

“I Am Not Dead”

ASHBY WILLIAMS

The Meuse-Argonne presented a succession of severe challenges for the AEF: many of its divisions were fighting their first major battle; inexperienced leaders struggled to control poorly trained troops while under intense artillery and machine-gun fire; crowded roads and poor communications increased the trials of fighting over rugged terrain full of steep ravines, dense woods, and thick underbrush. Major Ashby Williams fought with the 80th Division on the eastern flank of the battlefield near the Meuse.

IT WAS a hazardous move looked at from any point of view, but the triangle of wood in my left front was practically impregnable as the situation stood, protected as it was by its own defensive weapons and by the mutually supporting positions on its flank, but, if I could take the system of trenches somewhat to the rear and to the right of it, either the enemy would be compelled to withdraw from the triangle of woods because of the threat against his flank or rear or I would then be in a position to attack him from three sides without being subjected to the enemy supporting fire from the positions in the 319th sector in my left. It was indeed a beautiful game, just like a game of checkers. I remember, at the same time that I sent Lieutenant Caulkins out on this mission on the right flank, I sent a message to Captain Little who was occupying the trenches on my right front, advising him of the move that was being made and telling him of the purpose and mission of the move, and that he would receive further orders telling him of the success of the mission.

It was now between three and four o'clock in the afternoon. Having made my new disposition I moved back to my temporary headquarters in the edge of the Malaumont Woods south of the Cunel-Briouilles Road which was near the center of my

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sector. Here I sat, together with Major Emory, in a little rifle pit, and I remember how we went over the mission together, and I wrote a message to regimental headquarters advising them of the move that I had made. As I said, Major Emory and I were sitting in the little rifle pit which was about three feet deep, two feet wide and five feet long, he in one end and I in the other so, as we were sitting, our knees touched and the tops of our helmets were slightly above the level of the ground. I remember an officer of the 5th Division came up after a little while and sat on the edge of the rifle pit and said that his Division was to relieve us, which relief, he said, was to take place that night. There were a number of other officers and a number of men immediately around the place. I remember Lieutenant France was sitting on the edge of the pit on one side and Lieutenant Preston on the other. Captain Sumner and Lieutenant Vermule were in a little pit about twenty feet away and some wounded machine gunners and other men were seated in rifle pits or lying upon the ground. I remember as we sat in this rifle pit one of the companies from the 319th Infantry sector on our left came in battle formation across the open space that separated our wood from their sector and poured a great volume of fire into our wood, under the impression, the officer in charge said, that enemy fire was coming from our woods. I remember Lieutenant Ben Temple, who was also close by, rushed out to the edge of the woods, held up his hands and said:

“For God’s sake, men, stop shooting us up!”

The bullets did not do us any harm, but the Boche saw the movement of the troops into our woods and communicated this fact to his artillery, and in about twenty minutes the Boche began to pour steel into the woods in the area in which we were, and they were falling fast and furious about us. It was during this bombardment that I had perhaps the narrowest escape of my life. Indeed, as narrow an escape, perhaps, as any man ever had who came out alive. Without the slightest warning of any sort I suddenly found myself under the ground as if by magic, with a ringing in my ears as of many bells. There was a sense of great bewilderment—for the act was quicker than thought, and I remember my first thought was:

"I am not dead, I am thinking."

After a bewildered moment or two I worked my helmet and my head through the surface of the earth and looked around. Major Emory was just then doing the same thing, and I remember the dazed and bewildered look in his eye as he gazed around the place. I think he spoke, because his lips moved, but I was too deaf to hear whether he said anything. I tried to get my arms loose, but could not, so tight had they been packed in by the impact of the shell. Presently two men (I think Captain Wilson was one of them) took hold of me and pulled me out. And I remember as I scrambled out of the dirt I took hold of an unexploded portion of a six-inch high explosive shell that had stopped within a few inches of my face, and it was so hot I had to let it go. This shell had struck about two feet from the edge of the rifle pit in which we were sitting. How Major Emory and I escaped being blown to pieces is almost incredible. The shell had struck and exploded with its full force against the body of the 5th Division Officer who was talking to us, blowing him into a thousand pieces. Lieutenant France, with his head crushed in, was blown across the rifle pit and killed, two machine gunners were killed outright and four others were wounded. Lieutenant Preston was struck in the side and in the neck with pieces of steel but was able, with some assistance, to move to the first aid station. Captain Sumner was shell-shocked.

I remember as I got out of the hole my legs had been cramped with the impact of the earth and were very shaky and my ear drums were ringing so that I could not hear a person speak. In that condition of mind and body I determined to go back to my headquarters at once where I could collect my scattered thoughts and rest my shattered nerves for a time; so I got my stick (which I never forsook under any circumstances at the front) and started out of the woods in the direction of my headquarters. I remember as I passed along the beaten path a few feet from the edge of the woods, a man's liver was scattered along the path, and twenty feet out in the open I saw a leg and part of a stomach, still warm with the blood of life so recently departed. It was a horrible sight that I shall never forget. I passed along the hollow that leads by the Ville aux

Bois, and I remember the shells were bursting in the woods and they sounded in my ears like the ringing of many bells. As I passed along also I recollected that I had left a pair of Boche gloves in the hole where I was buried but I decided that if the Boche wanted them that bad he could have them.

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