

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

ARTHUR GUY EMPEY'S

OVER THE TOP

EDITED BY DAVID SCOTT STIEGHAN

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OVERVIEW

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ARTHUR GUY EMPEY'S

OVER THE TOP

EDITED BY DAVID SCOTT STIEGHAN

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ARTHUR GUY EMPEY'S

OVER THE TOP

EDITED BY DAVID SCOTT STIEGHAN



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To
MY MOTHER AND MY SISTER

I have had many good comrades as I have journeyed around the world, before the mast and in the trenches, but loyal and true as they were, none have ever done, or could ever do, as , much as you have done for me. So as a little token of my gratitude for your love and sacrifice I dedicate this book to you.

A.G.E.

FOREWORD

During sixteen years of “roughing it,” knocking around the world, I have rubbed against the high and low and have had ample opportunity of studying, at close range, many different peoples, their ideals, political and otherwise, their hopes and principles. Through this elbow rubbing, and not from reading, I have become convinced of the nobility, truth, and justice of the Allies’ cause, and know their fight to be our fight, because it espouses the principles of the United States of America, democracy, justice, and liberty.

To the average American who has not lived and fought with him, the Englishman appears to be distant, reserved, a slow thinker, and lacking in humor, but from my association with the man who inhabits the British Isles, I find that this opinion is unjust. To me, Tommy Atkins has proved himself to be the best of mates, a pal, and bubbling over with a fine sense of humor, a man with a just cause who is willing to sacrifice everything but honor in the advancement of the same.

It is my fondest hope that Uncle Sam and John Bull, arms locked, as mates, good and true, each knowing and appreciating the worth of the other, will wend their way through the years to come, happy and contented in each other’s company. So if this poor attempt of mine will, in any way, help to bring Tommy Atkins closer to the doorstep of Uncle Sam, my ambition will have been realized.

Perhaps to some of my readers it will appear that I have written of a great and just cause in a somewhat flippant manner, but I assure them such was not my intention. I have tried to tell my experiences in the language of Tommy sitting on the fire step of a front-line trench on the Western Front — just as he would tell his mate next him what was happening at a different part of the line.

A. G. E.
New York City
May, 1917

INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITOR

Within weeks of the decision of the United States Congress on April 6, 1917, to declare war upon the Central Powers and join in the Great War, a book appeared in American stores by a former British Soldier. No one could have guessed the impact this single volume by an unknown and unpublished author would have upon the minds of Americans who planned to go overseas and those who remained home but wished to understand the conflict. Originally written to arouse his home nation, a nation at peace, this brash and boastful “Yank” (American) and former British Soldier, penned his reminiscences of his recent service in the trenches of the Western Front and submitted his manuscript that ended up inspiring a people who had just gone to war. Such was the luck of Arthur Guy Empey, sometime United States Regular Army Soldier, Sailor, and New Jersey National Guard Recruiting Sergeant whose book *Over the Top* sold around a million copies beginning in 1917.¹

This modern printing of *Over the Top* is the first title in the WWI Centenary Doughboy Series published by the University of North Georgia Press. The editing of Empey’s work is largely an introduction of the author’s life before and after his experiences as a soldier in the British Army. In between, attempts are made to discover the locations and military events that Empey mentions, but self-censors. He often gives only the first letter of the town or village where action, training, or rest out-of-the-line takes place as though spelling out the location would provide the Germans some form of military intelligence a year after the event took place. Additional research reveals most of the locations that are also confirmed by reference to period maps of the region. Therefore, where Empey uses abbreviations or codes for locations, the full names will appear in brackets for those matching places. The bigger picture of the units, leaders, and battles is also included.²

While Empey’s use of a unique appendix, “Tommy’s Glossary of the Trenches,” clarifies his use of terms in the narrative, it is obviously written to be read in its entirety as a final chapter from beginning to end. There are phrases in the text that

1 Arthur Guy Empey, *Over the Top* (New York: G. P Putnam’s Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1917), v-315.

2 Major C. H. Dudley Ward, *The Fifty-Sixth Division, 1st London Territorial Division, 1914-1918* (London: The Naval & Military Press, 2006), 3-5.

Introduction from the Editor

are not commonly understood by readers over 100 years later. Some colloquialisms and slang used in the book date back to his days as a U.S. sailor and a few were common military expressions that originated from the American Civil War. These are explained in footnotes to assist the reader in understanding Empey's story, but are left alone in the original text.

While much of the book seems overly sentimental today, it was originally written for an audience of curious Americans in 1917. Although there are many scenes which conjure up shocking images of combat, Empey left many of the graphic details to the reader's imagination. In fact, the book seems to be aimed at a broad audience with the intention of stirring passions among Americans to support the Allies and condemn the Germans. Since the narrative was created before the United States declared war on April 6, 1917, the forward was obviously written in the weeks after and adds to the patriotic sentiment that Empey champions throughout the work. The author stressed that America needed to join in the war as an Ally and sacrifice everything, including its young men, to defeat Germany and set Western Europe free. Meant originally to encourage America's active participation in the war, the book became at once a propaganda tool and a means to rally both potential recruits and the Home Front.

Arthur Guy Empey was born in Ogden, Utah, on December 11, 1883, to Robert A. Empey and Rose Dana Empey. His parents were originally from Canada and Utah, respectively. As a boy, Empey learned from McGuffey's Readers while attending school in Virginia. By the time of the 1900 United States Census, Empey's family had moved to Brooklyn, New York. Empey was sixteen years old and attending Manual Training High School. He states in *Over the Top* (1917), that he began "roughing it" sixteen years earlier, meaning that he left home to seek his fortune in 1901.³



Empey serving in Texas with the 11th U.S. Cavalry, 1911.

³ Year: 1900; Census Place: Brooklyn ward 6, Kings, New York; Roll: 1044; Page: 3B; Enumeration District: 0050; FHL microfilm: 1241044. "Service League to See 'Over the Top.'" *New York Times*, April 17, 1918. <http://nyti>.

Over the Top

From 1901 until 1915, Empey's American military record and civilian career is complicated. In 1901, two days before his eighteenth birthday, he claimed to be twenty-one years old so he could serve as a private in Company F, 47th New York Militia Infantry Regiment. Two years later, in 1903, he transferred to the New York naval militia, as a Sailor and rose to the rank of Petty Officer. Since his service afloat was recorded in a New York state military record, it was probably state service. Note that in the first chapter, Empey refers to driving on the left as the "port side," something a sailor would likely say rather than something a soldier would typically state.⁴

After reaching the age of twenty-one, Empey decided to transfer from state to Federal service. On July 15, 1905, he joined the United States Regular Army, listing his avocation as Life Guard and enlisted in the 12th United States Regular Cavalry. He was discharged at the end of his first three-year enlistment at "Chickamauga Park, Ga.," on July 9, 1908. He reenlisted for another three-year stint with the 11th United States Regular. At the time, the 11th Cavalry was stationed at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, which was on the northern edge of the Chickamauga Battlefield Park. There is a photograph of him on a rearing horse in his book *First Call* captioned, "The Author Serving in Texas with 11th U.S. Cavalry, 1911." In early 1911, the regiment transferred to Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas, and deployed to patrol the Mexican border.⁵

Upon discharge from the Regular Army in 1912, Empey returned to civil life in New York and reenlisted in Company F, 47th New York Militia Infantry Regiment. After a few months, Empey transferred to Company M, 14th New York Militia Infantry Regiment. Surprisingly, in 1915 Empey enlisted in the 71st New York Militia Infantry Regiment, served as a recruiting sergeant in the New Jersey Militia, and continued in his full-time career with an engineer firm in Jersey City, New Jersey. While busy with all three pursuits, he decided one day to resign from all of his military and civilian posts and sail to England. He obtained his passport, booked passage to Great Britain, and landed at Tilbury. At this point, Empey's odyssey to the Western Front begins.⁶

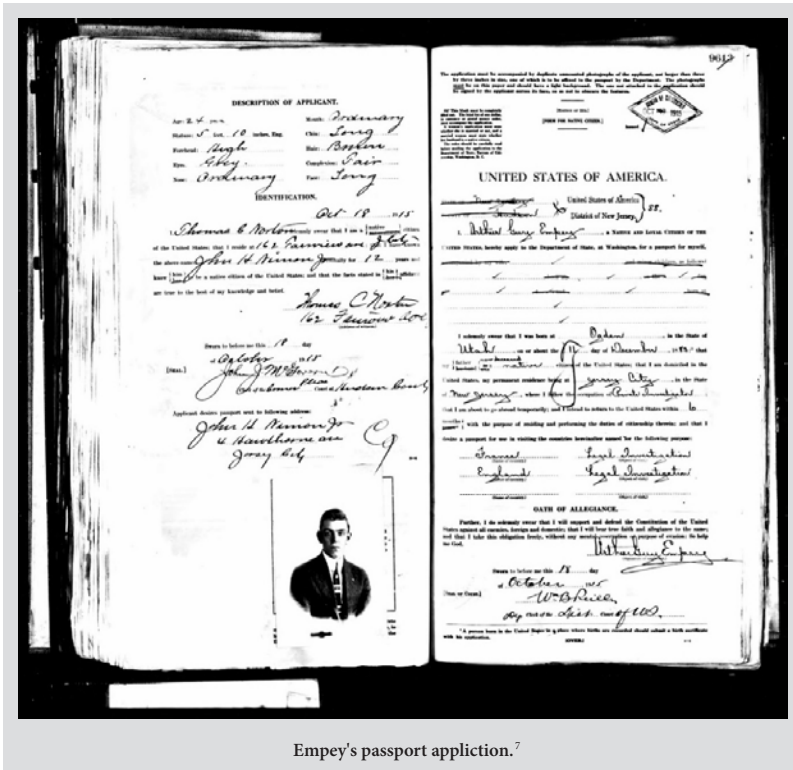
ms/2d7wGmE (accessed October 1, 2016).

4 Before the National Defense Act of 1916 formally created the National Guard, all state units were considered militia or volunteer militia. If they were accepted for Federal (or Confederate) service, units were listed as volunteer outfits from the state.

5 Empey is listed in the New York Census of 1905. His mother, Rose D. Empey, is listed on June 1 as the head of household, with a daughter, Rita D., and a son, Arthur Guy Empey, age twenty-one, by occupation an electrician. It is not known why she listed him as a member of the household while he was serving in the Army in Georgia. New York, State Census, 1905 for Arthur G Empey. Kings. Brooklyn A.D. 01 E.D. 18. Empey is also listed in the 1910 census taken on April 15 as stationed at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, as a single and twenty-six year old corporal who can read and write English. 1910 United States Census for Arthur G Empey. Georgia, Catoosa, Fort Oglethorpe, District 0020.

6 In 1905, the United States Army examined Empey upon his enlistment and found that he had brown eyes, brown hair, and stood 5 foot, 4 ½ inches tall. New York Adjutant General. Arthur Guy Empey. Register of Enlistments United States Army, 1905. Empey, *First Call*. US Passport, Arthur Guy Empey.

Introduction from the Editor



Empey's passport application.⁷

⁷ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; NARA Series: *Passport Applications*, January 2, 1906 – March 31, 1925; Roll #: 272; Volume #: Roll 0272 – Certificates: 9501-9900, 07 Oct 1915-23 Oct 1915.

Chapter 1

FROM MUFTI TO KHAKI

IT was in an office in Jersey City. I was sitting at my desk talking to a Lieutenant of the Jersey National Guard. On the wall was a big war map decorated with variously colored little flags showing the position of the opposing armies on the Western Front in France. In front of me on the desk lay a New York paper with big flaring head lines:

LUSITANIA SUNK! AMERICAN LIVES LOST!

The windows were open and a feeling of spring pervaded the air. Through the open windows came the strains of a hurdy-gurdy playing in the street — *I Didn't Raise my Boy to be a Soldier*.

“*Lusitania Sunk! American Lives Lost!*” — *I Didn't Raise my Boy to be a Soldier*. To us these did not seem to jibe.

The Lieutenant in silence opened one of the lower drawers of his desk and took from it an American flag which he solemnly draped over the war map on the wall. Then, turning to me with a grim face, said:

“How about it, Sergeant? You had better get out the muster roll of the Mounted Scouts, as I think they will be needed in the course of a few days.”

We busied ourselves till late in the evening writing out emergency telegrams for the men to report when the call should come from Washington. Then we went home.

I crossed over to New York, and as I went up Fulton Street to take the Subway to Brooklyn, the lights in the tall buildings of New York seemed to be burning brighter than usual, as if they, too, had read “*Lusitania Sunk! American Lives Lost!*” They seemed to be glowing with anger and righteous indignation, and their rays wigwagged the message, “REPAY!”

Months passed, the telegrams lying handy, but covered with dust. Then, one momentous morning the Lieutenant with a sigh of disgust removed the flag from the war map and returned to his desk. I immediately followed this action

by throwing the telegrams into the wastebasket. Then we looked at each other in silence. He was squirming in his chair and I felt depressed and uneasy.

The telephone rang and I answered it. It was a business call for me requesting my services for an out-of-town assignment. Business was not very good, so this was very welcome. After listening to the proposition, I seemed to be swayed by a peculiarly strong force within me, and answered, "I am sorry that I cannot accept your offer, but I am leaving for England next week," and hung up the receiver. The Lieutenant swung around in his chair, and stared at me in blank astonishment. A sinking sensation came over me, but I defiantly answered his look with, "Well, it's so. I'm going." And I went.

The trip across was uneventful. I landed at Tilbury, England, then got into a string of matchbox cars and proceeded to London, arriving there about 10 P.M. I took a room in a hotel near St. Pancras Station for "five and six — fire extra."

The room was minus the fire, but the "extra" seemed to keep me warm. That night there was a Zeppelin raid, but I didn't see much of it, because the slit in the curtains was too small and I had no desire to make it larger. Next morning the telephone bell rang, and someone asked, "Are you there?" I was, hardly. Anyway, I learned that the Zeps had returned to their Fatherland, so I went out into the street expecting to see scenes of awful devastation and a cowering populace, but everything was normal. People were calmly proceeding to their work. Crossing the street, I accosted a Bobbie with:

"Can you direct me to the place of damage?"

He asked me, "What damage?"

In surprise, I answered, "Why, the damage caused by the Zeps."

With a wink, he replied: "There was no damage, we missed them again."

After several fruitless inquiries of the passersby, I decided to go on my own in search of ruined buildings and scenes of destruction. I boarded a bus which carried me through Tottenham Court Road. Recruiting posters were everywhere. The one that impressed me most was a life-size picture of Lord Kitchener with his finger pointing directly at me, under the caption of "Your King and Country Need You." No matter which way I turned, the accusing finger followed me. I was an American, in mufti, and had a little American flag in the lapel of my coat. I had no king, and my country had seen fit not to need me, but still that pointing finger made me feel small and ill at ease. I got off the bus to try to dissipate this feeling by mixing with the throng of the sidewalks.

Presently I came to a recruiting office. Inside, sitting at a desk was a lonely Tommy Atkins. I decided to interview him in regard to joining the British Army. I opened the door. He looked up and greeted me with "I s'y, myte, want to tyke on?"

I looked at him and answered, "Well, whatever that is, I'll take a chance at it."

Without the aid of an interpreter, I found out that Tommy wanted to know if I cared to join the British Army. He asked me: "Did you ever hear of the Royal Fusiliers?" Well, in London you know, Yanks are supposed to know everything, so I was not going to appear ignorant and answered, "Sure."

After listening for one half-hour to Tommy's tale of their exploits on the firing line, I decided to join. Tommy took me to the recruiting headquarters where I met a typical English Captain. He asked my nationality. I immediately pulled out my American passport and showed it to him. It was signed by Lansing, — Bryan had lost his job a little while previously. After looking at the passport, he informed me that he was sorry but could not enlist me, as it would be a breach of neutrality. I insisted that I was not neutral, because to me it seemed that a real American could not be neutral when big things were in progress, but the Captain would not enlist me.

With disgust in my heart I went out in the street. I had gone about a block when a recruiting Sergeant who had followed me out of the office tapped me on the shoulder with his swagger stick and said: "S'y, I can get you in the Army. We have a 'Leftenant' down at the other office who can do anything. He has just come out of the O. T. C. (Officers' Training Corps) and does not know what neutrality is." I decided to take a chance, and accepted his invitation for an introduction to the Lieutenant. I entered the office and went up to him, opened up my passport, and said: "Before going further I wish to state that I am an American, not too proud to fight, and want to join your army. "

He looked at me in a nonchalant manner, and answered, "That's all right, we take anything over here."

I looked at him kind of hard and replied, "So I notice," but it went over his head.

He got out an enlistment blank, and placing his finger on a blank line said, "Sign here."

I answered, "Not on your tintype."

"I beg your pardon?"

Then I explained to him that I would not sign it without first reading it. I read it over and signed for duration of war. Some of the recruits were lucky. *They signed for seven years only.*

Then he asked me my birthplace. I answered, "Ogden, Utah."

He said, "Oh yes, just outside of New York?"

With a smile, I replied, "Well, it's up the State a little."

Then I was taken before the doctor and passed as physically fit, and was issued a uniform. When I reported back to the Lieutenant, he suggested that, being an American, I go on recruiting service and try to shame some of the slackers into joining the Army.

"All you have to do," he said, "is to go out on the street, and when you see a young fellow in mufti who looks physically fit, just stop him and give him this kind of a talk:

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, a Britisher, physically fit, and in mufti when your King and Country need you? Don't you know that your country is at war and that the place for every young Briton is on the firing line? Here I am, an American, in khaki, who came four thousand miles to fight for your King and Country, and you, as yet, have not enlisted. Why don't you join? Now is the time."

This argument ought to get many recruits, Empey, so go out and see what you can do."

He then gave me a small rosette of red, white, and blue ribbon, with three little streamers hanging down. This was the recruiting insignia and was to be worn on the left side of the cap.

Armed with a swagger stick and my patriotic rosette I went out into Tottenham Court Road in quest of cannon fodder.

Two or three poorly dressed civilians passed me, and although they appeared physically fit. I said to myself, "They don't want to join the army; perhaps they have someone dependent on them for support," so I did not accost them.

Coming down the street I saw a young dandy, top hat and all, with a fashionably dressed girl walking beside him. I muttered, "You are my meat," and when he came abreast of me I stepped directly in his path and stopped him with my swagger stick, saying:

"You would look fine in khaki, why not change that top hat for a steel helmet? Aren't you ashamed of yourself, a husky young chap like you in mufti when men are needed in the trenches? Here I am, an American, came four thousand miles from Ogden, Utah, just outside of New York, to fight for your King and Country. Don't be a slacker, buck up and get into uniform; come over to the recruiting office and I'll have you enlisted."

He yawned and answered, "I don't care if you came forty thousand miles, no one asked you to," and he walked on. The girl gave me a sneering look; I was speechless.

I recruited for three weeks and nearly got one recruit.

This perhaps was not the greatest stunt in the world, but it got back at the officer who had told me, "Yes, we take anything over here." I had been spending a good lot of my recruiting time in the saloon bar of the "Wheat Sheaf" pub (there was a very attractive blonde barmaid, who helped kill time—I was not as serious in those days as I was a little later when I reached the front) — well, it was the sixth day and my recruiting report was blank. I was getting low in the pocket — barmaids haven't much use for anyone who cannot buy drinks — so I looked around for recruiting material. You know a man on recruiting service gets a "bob" or shilling for every

recruit he entices into joining the army, the recruit is supposed to get this, but he would not be a recruit if he were wise to this fact, would he?

Down at the end of the bar was a young fellow in mufti who was very patriotic — he had about four “Old Six” ales aboard. He asked me if he could join, showed me his left hand, two fingers were missing, but I said that did not matter as “we take anything over here.” The left hand is the rifle hand as the piece is carried at the slope on the left shoulder. Nearly everything in England is “by the left,” even general traffic keeps to the port side.

I took the applicant over to headquarters where he was hurriedly examined. Recruiting surgeons were busy in those days and did not have much time for thorough physical examinations. My recruit was passed as “fit” by the doctor and turned over to a Corporal to make note of his scars. I was mystified. Suddenly the Corporal burst out with, “Blimey, two of his fingers are gone;” turning to me he said, “You certainly have your nerve with you, not ‘alf you ain’t, to bring this beggar in.”

The doctor came over and exploded, “What do you mean by bringing in a man in this condition?”

Looking out of the corner of my eye I noticed that the officer who had recruited me had joined the group, and I could not help answering, “Well, sir, I was told that you took anything over here.”

I think they called it “Yankee impudence;” anyhow it ended my recruiting.

EDITOR’S NOTES

Following heavy losses suffered during the first months of the war in 1914, large numbers of the wartime British volunteers were gathered into new battalions and divisions for use in a “Big Push” to break through the German lines in 1916. In honor of the great British hero, Lord Kitchener, who appeared throughout the kingdom pointing his finger from a popular recruiting poster, this force of wartime recruits was referred to as “Kitchener’s Army.” These new units were often added to rebuild decimated existing peacetime Regular, Territorial Force, and New Army regiments.

The Territorial Force was part of the formal national guard of Great Britain designated before the Great War to defend the Home Territory from foreign invasion. Since they were needed in France and Belgium when the war began in 1914, the federalized Territorial Force units joined the new divisions composed of volunteers and conscripts. They formed the backbone of the British Army after the prewar Regular divisions absorbed tremendous losses in the first months of combat. The distinction between the Regular and Territorial formations soon became one of title and tradition. All these units suffered two or three times the number of

casualties during the war than their official strength, but were constantly refilled with replacements. All sides in the war became desperate for additional manpower as the carnage of the Western Front continued to cause enormous casualties. Then, in steps Empey.¹

The recruiting office Empey entered upon arrival in London was one operated by the Royal Fusiliers. Specifically, for the 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, The London Regiment. He was designated Private #5203, 1st London Regiment, Royal Fusiliers, Territorial Force, on November 3, 1915, when he enlisted for the “Duration of the War.” It is surprising that his original enlistment form still exists since many like documents were destroyed during the German bombing “blitz” in World War II. Empey lists his London lodgings as his residence and attests that he is a “British Subject,” so he could be legally recruited into the British Army. Indeed, the enlistment is witnessed by a lieutenant, possibly the one Empey clashed with in the recruiting office.²

Following his period of initial recruit training, Empey and other reinforcements were shipped to France and eventually arrived via rail cattle cars and on foot at the front lines. Assigned to the 56th (London) Division (Territorial Force), Empey was incorporated into a unit that had been in the trench line for a number of

months. He began his experience as a Tommy rifleman by observing everything, keeping his eyes open, and his head down. He apparently stays in trouble for “Yankee impudence” with his corporals and sergeants because he can’t keep his

Territorial Force, Army Form E. 501, Attestation of No. 5203, Arthur Guy Empey, 1st London Regiment (T.F), 3 November 1915.

1 Ward, 1-3.

2 Territorial Force, Army Form E. 501, Attestation of No. 5203, Arthur Guy Empey, 1st London Regiment (T.F), 3 November 1915.

opinions to himself. He got in more trouble when he stated that he had once been a sergeant-major in the U. S. Cavalry while in training in Great Britain, as he states in the next chapter. It seems that he never learns not to “chuck his weight about.”