The Rouen Post, April 1942

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The January meeting of Rouen Post 242, had come to a close and, as the evening was still young, a few of us lingered over our beer in Garavelli's restaurant. We talked, at first, of the millions of comfort-loving citizens soon to be introduced to the rigors of army training. This subject gradually led to a discussion of the problem of all armies—the surprisingly large minority who fail to adjust themselves to military life; malcontents who will go to any lengths to evade duties not to their liking. They are a race of men who don't fit in; the camp guardhouses and the prison wards for self-inflicted wounded know them well.

Bill Engel recalled the case of a sergeant at Tours shortly after the Armistice. Failing to obtain leave to the United States, ahead of men with longer service overseas, he went A. W. O. L. Upon his return he was assigned to kitchen police duty. A few days later he again left without permission and his second offense resulted in a summary court-martial. He was reduced to the rank of private and ordered to duty for one year with the Graves Registration Department.

Bill's story was followed by several others of a similar nature; commonplace cases of insubordination that could be multiplied by the thousands. As I listened, it seemed to me that the offenders described were small fry by comparison with an Australian I had known in Rouen. Fortifying myself with a beef on rye and a fresh stein I settled back in my chair and launched into the story of Private Flegg—the outstanding insurgent in my personal recollections of the First World War:

We met in British General Hospital 12, at Rouen, one afternoon in the latter part of February, 1918. I was strolling past the compound for patients suspected of self-inflicted wounds when a stocky chap, in hospital "blues" and an Australian campaign hat, hailed me from within the high barbed wire fence: "I say, Yank, have you any Bull Durham?" Having long ceased to roll my own, I tossed a couple of Camels through the wire, and in a brief conversation that followed, learned that he was a native of Sydney, had lived for a short time in Cleveland, Ohio, and was awaiting
trial by court-martial in Paris on a charge of injuring both legs to evade front line duty. Pulling up his rousers he revealed two bandaged calves. "They say I did this," he sneered. "But I say it's the work of their bloody 'Redcaps' in Le Havre. I was knocked down and kicked in Military Police Headquarters. That's my story—and they can take it or leave it. I'm through, Yank. I'll never soldier another day in the British Army."

During the next two weeks I talked with him a number of times and his contempt for military authority seemed to increase from day to day. The date of his trial in Paris was drawing near, but he showed no concern over the outcome. "They'll probably give me the works," he said.

An English orderly in the compound gave me a few sidelights on Flegg as we sipped beer during a chance meeting in the British canteen. "He's a rum one, that chap," grinned the orderly. "Always ready for a bit of a joke, an' he doesn't mind if it's on 'im now and then. He's a great one for cooking—nearly every night he fixes a stew that jolly well makes me mouth water just to smell it. Where he gets the onions, bully beef an' potatoes, I don't know. Seems to pull 'em out of the bloomin' air."

My informant drained his glass and lit a Goldflake. I ordered another round of beers. "Tell me some more," I urged.

"Well," he continued, "you'd be surprised at the things he can do. Last week he drew a cartoon of old Major Morrison—and Bairnsfather 'imself couldn't ha' done it better. During the week he'll sit at the little organ in the chapel tent and play and sing like an angel. It would do your 'eart good to 'ear 'im sing 'Danny Boy'; but do you think he'd play at the Sunday service? Not he. Not for Sir Douglas Haig, 'imself."

The evening before Flegg was taken to Paris I dropped by the compound, wished him luck, and gave him a package of Piedmonts. He confided that he and another prisoner, a New Zealander, had planned to escape, but increased vigilance on the part of the sentries had forced them to give up the idea. There was nothing left to do but face the court-martial.

Flegg's stay in Paris was short. At the conclusion of his trial he was returned to Rouen pending the decision of the court. As the days passed the rebellious Australian played the little organ, cooked his savory stews, and subjected the orderlies to daily good-natured analysis of their short-comings. He seemed utterly indifferent to his fate.

The result of the court-martial was dramatically announced about a week after the hearing. Late one blustery afternoon a Scottish ambulance driver poked his head in the kitchen door and announced that a ceremony of some sort was taking place in the compound yard. Ever ready for an interlude in the daily camp routine, I grabbed
my cap and set off to see the show. A double row of blue-clad convalescent patients were lined up in hollow square formation. For a moment I thought an inspection was under way. And then I saw Flegg.

He was at attention, in the center of the square, facing a group of officers. A captain with a resonant voice was proclaiming the contents of an order in his gloved hand. I arrived within earshot as he reached the end: "... guilty of disabling yourself in the face of the enemy. It is the sentence of the Court that you be confined in a military prison for a term of five years—at hard labor."

Silence followed the grim announcement. All eyes were on Flegg. For a moment he seemed to revel in the spotlight. Then with a shrug of contempt he hurled a final defy at the officers before him; the words seemed to crackle from his lips: "Five years, eh... Well, at least I'm through with you b...ds."

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It was a crisp Sunday afternoon early in March. With nothing to do for the moment I was glancing through a London Daily Mail at a table in the company kitchen. Four days had passed since the scene in the compound yard; Flegg had been taken away and I assumed the court's order had been carried out. Five years at hard labor! The war would be over long before he had completed his sentence. Wrong as he was I felt sorry for him. There was something likeable about the fellow.

A shadow fell across the table; someone was standing at the window behind me. I turned, and there was Flegg, freshly shaved and dapper, in an English uniform. "Hi, Digger," he beamed. I motioned for him to come around to the cookhouse door and a moment later he was sitting by the stove. "What happened?" I asked. "I thought you were out of circulation. And why are you wearing that Tommy uniform?" Flegg grinned as he poured himself a cup of coffee. "It seems that I'm to get another chance," he explained. "The Brass Hats have turned soft. They've decided that if I go back to the front and do my bit the sentence will be suspended. So I've been assigned to the Lancashire Fusiliers, and we're going up tonight. But I'll be back, lad. I told you I was through—and I wasn't joking."

He ate a hearty lunch and I wrapped a few sandwiches for him to take along. As he was leaving he reached into the pocket of his greatcoat and drew forth a regulation British webbed belt covered with various regimental cap badges.* "I'll see you again, Digger," he prophesied. "But if I don't... Here's a souvenir of Private Flegg—and the great war. Cheerio."

On March 21 General Ludendorff played his trump cards in the game with destiny and one hundred and fourteen German divisions began the long-awaited offensive against a 50-mile front. Shortly before daybreak that morning a convoy of gas cases arrived in General 12. Among them was an Australian who sent word to me, "Here's a souvenir" through a stretcher bearer, that he was in a tent on G-line.

It was the starry-eyed patriot, Private Flegg, and on the floor beside his bed an Australian uniform tied in the regulation bundle, awaited the routine trip to the delouser. His field card identified him as a member of an Australian regiment.

*Badges pinned to belts were popular souvenirs. I still have the one given to me by Flegg.
"You’re certainly a lightning change artist," I admitted. "How did you do it?" He shrugged and took a sip of tea: "It was easy. We moved in next to an Australian division and I simply went over and joined them. And here I am. I told you I’d be back."

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Private Flegg never returned to the front. After a short stay in General 12 he was sent to a nearby convalescent camp and early in July, when the Germans were again threatening the Marne, he wrote from the great rest camp at Louviers a few miles out of Rouen: "I’ve been assigned as a helper in one of the steward stores. It’s not too bad—sort of like working in a grocery. I fill orders for lime juice, tea, coffee, canned milk, and things of that sort."

About a week before the Armistice I heard from him indirectly through another Australian who called on me one evening in the company office, and introduced himself as Corporal Stack. "It seems that we have the same name and a mutual friend," he said as we shook hands. "I spent some time with a chap named Flegg at Louviers. When he learned I was coming to Rouen for an operation he told me I had a namesake in General 12, and asked me to give you his regards. He said: ‘Tell him I’m still keeping my resolution. He’ll know what I mean.’"

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We hold no brief for the attitude of Private Flegg. He played an ignoble role at a time when men were dedicating their lives upon the altar of sacrifice in the belief that they were making a better world. British Army discipline was not to be taken lightly—a less fortunate offender might have closed his career before a firing squad. Yet, I have always felt that if such a fate had overtaken Flegg he would have faced the end with the same coolness he displayed before the officers in the compound yard. For, say what you will, he had plenty of nerve. It was worthy of a better cause.

**RIFLEMAN JORDAN**

Mr. Orville Jordan, 17 years old, of St. Louis, has fired his way into national target shooting prominence by winning the second highest junior award of the National Rifle Association, it was disclosed by the N. R. A. Junior Division here today. He is one of the first junior contestants in the Association's shooting qualification series to gain this distinction so far this year.

Young Jordan was required to fire 50 shots in the most difficult of all shooting positions—standing—at a bullseye actually smaller than the .22 caliber cartridge he was firing. The distance was 50 feet and the youthful sharpshooter had to average 80 per cent accuracy over the course.

Orville’s new award is second in importance only to the Distinguished Rifleman Gold Bar, for which he is now eligible to compete, and is preceded by 13 progressively harder tests which the St. Louis boy was required to pass. The firing was done in a recent series of qualification shooting which annually draws thousands of juniors into rifle competition. Last year the Junior Division awarded some 90,000 medals in all the fifteen classifications, the great majority, of course, being taken by shooters in classifications lower than Expert.

Orville, the son of Mr. and Mrs. George H. B. Jordan, lives at 3506 Henrietta street, St. Louis, Missouri.

From National Rifle Association, Washington, D. C.