

CHAPTER 1

FIRST WORLD WAR - NORTHEAST FRANCE - MARCH, 1918

In the pitch dark early morning hours of March 21, 1918 the steam locomotive crawled along slowly without headlamp to hide its advance from any German aerial observation. The train was approaching the front lines of the Western Front. A distant rumble began at 4:40. A massive artillery barrage.

The sound increased as the train traveled east toward the River Somme. As daylight broke the terrain only added to the sense of impending dread. A surreal landscape as far as the eye could see. Gray ground meeting a gray sky. No trees, no vegetation, only upturned soil pockmarked with shell craters. Partly buried destroyed military debris poked out from the ground. An apocalyptic scene created by years of some of the war's worse fighting. Any suggestion of human habitation long since obliterated.

Positioning of opposing forces along the River Somme varied little over the course of the war. Each side pushed the other back to occupy the enemy trenches in great offensives resulting in thousands of casualties. In a later battle, the opposing side retook the same ground leaving countless more thousands of fallen young men. Unimaginative generals repeatedly threw their armies in massed assaults employing the same unsuccessful tactics.

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The train operated by American Army engineers arrived midmorning at a British Army supply depot three miles to the rear of the front trenches. The artillery volume so heavy the noise sounded almost continuous with little interval between explosions. German artillery rounds were landing only a half mile distant.

"Seems a bigger than normal barrage. What do ya think is going on, Sir?" The sergeant handling the locomotive's throttle shouted to the officer standing next to him.

"I'd guess a new German offensive," the American Army captain said. "This time the Germans, next time the Brits. Been this way for four years. Does sound like something big going on though."

This time would prove different. The Germans were intent on breaking through the Allied lines to end years of stalemated trench warfare. Heavy long-range German guns lobbed shells well behind the British lines west of the town of St. Quentin, France intending to disrupt British artillery batteries and supply lines. The weight of this unprecedented artillery bombardment lasted five hours then abruptly ended signaling the German infantry assault. Unprepared, nearly one million German troops overwhelmed Allied forward defensive positions.

The captain added, "Poor buggers in the trenches are now catching hell from German mortars. The infantry assault comes next."

"Can't imagine being in one of those stinking trenches, Sir," the sergeant said.

"Neither can I, Sergeant. Keep the boiler steam up. We're exposed this close to the front. Want to reverse out of here soon as we're unloaded. Got a bad feeling."

The British Third and Fifth Armies fell into strategic retreat as seventy-two German divisions launched what was to become known as the Spring Offensive along a 45-mile front. This was the latest in a series of great battles fought along the meandering River Somme in northeast France. The first clash between Ger-

man and French forces occurred early in the war in 1914. That failure of the Germans to penetrate the French lines resulted in both sides constructing defensive trench positions. The Western Front extending through Belgium and France from the English Channel to the Swiss border would define the Great War.

Later years saw enormous clashes of million-man armies between the Germans and the allied forces of France and the United Kingdom. The front lines eventually solidified into ever more permanent trench fortifications. During the Battle of the Somme from July to November, 1916, the Allies advanced their front lines by only seven miles. The cost was 623,000 British and French casualties, 465,000 German. An average of 8,000 men falling each day.

The United States entered the war on the side of Britain and France in 1917. A future threat to the Germans since the United States at the time had only a small standing army. It would require time to recruit, train, and equip an army sufficient to impact the European conflict. By early 1918, the United States had yet to field a sizable fighting force. Eventually the Germans knew the great industrial power would pour men and materiel into the conflict. Four years had exhausted all the European combatants. America would decisively tip the advantage to the Allies.

General Erich von Ludendorff, chief strategist of the German high command, recognized by 1918 that Germany could not win this continued war of attrition once the United States weighed in on the Allied side. But the overthrow of the Russian Tsar months earlier resulted in the new Bolshevik government signing an armistice with Germany ending the fighting in the East. This allowed shifting substantial manpower and supplies to the Western Front. This convergence of circumstances led Ludendorff to attempt a massive offensive at the River Somme.

Penetrate deep into France. Capture the strategic city of Amiens. Split the British and French forces denying the ability of a combined counterattack. Break out of the accursed trenches.

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Achieve improved territorial leverage from which to negotiate better terms under the unavoidable armistice.

On March 21, 1918, Ludendorff began the attack of *Operation Michael*. Much of the terrain was already a vast wasteland of destruction resulting from two years of war. Tactically Ludendorff counted on not only superior manpower strength but deployment of new tactics. On the Eastern Front the Germans developed mobile open-warfare tactics using elite infantry units. Shock troops, *Stoßtruppen*, consisted of select soldiers used in rapidly advancing small units to infiltrate and disrupt enemy essential support operations behind their front lines.

At the beginning of 1918, only four American combat divisions were on the front lines. Deployed under British and French command, they remained in quiet sectors to gain combat experience. However, American engineering units arrived in France months earlier to reinforce Allied supply capabilities. Among these were railway engineering regiments. The staggering volume of food, ordnance, and timber necessary to support millions of troops required construction of new rail lines.

On that first day of the German assault the British Fifth Army fell back under the weight of the German onslaught overwhelming the twenty-six British divisions.

The five-hour preceding artillery barrage surpassed anything previously experienced. The Germans fired over 3.5 million shells. German trench mortars concentrated poison gas rounds of mustard and chlorine gas on the forward British trenches. Adding to this new vision of hell, heavy fog blanketed the battlefield disguising the clouds of deadly gas.

Captain Trevor Sullivan of the 12th Engineers Light Railway Battalion of the United States Army commanded a train resupplying the British with ammunition and provisions. His train arrived at a supply depot close to the front near the town of Saint-Quentin. As offloading started, wounded spread in growing numbers over an acre near the tracks waiting evacuation. A continuous stream of arriving wounded stretched from the di-

rection of the front as far as he could see. He estimated their numbers would soon exceed the capacity to evacuate by this train alone. A massive battle was raging.

By ten o'clock in the morning, the artillery barrage stopped. The thunder became replaced by sounds of gunfire, grenade explosions, and the rattle of machine guns. By early afternoon great numbers of retreating British soldiers poured into the immediate vicinity of the supply depot. The noise progressively sounding closer. The front was collapsing.

To a wounded British junior officer Sullivan said, "What's happening at the front, Lieutenant?"

The young man was walking with his arm in a sling and a blood-soaked bandage covering an ear.

"Germans have attacked in strength. Overran our lines. Never seen anything like it. My colonel said the *Krauts* didn't have the means to mount a serious offensive. Bloody fucking idiot."

"Has the front stabilized?" Sullivan said.

"Stabilized? Fuck no! If reserves aren't thrown in soon no telling where this'll end."

Sullivan motioned to one of his own officers.

"Lieutenant, start loading the wounded immediately. And get the Limeys to hurry up offloading those supplies. Once the cars are loaded with wounded we're out of here regardless where the unloading stands. Where the hell is that goddamn captain of theirs?"

Sullivan was no fan of the British, especially being Irish. American-Irish from Brooklyn. But his family also had a strong *Fenian* background, Irish republicans dedicated to an independent Irish republic. Freedom from British rule. Two uncles participated in the failed Eastern Rising of 1916 in Dublin. Both executed by the British.

Yet Sullivan found himself attached to the British Army. Combat troops of the American Expeditionary Force had yet to come up to strength in France. In the first vanguard, U.S. engineering battalions arrived in late 1917. His battalion was assigned to support the British Expeditionary Forces fighting in

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northeast France. Build new rail lines. Run trains transporting supplies to the front and remove the wounded to the rear.

Sullivan eventually found the British captain commanding the supply depot. The stereotypical British officer with traits that irked Sullivan after working alongside them for months.

West Point trained, Sullivan considered the British general staff criminally incompetent in prosecuting the war. Unimaginative, dull-witted, seemingly unconcerned by the extent of their own casualties. Bred of the best schools. From the *right* families meaning wealth or influence. An elitist officer class promoted by other than merit.

"Captain, I suggest your troops get a move on with unloading. Many of the wounded are in a bad way. Their numbers rapidly growing. We must get underway."

"I believe we shall finish soon, Captain."

Sullivan persisted. "According to some of the wounded, the front has become fluid. Some say the Germans have deeply penetrated the British lines in places with small units of elite troops. Not stopping to consolidate their gains, they just keep on advancing. One fellow said they were ambushed from behind as they fell back. You need to prepare your men."

"Captain Sullivan. Have you ever been in combat?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I mean that I have. Three years' worth of war. Soldiers invent all sorts of fanciful stories. Rumors abound."

"My point is we have no idea where the front is. If there even is a front anymore. And if the Germans are making deep penetrations our position here may soon come directly under attack. Your position, Captain. This supply depot."

"I think that's unlikely. The front is still some distance. This is a rear supply depot. If a threat were imminent headquarters would be making arrangements to reinforce our position. There has been no communication or warning."

Inept fool. Before Sullivan could lose his temper the sound of battle erupted close by. Small arms fire at first, soon followed by the unmistakable rattle of machine gun fire. Then a few errant

rounds struck the train cars. That meant fighting just hundreds of yards away.

Sullivan left the bewildered British officer on the run moving toward the train's engine. Along the way he yelled orders to any officer or NCO within earshot. "Get the stretcher wounded onboard immediately! Anyone not capable of firing a rifle. We'll leave once we have steam."

Swinging up into the cab of the engine he told the three-man crew, "Get the steam up, Sergeant. Once you're ready we're reversing the hell out of here."

Two soldiers began furiously shoveling coal into the boiler.

To the credit of the British wounded there was no panic. Several wounded officers rallied those capable of holding a rifle to move toward the sound of the approaching assault. Taking up defensive positions some distance from the train, most realized they were now a rear guard. Even if they survived they would not be among those evacuated on the train.

Sullivan quickly assessed British troop strength guarding the supply depot as light. Unlikely to be reinforced with the front collapsing. Walking wounded could not defend this position if the Germans penetrated this far with any strength.

He ordered two of his men to run forward up the tracks towards the fighting.

"Once you see any Germans get your asses back here on the double."

To his two lieutenants, "Gentlemen, I sent two men forward to act as lookouts. If they return it'll be on the run. I'll signal the engineer to sound three blasts on the whistle. Then he'll immediately put the train in reverse. Warn the men. When the whistle sounds, stop loading wounded and jump on board. It means we're being overrun."

With that Sullivan took up a position a short distance in front of the engine.

Within minutes the two American soldiers came sprinting toward him. One soldier screamed as he approached Sullivan,

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"Lots of Germans, Sir. Right behind us. The Brits have been overrun!"

Sullivan could now see many British soldiers in full retreat. Many bandaged from previous wounds expecting evacuation to the rear. Poor bastards.

He signaled the engineer hanging out the cab window with a winding motion of his upraised hand. Three blasts of the steam whistle followed.

Sullivan took off at a run behind his two soldiers. The train was slowly moving in reverse as he reached the engine. Looking down the length of the train he could see his American soldiers climbing onboard. Hundreds of wounded remained unloaded. Nothing he could do. Must save as many as possible.

Small arms rounds began hitting the engine right next to him. Two lone German soldiers clumsily ran toward him in their hobnail boots weighed down by heavy field kits. Bayonets fixed to their rifles.

Dropping to one knee he took up a classic firing position. A long distance shot for his Colt M1911 .45 caliber pistol. He rested his left elbow on his knee supporting the butt of the pistol in his left palm. A single shot dropped one of the Germans at over thirty yards.

The other soldier stopped running to take aim at Sullivan with his Mauser rifle. With his target stationary for just a second, Sullivan placed a shot into his chest followed by a second to the head.

Behind the two soldiers came an officer at a full run. Firing his sidearm while closing on Sullivan, one round found its mark hitting Sullivan's steel helmet.

The round did not penetrate the helmet but jerked the chin strap distracting Sullivan for a second. With the German now within only a few yards Sullivan fired three rounds slamming him backward.

The first soldier that Sullivan shot rose to his knees trying to recover his rifle. Sullivan sighted his last round delivering a kill-shot to the throat.

DOUGLAS CLARK

This sequence of events happened in the span of only a few seconds. The sergeant engineer frantically waved Sullivan to climb aboard. As he grabbed the handhold swinging up into the cab the sergeant let out the throttle. The steam engine's drive wheels slipped a few turns on the rails before eventually catching hold. The train steadily accelerated.

The Americans narrowly escaped the near disaster. Managing to rescue only some British wounded, it was difficult to look at the wounded left behind as the train sped past.

"That sure as hell was close, Sir," the sergeant at the throttle said. "Saw you drop all three of those *Krauts*. Damn impressive shooting. Were you lucky or are you that good a shot, Sir?"

Sullivan loaded a fresh clip into his pistol. "Some of both I'd guess, Sergeant. I was sidearm champion at West Point my last two years. Just a knack I guess. But only against targets over ten years ago. When someone's shooting at you it's a whole different matter. So yeah I got lucky."

The sergeant turned to the two soldiers feeding coal into the boiler, "Ain't that somethin', lads. We got Wild Bill Hickok for our captain."