

# The Enemy

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When I asked my schoolmate Lieutenant Ludwig Breyer which experience of the war was the most vivid in his memory, I expected to hear about Verdun, the Somme, or Flanders, as he had been at all three battles during the worst months. But instead he told me the following:

Not the most vivid, but the most enduring of my impressions began as we rested far behind the lines in a small French village. We had been in a rotten sector, where the artillery fire had been extremely heavy, and had to be taken back farther than was usual because we had suffered heavy casualties and needed to regain our strength.

It was a glorious week in August, a wonderful, biblical summer, and it went to our heads like the strong golden wine that we had once found in a cellar in Champagne. We had been deloused, a few of us were actually in clean clothes, the others cooked their shirts thoroughly over small fires; an atmosphere of cleanliness reigned—whose magic only a dirt-encrusted soldier knows—friendly like a Saturday evening in those far-removed days of peace, when we bathed as children in huge tubs and mother pulled the fresh laundry out of the cupboard, smelling of starch, Sunday, and pie.

But you know that it's no fairytale when I say that the feeling of this slowly receding August afternoon sweetly and heavily slackened my body. As soldiers we have a very different relationship with nature than most people. All of the thousands of prohibitions, the restraints and compulsions, fall away before this hard and horrible existence on the border of death; and in the minutes and hours of the interlude, in the days of peace, the thought of *living*, the mere fact of being alive, to have scraped by, grows into the sheer joy of existence, to be able to see, to breathe and to move yourself freely.

A field at dusk, the blue shadows of a forest, the rustling of a poplar, the clear streams of flowing water were an indescribable joy. But deep within, like a whip, like a barb, was the sharp pain of the knowledge that in a few hours or a few days all this would be over and I must again exchange this for the shattered landscapes of death. And this feeling, which was strangely made up of happiness, pain, melancholy, mourning, longing, and hopelessness, was the usual experience of a soldier on furlough.

After supper I went a little ways out of the village with a few comrades. We didn't talk much; for the first time in weeks we were fully contented and warmed ourselves in

the slanted sunbeams, which were shining straight into our faces. And so we came to a small, miserable factory in the middle of a wide, fenced-in piece of land around which sentries were posted. The yard was full of prisoners who were awaiting transport to Germany.

The sentries let us in without any problems, and we had a look around. A few hundred Frenchmen were quartered there. They sat or lay around, smoked, talked, and dozed. That opened my eyes. Until now I had had only short, fleeting impressions— isolated, vague—of the men who occupied the enemy trenches. Maybe a helmet, that protruded above the parapet for a split second; an arm that threw something and quickly disappeared; a piece of blue-gray cloth, a shape that jumped into the air—nearly abstract things which lurked behind rifle fire, behind hand grenades and barbed wire.

Here I saw prisoners for the first time, and lots of them at that, sitting, lying around, smoking—Frenchmen without weapons.

A sudden shock went through me; immediately after that I had to laugh at myself. I was shocked that they were human beings—so similar to us. But the fact was—God knows, strangely enough—that I had simply never thought about it before. The French? They were enemies who must be killed because they wanted to destroy Germany. But on that evening in August, that ominous secret, the magic of the Weapons became clear to me. Weapons transform people. And these innocent comrades, these factory workers, laborers, businessmen, and schoolboys, who sat around so quietly and resigned, would, if they only had Weapons, become Enemies again in the blink of an eye.

Originally they weren't Enemies; they became Enemies only when they were given Weapons. That made me think, although I knew that my logic was perhaps not totally correct. But it struck me that it was the Weapons that forced war upon us. There were so many Weapons in the world, that in the end they won the upper hand over humans, transforming them into Enemies.

And much later, in Flanders, I observed the same thing again: While the battle of materials raged, human beings were of practically no use. The Weapons hurled themselves in insane rage against each other. As a man you had to have the feeling that even when everything between the Weapons was dead, the Weapons would carry on until the world was obliterated. But here in the factory yard I saw only people like us. And for the first time I understood that I fought against *people*; people, like us, who were under a curse of strong words and weapons; people who had wives and children, parents and a profession, and who—just as I myself had gotten the idea from looking at them - would look around exactly as we did and have to ask themselves, "Brother, what on earth are we doing? What's all this about?"

A few weeks later we were in a quiet sector again. The French line came fairly close to our own, but our positions were well fortified and apart from that I'd say there was almost nothing going on. Right at seven every morning the artillery exchanged a few shots as a greeting, there was another little salute at noon, and in the evening the usual blessing. We sunbathed in front of our bunkers and were even so daring as to sleep at night with our boots off.

One day a sign suddenly popped up over the parapet on the other side of No Man's Land with the inscription "*Attention!*". You can imagine the astonishment with which we stared at it. Eventually we came to the conclusion that they only wanted to warn us

that there would be extremely heavy artillery fire, over and above the usual program, so we prepared ourselves to run off into our bunkers at the sound of the first shot.

But everything remained quiet. The sign disappeared. A few seconds later a spade came up, and we could see a large cigarette carton. One of our comrades, who had some knowledge of the language, painted the word "*Compris*" with shoe polish on a map case. We held the map case high. Then on the other side they waved the cigarette carton back and forth. And we in turn waved our map case to and fro. Then a white rag went up. With all due speed we took the shirt, which had just been deloused, from the knees of Private First Class Bühler and waved it around.

After a while they raised a white rag on the other side, and a helmet appeared. We shook our shirts so vigorously that the lice rained out of them. An arm came up, holding a packet. And then a man slowly scrambled out through the barbed wire; on his hands and knees he crawled toward us, and at the same time waved to us now and again with a handkerchief and laughed giddily. Near the middle of No Man's Land he reached out and put his package down. He pointed at it a few times, laughed, nodded, and crawled back. That made us unusually excited. Bound up with this almost childish feeling of doing something forbidden, the feeling of outsmarting someone, and simply the naked desire to get at the good things which lay there before us, was a taste of freedom, of independence, of triumph over the whole mechanism of death. I had the exact same feeling as I stood amongst the prisoners, as if something humane had victoriously broken through the simple notion of "Enemy", and I wanted to contribute my part to this triumph.

We quickly got a few gifts together, really poor things because we had so much less to give than our comrades on the other side. Then we gave our signal with the shirt again and got a direct response. I slowly heaved myself up, my head and shoulders were out in the open. That was a damned terrible minute, I can tell you, to stand there so unprotected, above the parapet and out in the open.

Then I crawled straight forward and my thoughts totally changed, as if they had been thrown into reverse. The strange situation captivated me, I sensed a strong, effervescent joy rise up in me; happy and smiling I moved swiftly on all fours. And I experienced a magnificent moment of peace—a solitary, private peace, a peace throughout the entire world just for my sake.

I set my things down, picked the others up and crawled back. And in this moment the peace fell apart. I felt again as if hundreds of rifle barrels were pointed at my back. A terrible fear gripped me, and sweat poured off me in streams. But I made it back to the trenches unharmed and laid down, out of breath.

By the next day I had grown somewhat more accustomed to these things, and little by little we made it easier, so that we no longer went out one after the other, but instead we both clambered out of our trenches at the same time. We crawled towards each other like dogs let loose from their leashes and exchanged our gifts.

As we looked each in the face for the first time, we only grinned, embarrassed. The other comrade was a young fellow like me, about twenty years old. You could tell from his face how much he enjoyed this. "*Bonjour, camarade*", he said, but I was so flustered that I said, "*Bonjour, bonjour*", repeated it two or three more times,

nodded, and quickly turned around. We had a specific time for the meeting and the earlier signaling was dropped, because both sides kept this unwritten peace treaty. And an hour later we fired at each other again, just like before. Once the other comrade reached his hand out to me with a slight hesitation, and we shook hands. That was quite odd.

Around this time similar incidents occurred in other sectors of the front line. Supreme Command had gotten wind of it, and an order had already been issued that absolutely forbade such things; in a few cases it had even prevented the daily rounds of hostilities. But that didn't bother us.

One day a major came up to the front and personally gave us a lecture. He was very eager and energetic and told us that he planned to remain at the front until evening. Unfortunately he took up a position near our exit point and requested a rifle. He was a very young major and anxious for action.

We didn't know what to do. It wasn't possible to give our comrades over there a sign, and besides that, we believed that we could be shot on the spot for it because it would show that we conducted business with the enemy. The minute hand on my watch slowly went around. Nothing happened, and it seemed as if everything would work out.

We didn't doubt that the major only knew about the general fraternization which had developed along the front, but nothing specific about what we had undertaken here. It was really bad luck, plain and simple, that led him to this spot and given him this assignment. I wondered if I should tell him: "In five minutes someone from over there will come. We can't shoot, he trusts us." But I didn't dare do that, and besides, what could that have accomplished? If I did that, he would only be right to remain there and wait when there was always the chance that he would leave. Besides, Bühler whispered to me that he had crouched behind a parapet and waved a "wash-out" with his rifle (like you signal a miss on a firing range) and that they had waved back. They had understood that they shouldn't come.

Luckily it was a dreary day, it rained some and darkness fell. It was already 15 minutes past the established time for our rendezvous. Slowly but surely we could breathe again. Then something caught my eye; my tongue lay like a clot in my mouth; I wanted to cry out but couldn't; paralyzed by fear, I stared across No Man's Land and saw an arm slowly appear, followed by a body. Bühler sprinted around the parapet and desperately tried to give a warning sign. But it was too late. The major had already fired. With a thin scream the body sank back down.

For a moment an eerie calm dominated. Then we heard shouting and withering fire set in. "Fire! They're coming!" screamed the major.

Then we returned fire. We loaded and fired like madmen, loaded and fired, only to put this terrible moment behind us. The entire front was in a state of agitation, the heavy artillery opened up, and so it continued for the whole night. By the morning we had lost twelve men, among them the major and Bühler.

From then on the hostilities resumed as ordered; cigarettes didn't go back and forth anymore, and the casualty count climbed. Many things have happened to me since then. I saw many men die; as for myself, I've killed more than one; I became hard and numb. The years went by. But for this whole long while I haven't dared to think about that thin scream in the rain.