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THEY TOLD ALL

By

THOMAS
M. JOHNSON



Intelligence officers questioning Germans captured at Château-Thierry.

“G-2’S deepest, darkest secret,” General Nolan told me, “was this: ‘If you want to know something about the Germans, just ask them.’”

For, if you knew the tricks of how to ask, they would answer you pretty truthfully. To the A. E. F. Intelligence Service that General Nolan headed, the 48,000 prisoners captured by American dough-boys gave an astonishing amount of information. They more than anyone made it possible for John J. Pershing and his staff to plan their moves on the most accurate strategic map in the world—and the most dangerous.

That map was kept at Chaumont behind a sliding wall-panel that, save when absolutely necessary, was padlocked tight, and at night was protected by an armed guard. No other G. H. Q. took a chance on having such a map, that told at a glance with almost exact accuracy the location and condition of every Division, Allied and German.

It was a mosaic G-2 made up from many sources, such as aviation, German newspapers, spy-reports. But oftenest, from what German prisoners revealed to an unique group of men whose work is a fascinating untold story of real American “secret service”; of detective methods ingenious and sometimes weird, that made hard-boiled Prussian top sergeants as talkative as Hitler. And, as for Junker officers—eighty percent of the officers we captured told us things we wanted to know, such as just where the 5th Guard Division lay in wait the first day of the Meuse-Argonne, and where the next resistance line was being laid out. Many an American veteran today owes his life to a blurting German prisoner.

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Men taken by Co. M, 105th Infantry, in the Argonne drive ready to help with the wounded, before the inevitable quizzing

THAT is the best of all possible defenses against captious critics of a type of gumshoe work common in war, in which all is fair. The Germans did it too, but not quite so well. The stool-pigeons they used on American prisoners were left at the cote by G-2's flock of rare birds. These included not alone German-American baker-boys from Milwaukee, but full-fledged Germans and Austrians, like "the Bishop," who had been degraded from officer's rank; the romantic pianist caught leading a trench-raid; the "wounded" aviator whose "wounds" were movable, and others. Unique among G-2 men, to hasten autocracy's downfall, they helped democracy pick its brains, using tricks, disguises, dictaphones. Sometimes they were detected, attacked, one nearly killed. But they kept on, gleaning from prisoners what added up to nearly ninety percent of the best information Col. Willey Howell, G-2 First Army, received from all sources. Compared to them, the much-ballyhooed spies were just men from Mars.

A spy's warning of the German offensive of May 27, 1918 arrived a week later, when that offensive had reached Château-Thierry and might well have reached Paris, save for our Second and Third Divisions. But when those same Divisions, and the 28th, 42d and the French, were warned of the July 15th drive in time to make it the German offensive that ended German offensives, they were warned not by spies, but by prisoners in new uniforms with iron rations, fresh-caught, on the spot.

Which explains why G-2 begged the doughboys:

"Don't be rough! Bring them back alive, and all in one piece—so they can talk."

Had two ardent First Division doughboys done that when they captured the A. E. F.'s first German prisoner, he might have warned them of the trench raid his comrades were rehearsing, that five days later captured the first American prisoners—eleven of them. New outfits thought the only safe Boche was a dead Boche, and laboriously brought in multifarious corpses from which G-2 could get only a

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shoulder-strap number and sometimes, from the right coat-tail pocket, letters, "*Soldbuch*" and usually, diary.

Still, even such things had their uses, as witness these quotations from the Summary of Intelligence of our First Army just before the Meuse-Argonne:

"Sept. 20: The body of an officer killed during the enemy raid of Sept. 18-19 was found one kilometer west of Avocourt. He appears to belong to the First Footguard Regiment of the First Guard Division. The presence of the Division cannot, however, be accepted without further evidence. The body was found near the boundary of the 37th and 53d Reserve Divisions.

"Sept. 22: Prisoner of 157th Regiment taken 500 meters east of Avocourt states his regiment relieved the 150th Regiment, 37th Division, three nights ago. The 117th Division appears to have relieved the 37th. Same prisoner states that "a Foot Guard Regiment" is in line west of his regiment, which appears to confirm the presence of the First Guard Division.

"Sept. 25: Deserter of the Fourth Footguard Regiment came into our lines near the Aire River. He confirms the presence of the First Guard Division in this sector and states the order of battle west to east, is Second, Fourth and First Footguard Regiments. They relieved the 53d Reserve Division, September 16.

By such detective work, the jigsaw puzzle was put together; mostly out of the mouths of prisoners. The front line asked them little more than what was their outfit, were its orders to attack, retreat or stand still; where were its pillboxes, machine guns and battery positions. Corps asked a few more questions, then sent prisoners to Army headquarters for St. Mihiel, Ligny; for the Meuse-Argonne, Souilly—for the real going-over. And they were just God's gift, if their exhaustion, hunger, shock and fright could be exploited promptly and cleverly.

IN **THEY** came—dull-gray, muddy, smelly, lousy. Into the pens with them, behind barbed-wire! Then, quick! "*Raus* with officers who might shut them up! Separate the men by units, and . . . "*Bist du Pole?*" The "*Ja's*" were questioned at once. So were Alsace-Lorrainers, Schleswigers, all who loved not the Deutsches Reich nor the Austro-Hungarian, like the Czechs and Jugoslavs taken by the 26th Division at St. Mihiel, who said their Slav colonel had quietly told them: "Down with your rifles—up with your hands!" Then, officers' orderlies, messengers, telephonists, like the Bavarian who had overheard an order to send concrete to the frontline countermanded, which meant a retirement. Now the noncoms; they knew as much as

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company officers and would tell it. Before St. Mihiel a noncom told that the Germans were beginning to tear up their narrow-gauge tracks, which was the first evidence of withdrawal. A sergeant described the new anti-tank rifle; a sergeant-major told the location of two big ammunition dumps.

And these were the good old fire-eating Prussian drill sergeants! What loosened them up—a rubber hose? Not at all. The inquisition was painless; the seven inquisitors were chosen for their understanding not only of German but of Germans. Their chief, Major Sanford Griffith, had lived in a German garrison town. Others were college professors, even a Lutheran minister. They always spoke German, ate German food, cooked by a Berlin chef. Their assistants were apple-cheeked Milwaukee butchers and bakers from the 32d Division who could do the German manual of arms and handled prisoners in their own *lingua latrina*.

But no concentration-camp stuff. Only once an American got rough and shook a German prisoner like an old coat. The prisoner had called him a filthy name; the American was the Lutheran minister! We treated our prisoners gently; too gently, the Allies thought. But we got more out of them. There were ways.

“Surrender to us and eat,” our propaganda circulars had told them, and a general order made good on the promise in this way. At Corps cages they saw a fine field kitchen, savory with bacon, white bread and other miracles. Mouths watering, the line formed. Along it came inquisitors, picking those who looked most intelligent or weakest. “Talk first,” they said. “Then you eat.” And eat they did—for talk they did. Then they got tobacco, blankets and if necessary, medical care.

“We didn’t baby them,” Major Griffith explains. “Just treated them like human beings.”

During questioning they were not made to stand stiffly at attention; they could sit down.

“Would you like us to send word via Switzerland to your family that you’re safe?”

Anger or fright began to melt. (Such promises were always kept, too.)

“Well, how’s the beer in Munich now?” if he were a Bavarian; or perhaps, in Berlin, or *Schnickelfritz-an-der-Mozel*.

A little more half-kidding, in good German, and then with a grin:

“Does Major Schmalz still stick down in that deep dugout at Romagne?”

“*Ach Gott!*” thought the prisoner. “He even knows about my battalion commander—the big bum! This *Amerikaner*’s a good fellow, and pretty wise, anyway. Why not answer? He isn’t even taking notes.”

No, he wasn’t. But behind a panel, someone was; the former secretary to

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Major, Sanford Sanford Griffith, under whose direction most of the 48,000 Germans captured by the A.E.F. were subjected to questioning

a big St. Louis banker, who knew German shorthand.

There were ways—as General Nolan himself demonstrated. Eager to know the instant German reserves arrived to check our first assault in the Meuse-Argonne, on September 28th he reached the 35th Division's weary front line just as the Germans counter-attacked. Prisoners! New uniforms, faces with healthy color! The general's eyes narrowed.

“It looks pretty bad for you, doesn't it?” he challenged. “We've pushed you back six or seven miles.”

“*Pfui!*” hotly retorted one of them. “We're the 52d Division! We've had a month's rest, and we're the boys can stop you!”

The others grinned agreement. Which General Nolan promptly reported to General Pershing, who thereupon sent the First Division pelting to relieve the 35th.

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Lieut. Maurice Stern found ways to get something out of every one of three thousand prisoners he questioned at the First Corps cage. At the Fifth Corps at the critical stage of the Meuse-Argonne a young officer, Lieut. Szlapka, was most successful. But all officers captured were handled eventually by Army headquarters, which found that at first three-quarters would refuse to answer or would give false information. Usually that was easily checked by one source or another. Then the officer would be brought back.

"Don't do that," they would warn him. "We don't force you to answer at all; but if you do answer, tell the truth, if you know what's good for you."

A Hungarian captain lied right on, with Magyar colorfulness. No rough stuff; they just put him out in a field to meditate and watch the others eat. A German officer lied even more brazenly; so they staged a full German ceremony of degrading to "Gewöhnlicher" (private) him who being treated like an officer and a gentleman, had acted like neither. At the instant the knots were to be ripped from his shoulders, he broke down and talked. None liked being put in with their men—even a blustery Württemberger major whose name should have been Münchhausen for the tales he told—the Prussian Guard, the Jäger, all the crack Divisions were rushing to counter-attack the Americans; they were being fed blutwurst and Schnapps three times a day; were digging a tunnel under Verdun, and . . . He knew we knew it was gabble—and so what?

"Stop that!" commanded Major Griffith.

. . . "And our new thousand-ton Jugger-naut-tank . . .!"

The Milwaukee German-Americans bums-rushed him into a pen-full of privates, some from his own battalion. They left him there—but not for long.

"*Hilfe! Hilfe!*" cried his frightened voice.

His men were beating him up—and glad of the chance.

Throughout the Meuse-Argonne but one German officer remained unbroken—Lieutenant Eisentraeger, typical Prussian Guardsman, who through four interrogations retained monocle and defi-

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A couple of prisoners earn their keep by harvesting hay, after going through the G-2 mill

ance. He was forwarded to the French Army's most expert interrogator, who wrote: "Why send me this soandso? I'd ship him to Devil's Island, but what a dirty trick to play on the devil!"

But the rest yielded to the personal touch, applied in a "special interrogation." Enter the stool-pigeons, uniformed as German officers, with Iron Cross complete, but dirty as the rest of the clumping column they joined unobtrusively enroute to the cages. There they mingled with the crowd, listening, taking mental notes. One, who was short, slight, sad-eyed, was of a low-browed inconspicuousness that absorbed information as a barfly absorbs free lunch. Sleeping on the ground with the rest, he played his part like a real trouper; just looking dumb, keeping his mouth shut and his prominent ears wide open. They called him Charlie Chaplin. His motive? Revenge on an unappreciative Gretchen in the *Heimat!*

With others, it was love not of women, but in various senses, of country. To free Alsace from Germany two Alsatians helped G-2; one handsome, polished graduate of a German officers' school, could meet captured staff officers on their own ground. So he knew almost immediately of the staff conference that had ordered the final German retreat; news soon confirmed by two captured runners who had carried the sealed orders. The other Alsatian was an artilleryman who spoke German with a rich Munich accent—priceless with Bavarian artillerymen. He would get them raving about the ammunition shortage in quantity and quality, estimating the mounting percentage of duds, the worn-out tubes that made shooting about as accurate as the last *Literary Digest* Poll. One told him: "A big Austrian gun just came to shell Verdun citadel. Verdun needn't worry, but every place else had better.



Every scrap of paper is taken from prisoners before they are turned into prison pens at Menil-la-Tour during the St. Mihiel drive

That gun hasn't been re-lined in God knows when."

And as every doughboy knows who was around Verdun in October, those big shells hit everywhere but the citadel.

Every night the Alsatian tipped our artillery to ten or fifteen new German battery positions, illustrated with neat maps prepared by that genial genius, "The Bishop." They called him that because his brother was a real Austrian Bishop, though he himself was a bit of a black sheep, as he cheerfully confessed. He liked to tell dirty jokes on the clergy, to talk about the good old days in Vienna and Paris, and to sample the liquors of all nations. Perhaps that was why the Austrian army had degraded him from officer to private soldier, for he knew military science and was a fine draftsman. So he joined G-2, "to save Austria from Prussianization"—which today sounds odd. He could rapidly fashion into a sketch-map clear as crystal, information from a prisoner or a captured map or document.

The Bishop and Charlie Chaplin played a neat duo that helped make our attack of November 1st a great success. That attack was to break the Germans' last hold on their main resistance line, the Kriemhilde Stellung, and push on to Sedan. But somewhere in between the Germans must have another line ready. Where? Until G-2 found out, John J. Pershing could not strike his final blow. Then, late in October into the pen came a new batch of officers, among them, snuffling and sloppy, Charlie Chaplin.

"Been back behind the Kriemhilde Line," he noted silently. "Where—what's that fellow up to?"

Beneath a duckboard an officer was furtively slipping something white. Casually Charlie removed his sweat-stained cap. In came a guard, lifted the duck-

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board and produced a map. In purest Milwaukee German he asked:

“*Was ist das?*”

Equally pure German silence. They brought the map to the Bishop. His pontifical eye detected, back of the Kriemhilde Line, in faint blue penciling another line which at one point showed a mysterious little cross with a Roman II and figure 69. What could they mean?

“Fly over,” G-2 telephoned aviation. “See what you can see where these funny marks are.”

“Funny marks is right,” was the report. “We’ve flown over and can see nothing.”

But meantime up from his pile of captured German documents the Bishop had brought an Army weekly with this warning:

“Troops training in rear areas must not use for targets numbered signs they find stuck in the ground. These are surveying points for locating a new retirement position.”

A quick huddle (*Continued on page 38*) with Captain William H. Dearden, expert on enemy order-of-battle. The blue line was the eagerly sought last line we must break before Sedan. Now the inquisitors began quizzing prisoners for further details.

“Send us men from Labor Battalions,” they begged the front line. Where were machine gun and battery emplacements being made? By November 1st the attacking troops had a detailed map of the blue line, including its name, the Freya Stellung. But by November 2d they had torn up the map and the Stellung too, and were out in the clear, heading for Sedan.

SO SCRAPs of paper helped end the battle as they helped begin it. The first morning, September 26th, G-2, I Corps urged the 28th and 35th Divisions: “Send most promising prisoners by automobile.”

The staff car arrived filled with officers of the First Guard Division, about the toughest, least talkative lot imaginable. The receivers were utterly flabbergasted. Then someone groaned:

“Well, let’s search ‘em, anyway.”

In a boy lieutenant’s pocket they found a map and a paper: The entire German defence plan for the Aire valley; not only the front line which the First Guard held, as we had suspected, but as we had not dreamed, the second position where ready to counter-attack lurked the Fifth Guard, which was tougher than the First—in fact, the very toughest Division in the German Army.

Scraps of paper from prisoners and dug-outs were so valuable that G-2 men were especially trained in screening from diaries, letters and *Soldbuecher* (identification-books), orders and bulletins such nuggets as:

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“Anti-tank combat and traps;”

“The gassing of dugouts; directions for using the gas-bomb;”

“Instructions to the machine gun post ‘Laura.’ ”

And especially “The new defensive tactics” detailing methods to be used in carrying out in the Meuse-Argonne a general order signed “Ludendorff” and saying:

“It is on the main line of resistance and behind that line that we must hold. There is the place we must aim straight, without wasting ammunition, and prepare for the hand-to-hand fight.”

That treasure of the St. Mihiel salient was one of our most valuable finds; the first official revelation not alone of German defense plans, but of a munitions shortage that had the Big Shot himself worried.

Additional priceless bits were the effects of Generals Von Gallwitz and Von der Marwitz to the troops facing us; “Hold that line!” in September and early October while the Germans withdrew safely before the French and British.

“The Americans have the worst blood-letting sector,” said a pilot whose plane had hurtled down 5,000 feet on our side of the line. “That’s what they say at Fifth Aviation headquarters.”

“So?” remarked his companion in hospital. “Just two weeks ago I was there—in Montmedy.”

“No longer are they at Montmedy,” the pilot whispered. “They’ve moved to Arlon.”

“So far back?” replied the other, also a pilot by his bloodstained uniform. “The Fifth Army must be going to retreat . . . Ach, my shoulder!”

He shifted his bandage painfully.

“I wouldn’t be a prisoner,” he groaned, “but for our lousy petrol. My ship died on me. . . .”

“You’re not the only one,” consoled the first. “That petrol cost our squadron three planes last week.”

More talk, until the newcomer dozed off. Then the other scribbled a note and tiptoed to the door. To the guard he passed the note and whispered:

“For Major Griffith. This one’s easy. I’ll stay a while.”

HERMAN was one of the best stool pigeons, and the toughest. He had been “wounded” more times than any living aviator. Bedecked with bandage, he knew his aviation and aviators, and how to loosen them up with talk of their pet subjects, high-flying fighting planes and women.

His only crash was when, as he accosted a prospective victim, a Milwaukee boy new to the game slapped him on the shoulder with a hearty, “Hiya, Herman old kid?” The prospective victim turned on his heel—and that was that.

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Later that Milwaukee boy squared himself and just prevented murder. From the officers' pen came angry murmurs, then a hoarse shout of alarm, ending in a horrid gurgle. It was smothered, now, beneath grayclad bodies; a wolf-pack striving with claws and teeth to rend one of their number. Pinioned on his back, eyes protruding, officers clutching at his throat, his only sound a gasping wheeze, he was strangling agonizingly to death; a tall, handsome blonde youth in new German officers' uniform.

"Get back!" shouted the Milwaukee boy sternly. "I'll shoot!"

Before his menacing Colt the Germans sullenly withdrew, and their victim struggled to his feet, trembling and gray-faced. Then the guard exploded:

"Adolf, what a stool-pigeon *you* are! You got your boots blacked again!"

But Adolf was a better source of information than any spy, despite two spy-characteristics—vanity and courage. Both had impelled him to lead a trench-raid to capture Americans; reward, an Iron Cross, first class. But the Americans had captured him. He would never see the Iron Cross, and to inquisitors he turned a Great Stone Face . . . until Major Griffith gave him a chance to play the piano. Lo, the tough top sergeant showed himself a musician, romantic and idealistic, a university graduate.

"You don't really like war, do you?"

"I hate it! I am a Socialist!"

"Why not help end it? You would be a world-benefactor. And—you'd *eat!*"

Those mixed motives put Adolf to work with a will, against any German or Germans save his former buddies in his old outfit. He sought the hottest spots in the front line, where officer-prisoners, fresh out of hell, were least on guard. He got them going and coming; first a once-over that gave the inquisitors an idea what to question them about; then a re-check to see what they had held back. Easily done, by pretending he himself had been questioned and had "fooled that stupid Yankee. Didn't you?"

In these and other maneuvers clever help came from Lieutenant Sidney L. Levengood, Corporal John A. Ostermuller and Privates Albert E. Traeger, Leonard M. Mayer, Hendrik S. Muller and Charles Sheffler, but Adolf was a born actor, playing his role so well that he could report:

"The 76th Reserve Division formally petitioned for relief after their fighting against the Lost Battalion. No more

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fight left in them.”

“Engineer officer names nearly a hundred towns behind the front from which French civilians are being evacuated.”

“Officers of the 240th Division say when they entered the line October 17 they were told they were to cover a withdrawal.”

And plenty more, that Chaumont fitted into its mosaic, such as the captured colonel. He had commanded the 111th Infantry until October 10th, when the First Division barrage trapped him in a concrete dugout near Sommerance, and he came out cursing his Division Commander for insisting he stay in such a man-trap.

“He’s sore,” Adolf reported. “He’ll talk.”

So when the colonel demanded every toilet-article in Woolworth’s, he got them; also a bath, clean clothing, cigars, an orderly — and Adolf’s company. He didn’t suspect a thing.

“He’s a good egg. Worried about his company commanders. I’ve found two of them, in the cage.”

“One at a time, we’ll send them in,” decided the major. “When they come out, you pump them. We’ll double-check.”

The double-check was the orderly, a Milwaukee boy, sonorously asleep while the colonel and first one, then the other of his officers talked; of how astonishingly accurate the American artillery had been — and how inaccurate their machine-guns. Why, for instance . . . What a pity the 111th would never have a chance to try the colonel’s new idea about offensive use of machine-guns. . . .

That scheme was Major Griffith’s entering wedge to a long, friendly talk with the colonel, with this dramatic climax.

“For some time there has been want of unity between the staff and lower commands. Now I see it in the staff itself. That is the last crack. The German Army cannot hold out much longer.”

Indeed it couldn’t, if at last the Great General Staff were cracking. Then came news that its head, Ludendorff, was urging a mass levy of the whole German population—old men, women, children. The news released a secret spring of fury in Adolf. Face livid, hands clenching and unclenching, he came to Major Griffith:

“That soandso!” he cried. “He wants to prolong this war! He must be killed! I can do it!”

He was deadly earnest; had it all worked out: the place to crawl into the enemy lines; the route to Great Headquarters; the pistol—one of those little German ones. . . .

Major Griffith handed him an intercepted wireless message.

“They’ve turned Ludendorff down,” he said. “He’s resigned.”

“*Gott sei dank!*” cried Adolf, and wept like a baby.

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G-2 gave him his Iron Cross, first class; with proper German ceremony, which made him proud. It must have been a very queer scene.

Today, perhaps Adolf shows that black-enameled trinket to his children, who doubtless are good Americans. For after the war G-2 brought him and Hermann to this country—which was much nicer all around. Some people in Germany might not have appreciated what they had done to create the German Republic, by helping John J. Pershing get his order of battle map 100 percent accurate, as it was on November 11, 1918. That day it showed that the German Army had no real reserves left, and we had plenty, which worried the German G-2ers for they knew neither how many nor where those reserves were. German documents we captured show that, and so does this:

A German officer-prisoner sat down opposite Major Griffith and smiled quizzically.

“So you’re Major Griffith, are you?” he asked. “Well, we know all about you, and what you’re doing.”

“And how much do you know about our order of battle?”

“Your front line we know pretty well,” he said. “But about your reserves not so much. Your *verdammte* doughboys won’t tell us though we tried a fine scheme—brought together a few, each from a different outfit, and got them arguing about which was the best outfit. All they knew came out—but *Teufel!* They didn’t know anything! Americans have no military minds.”

Thomas M. Johnson was the correspondent of the New York Sun with the A. E. F. and has remained a keen student of that momentous affair. With Fletcher Pratt he recently wrote the story of the Lost Battalion in book form, part of the text first appearing in this magazine in the April, 1938, issue under the title, “The Lost Battalion As the Germans Saw It.”

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