HARRY’S JOURNEY

By

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Steven Hughes and Harry Edwards
July, 1918
Arrival on the USS Tanedores, June 8, 1918, Bordeaux, France

Departure on the USS Zeplin May 28, 1919, Brest, France

Map showing the route from Verneil to Vannes, Muse-Argonne, Redon, and Ravieres.
3 Nov 1918. Roads in the Argonne region of northern France were poorly marked and by 0430 hours on the morning of 2 November, 1918, Harry Edwards and his buddy Steven Hughes were lost. They were on the fourth supply run that night. They were a tiny dot on a huge effort to transfer quantities of 155 mm shells, powder bags, and fuses over the previous ten days from the regimental depot at Camp Gallieni to the artillery positions on Mount Faucon. The heavy wagon arrived at an intersection and Harry pulled on the reins to stop the horses.

“Hughes. Look at that map again.”

I watched as he retrieved a folded map and cigarette lighter from his jacket pocket, handed me the lighter and opened the map. I snapped the lighter and moved the flame closer. The map was barely readable in the flickering light.

Hughes concentrated intently, traced his finger along faint lines on the paper.

“We came this way. We should be here. Ahhh. We need to continue straight, about a half mile to the next intersection, then turn west. Faucon is only a mile or so further. Hell. Edwards, we should have gone the way we went earlier. It was shorter and direct!”

“You out of your damn mind? I’m not going through that lunacy again. Those retreating Poilus were crazy with panic. They could have killed us.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe it wasn’t so safe. Least we knew where the hell we were.”

“Let’s go,” he said and I snapped the lighter shut and handed it back. I watched as he refolded the map and put it and the lighter back in his pocket, carefully securing the button.

Hughes was irritatingly meticulous at times.
I put my tongue to the roof of my mouth, and snapped loudly, “tsk, tsk, tsk,” in rapid succession. Then called out, “Come on horsies,” while whipping the reins at the same time. The overworked animals tugged on the wagon. With a measure of certainty the load of munitions lumbered forward.

We were supposed to be well behind the lines. Intact woods, fields, farm houses, small villages and passable roads left the impression that things were relatively normal. It offered an illusion of sanity, and despite the sound of artillery in the distance, the war for us Waggoner’s was something out there.

Things were different on this run. I knew Hughes shared my discomfort as the wooded groves and farm fields thinned. I started to fidget when the trees disappeared altogether. We couldn’t see very far in the shimmering starlight. But the subdued light revealed a pockmarked terrain of shell craters along the side of the road. Uncertain what to do, I pushed the team forward another hundred and fifty yards. The road roughened and the unexpected quiet unsettled us.

“This isn’t right, Edwards.”

“No, it isn’t,” I snapped as I pulled on the reins to stop the horses. “Why the hell is it so quiet?”

An American voice in the darkness suddenly startled us, “Who’s there? Identify yourselves.” In the darkness I barely saw the silhouette of helmeted head as it cautiously rose out of a depression running perpendicular to the road. We both recognized the outline of a rifle pointed in our direction.

I quickly responded, “Private Edwards, Third Platoon, Company B, 315th Artillery Brigade. We’re on a supply run to Faucon. Ahhhh. We may have made a wrong turn.”
The gun cocked upward and I heard the soft click of the safety being reset. “You sure did. Do you know where the hell you are?”


Hughes muttered, “We would if we’d gone the other way.”

“You’re at the service trenches, about three-hundred yards from the front,” the voice called back. “Better get that wagon the hell out of here. Fast! Lieutenant thinks the Hun will attack at dawn.”

“Christ! Is there anywhere to turn around?” Hughes asked.

The voice directed, “Go up about fifty feet, the road widens. That’s where our chow wagon turns.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I jigged the reins, and felt the team strain as the wagon inched forward. Hughes stared intently into the darkness.

“Pull up. I think I see it,” he cried.

I stopped the rig as my partner jumped off the buckboard seat. He patted the horses and talked calmly to them as he walked to the front of the team. I saw him grab the lead stallion’s bridle and pull. The wagon crept forward twenty feet.

He called back, “I think we can make it here. Gotta be careful. There’s a ditch on either side, but it looks wide enough. At least thirty feet.”

A four day dry spell left the mud on the road more settled, yet it remained rough and rutted. Across the crest to the east glimmered the first hint of morning light. Hughes pushed on the bridle, and got the horses to step back. We inched backwards as I looked over my shoulder at the rear wheels. I saw the edge and yelled, “Stop. We’re at the edge.” At the same time I
tugged hard on the brake to stop the rig. When it stopped, Hughes reversed, and now pulled hard on the bridle as I released the brake at the same time. The team stepped forward six feet or so, and Hughes forced the animals to take steps into the turn. When he and the lead horses neared the edge of the road I heard him shout, “Brake now!” Back and forth we went.

Suddenly Hughes cried out, “Oh shit.” We both turned in the direction of the first flash, and watched with a gnawing panic in our stomachs. It was followed by another and another, momentarily lighting everything around us. Instinctively I ducked. The entire sky in the direction of the front erupted into a confusion of brilliant orange strikes and the fireworks cast an eerie glow on what moments ago was a darkened landscape. The desolation was now suddenly vivid. To the limits of my vision I saw churned earth, holes in the ground, long thin mounds of earth in the distance reveling the outer trench lines, and discarded or destroyed military junk scattered about or protruding from the ground. Carcasses of horses or mules in various stages of decay emerged from the dark. They were only part of the death stench that enveloped us.

Thunderous percussions followed the flashes. It rattled our teeth. My hands snapped up, with little success, to shield my ears from the blasts. The ground shuddered. I saw the horses flinch in the noise. Hughes watched with apprehension as I pulled hard on the reins and brake to maintain control.

I heard him shout, “Easy does it boy,” at the lead stallion as its head jerked back in fear.

“Come on Hughes, pull them round. Pull’em round,” I yelled. I strained on the reins to get the horses heads turned.

Over the din, I just barely heard a gasp, “Oh hell,” as Hughes momentarily lost his footing at the edge of the road. Then, just as quickly, he called back, “I’m okay.”
With growing apprehension I watched as Hughes strained hard on the bridle trying to turn the team into the straight away. Then he yelled, “We’re clear Edwards,” as hooves escaped the ditch by inches.

“Come on. Get in.” fear strained my voice.

I watched as Hughes scrambled to the front of the wagon, and leapt onto the buckboard. He screamed, “Get the hell outta here.”

I snapped the reins, and the horses eagerly stepped forward. In the growing daylight the route to safety lay before us. Behind us the screaming shells and the discord of their detonations inexorably marched in our direction.

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The wagon slid back and forth uncontrollably in the ruts and I gripped the railing tightly as I bounced in the seat. I watched anxiously as Edwards urged the rig forward. The wagon shuddered sharply as the earth shook. The cacophony behind us edged closer.

I knew Edwards was totally concentrated on the road and the horses, but I got a chance to glance around and assess their situation. Radom shells from the advancing barrage overshot their targets, and the deadly 210 mm projectiles slammed into the earth to our left and right. Sometimes less than a hundred yards distant I saw sheets of flame, smoke, and dirt erupt skyward. The searing heat and concussive power of their detonations slammed into our fleeing wagon. Shell fragments sizzled in the air dangerously close to us.

“Oh my God,” I uttered, as the wagon momentarily lurched in concert with the splintering sound of shattered wood. Turning back I saw a large hole torn out of the upper edge of the wagon sidewall.
The sudden, sickening sound of a dull thud brought my eyes back to the horses. The rear stallion shook. A hideous bellow of pain rose from the animal’s throat, its head flailed upward and side to side. The Andulusion held its position in the team despite the blood that pumped from a hole in the hindquarter of its leathery hide. A red rivulet formed, then ran down its leg. I saw an ugly jagged shard of metal embedded in the muscle protruded from the hole.

I yelled again, urgency driving my words, “Come on Edwards. Faster. Faster!”

I barely heard Edwards incoherent reply over the roar, “Can’t. Got ….. careful … these ruts.”

The panicked animals drove us forward as the wagon picked up speed. This despite Edwards effort to maintain control over them.

We were fifty, one hundred, one hundred and fifty feet beyond the turn around, when I realized that with another couple of hundred feet we’d be safe. But in that moment something caught my attention from the corner of my eye. I glanced back at the receding road for a better look. A yellowish-green fog obscured the muddy earth and slid along the ground in our direction. I thought how odd. It seemed to chase the wagon. In an instant I recognized this horrible slithering mass, and turned to Edwards, my mouth drawn in terror, and yelled, “Edwards, get your ga……,” but my words must have been cut short by the blast.

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In an instant time slowed to a crawl. The wagon rose up in the air and Hughes and I were carried with it. There was a peculiar fascination in the improbability of watching bags of oats and straw matting drift past my head. Stainless steel artillery shells turned slowly end over end. It was bizarre how beautiful they looked. A silvery sheen glistened off their polished steel surfaces as sunlight breached the distant horizon. Lighter powder bags sailed upward even
higher. This is impossible, flashed through my mind as the surreal scene of a weightless wagon, horses, artillery shells, powder bags, supplies, and Hughes and I were propelled hopelessly upward. As I rose, I must have been thrown from the seat. The reins tugged on my hands, they pulled me to the side, away from Hughes, away from the wagon.

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The moment ended, and Edwards tumbled through the air. He slammed onto his side, skidded across the muddy ground, over the rim of a shell hole, and came to rest on the side wall, the wind and sense knocked out of him.

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I landed more softly in the well churned mud, but the impact snapped my chin strap and my helmet sailed forward a dozen or more yards. I opened my eyes immediately, and felt for my fingers, toes, arms, and legs.

‘Jeez. I’m alive. I think I’m okay,’ I said aloud.

I scraped mud off my hands and unsteadily rose to one knee. But I was not all right. Dizziness overtook me and I fell back to my side, catching myself with my arms to prevent being swallowed up by the mud. I coughed and retched at the same time.

‘What the hell,’ I thought, as the world spun in my head and I became aware of a screaming sound in my ears. I banged my head with my hands, but the spinning and howling banshees were not stopped. I didn’t know if I lay in the muck for a minute or ten minutes. The dizziness gradually subsided, and I struggled to stand again. My legs were rubbery and I was certain they would collapse beneath me at any moment. With willed concentration I managed to steady myself and look around.
“Edwards, Edwards!” I shouted. Then, even louder, “Where the hell are you?” Again and again I yelled, as I staggered to keep balance. My voice was muted by the ringing in my ears.

Despite the chaos of the barrage, and my lost friend, my gaze froze on the overturned wagon. It was tilted at a bizarre angle in the far ditch. A tangle of splintered wood revealed the rear end, and all that remained of the wheels were shattered spokes. The once gleaming shells were scattered in the mud about the burning wagon, some sticking upward at weird angles, as if waiting to be launched. Powder charges burned. Plumes of smoke hurtled upward. Hot showers of sparks spewed over the ground. The sparks caused a loud hissing sound as they struck the wet mud.

My eyes froze on the horses. Their bodies were still attached to the wagon pole, but now laid out in a grotesque tumble of intertwined legs. The yellow-green mist surrounded them.

“Oh my God,” I uttered. I couldn’t take my eyes off their necks, heads and legs as they twitched in violent spasms. I saw white froth as it oozed from flared nostrils. Gaping mouths gasped for air, but found none. A moment later the agonized writhing stopped. The warning I tried to shout Edwards in the wagon returned.

‘Oh, Christ,’ I thought, fumbling for my gas mask, ‘Chlorine.’

As I grappled with the mask, I again turned to search for Edwards in the seared surroundings, and yelled over and over, “Edwards, where the hell are you?” I spotted his boots, partially covered with mud, protruding from the side of the shell hole behind me.

‘There you are,’ I thought.

Edwards immobile body lay just below the rim, angled downward toward a pool of blackened water at the bottom. The mud partially surrounded his face. I struggled step by step,
at the limits of my strength, toward my friend. I could smell traces of the gas now and felt a burning sensation rising in my throat. As I hastily tightened the seal on the mask, sluggish movement caught my attention on the far rim of the shell hole. It was hard to see through the murky eisenglass lenses of the mask, but almost immediately fear shuddered through me when I realized the green mist now breached the rim of Edwards’s crater. I fought the panic to turn and run. The deadly mist flowed slowly over the lip, and then oozed like molasses down the side, slowly filling the bottom. Wispy tendrils of vile yellow-green swirled and flicked upward toward Edwards head. I struggled to get to my comrade, but the determined muck that sucked at my feet impeded progress. ‘Sweet Jesus, give me strength,’ I thought. ‘In a few moments I’ll be too late.’