

Winning the Iron Cross at Gravelotte

BY ROBERT SHACKLETON

The battle of Gravelotte, one of the fiercest and bloodiest struggles of the Franco-Prussian war, was fought on August 18, 1870. The Germans had 230,000 men and lost about 20,000. The French had 180,000 and lost 12,000. The battle was won by the Germans, and was the most important in its results of any battle of the war, for it meant the cooping up in Metz of the army of Marshal Bazaine, and the subsequent surrender of the city and its fortress, and of three marshals, some fifty generals, thousands of other officers, and nearly 175,000 men. The fiercest fighting at Gravelotte was at St.-Privat. Guldner, a veteran whose story of the battle the author has here set down, carried the colors of his regiment.

"I WAS of the Second Regiment of Grenadier Guards. We were stationed at Berlin. The Emperor of Austria was our honorary colonel, but our actual commander was Lieutenant-Colonel Von Boehn, who had been captain and major in the regiment before becoming its commander. Our helmets had the star and the flying eagle, and were thus a little different from those of the regiments of the line.

"And before we left Berlin for the front, in the war with France in 1870, the King came to our quarters, and the Queen was with him. And all the men came running and surrounded them.

"King William was a kindly man; a big, tall man, of pleasant face. And he liked to stop on the street and speak to little children and pat them on the shoulder. I call him King, for he did not become Emperor till some months after this. And all the soldiers—everybody!—loved him. See, this is his picture, here above me on the wall.

"We saw the King was going to speak, and we stood all silent.

"‘You are going to march to France?’ he said.

"‘*Ja! Ihre Majestät!*’ we cried.

"‘Well, be sure and bring your colors back again,’ he said.

"And, ‘*Ja! Ihre Majestät!*’ all the men shouted again.

"I was the color-sergeant. It is not

an officer, but it is above the ranks. It is the same in your army, is it not? I was the color-sergeant, and I had run and got the colors, and I felt glad and proud. And I was holding the colors, and the King called me, and he took me by the arm and led me to the Queen.

"‘The regiment will defend its colors,’ he said, ‘and this man will bring them back again.’

"And the Queen smiled very gracious, and bowed, and said, ‘*Ja.*’

"And I was proud to be thus spoken to by the King and by the Queen, and I was proud that I was color-bearer. Thus I was on the regimental roll: ‘Wilhelm Guldner, color-sergeant.’ And I felt within myself, ‘The colors, yes, I will bring them back again.’

"We went by train to the Pfalz, and from there we marched, and we soon knew that Marshal Macmahon was in front of us in Elsass. There were some engagements, and he kept retreating, and we advanced. It was talked of in the regiment that Marshal Bazaine had his headquarters at Metz. We knew that it was before us to beat those two generals, and we were sure that with our generals to lead us we could do it. We had served, and were veterans, so that when news came to us we could sometimes understand what it meant, although there were new recruits who did not understand much of war.

"Our regiment was of the army of Prince Frederick Charles. He was a broad-built man, a whiskered man. He was a little over forty years old. He was a quick and eager general, and the French feared him. He was called the 'Red Prince,' but that was because he was a hussar and always wore a red tunic.

"Often, on the march, it was a fine sight, from some hill road, to see miles and miles of infantry and cavalry and artillery and wagons, and with the music of bands and drums one might have thought it was a great fair.

"But we were almost from the first in the enemy's country, and it was not a pretty sight for them. The peasant people, women and men, would stand at their cottage doors as a regiment came on, and then stare, silent and sullen, or look at the ground while the regiment passed. Never a word or a sign unless spoken to. But, although it was the enemy's country, we could take nothing. The peasants were safe from us, and their property was safe. There would be sharp punishment, the men knew, if orders were disobeyed. If we ever needed anything, an officer would requisition it and give an order, and the peasant could get the money. Sometimes they would try to overcharge, but our officers only laughed then and gave the price that it would cost in Prussia. As I was color-sergeant I saw more than if I had been in the ranks.

"Every night we camped as if we had been at exercise manoeuvres. Every rifle, every knapsack, every bread-cart, had its place. The officers camped in front, the men behind. The colors stood erect in the centre of the camp. There was an exact space between every line of men and every stack of guns, and we slept on the ground in rows. It was summer, and we did not need tents. I am speaking of my own regiment, you understand.

"But though there were discipline and order there was not hardness. We had plenty of food, of meat and bread, and of coffee, and we could always buy wine or beer of the sutlers. We played games, and smoked, and sang soldier songs and folk-songs and church songs. The bugle would sound to go to sleep and we would

go to sleep, and it would sound early in the morning to get up, and we would get up, ready always to march or to fight.

"It did not seem a long time before we were well into France. In all, the war was short and bloody. And as the days went by we came to understand that around Metz was to be great fighting, for our armies were gathering toward that city, and a great army of the French was known to be there.

"I never saw Metz until after the battle of Gravelotte, although what my regiment did was of such importance in gaining it. It was altogether hidden from us by hills. And it seems strange to me that after having been one of the Grenadier Guards, stationed at Berlin, and having fought to gain Metz, my home and my family and my work are now here at Metz. In those days I could never have thought of such a thing.

"It was August, the middle of August, and on the 14th we started early and marched hard and long. Next day we marched as far, or perhaps even farther. The officers were silent, and seemed only anxious to hurry, and so the men were silent too, for we all knew something of importance was to come. Silent, yes, but light-hearted, for with our King and our cause we were sure to win. Had not the French forced us into war and begun it by crossing into Prussia?

"The 16th was another day of long, hard marching, and it was talked of among us that we were pursuing an enemy. We knew we were swinging to the south, and we thought we were south of Metz. From the peasants, grudgingly, we found out that we were. There were always some of us who could make talk with the people of the border-land, by words and signs. Well, then, we were south of Metz, and we were either going toward Paris or marching between Paris and a French army. I take no credit for understanding this, for to a soldier it ought to be clear. Just which of the two it was we had no way, for a time, of telling, and of course we could not ask an officer.

"I wish I could tell you how far we marched in those few days. And when I say 'we' I mean not only my regiment, but the army of Prince Frederick Charles.

I have read, since the war, that it was a wonderful march. But we thought nothing of anything like that. We knew that it was a hurry march, and we did it gladly, and only a few men dropped out of the ranks and there was no grumbling. It took us to a position where the French were very anxious not to have us, and if we had not marched fast and got there, it would have been bad for Prussia, for there would have been no other soldiers to spare for this.

"I take it that you understand that General Von Moltke was in command of all, and that we were divided into armies under him.

"The King was with us, and so, of course, General Von Moltke was under him, but we believed that the King did not interfere much

with him. And we were proud that the King was with us to see us fight for him and for Vaterland, and we were glad because he was a kindly man and we loved him, and we knew he would always do what he could for us. And we were glad that he let Von Moltke do the generalship.

"Well, we continued our long march. On the morning of the 16th we were ordered to leave our knapsacks, and so that day we travelled more lightly. In our knapsacks were an extra shirt and unterhosen and stockings and an extra pair of shoes and some cartridges, besides what we had in our cartridge-boxes, and on top of the knapsack were kettle and greatcoat. A load, you see, yet no one had complained of it.

"At times, now, there came the sound of cannon, so we knew that at least some of the French were still north of us. We

were making such a sweep of a march that we did not see much of even our own men. And we were too far away to hear the cannon very plainly; and then, too, the sound was kept from us by hills. But rumors began to come, toward the end of our march, of a great battle, and of Marshal Bazaine being held in Metz.



WILHELM GULDNER

Veteran of the Battle of Gravelotte

"Then some said, 'We are marching between Bazaine and Macmahon.' Others said, 'We are marching between both these generals and Paris.' You see, we could understand a good deal of it, but not being officers and not having their information, we could not always know. We could only guess.

"The French boasted that Metz had never been captured. It had often been besieged. It had never been taken. They called it,

even the peasant folk called it, 'the Virgin,' and they said that no Prussian could ever touch the Virgin. It is a city, as you have seen, built upon two rivers, and so surrounded by hills, upon which forts are built, as to be a very strong place.

"It was far over there, far beyond that farthest hill that you see from this window—it was miles away over yonder—that we marched those August days to form for battle between Metz and Paris.

"Well, on the 16th we came to where there had been fighting, and many dead were on the ground. And even all the wounded had not been cared for. It made us sober again. Yet we did not pay much attention to it, for we were so busy thinking of our march and of what was to be the end of it.

"When a soldier is busy and interest-

ed, even a young soldier, he pays little attention to dead men or wounded. If he did, there would soon be no wars, for soldiers cannot think of such things and fight.

"We passed some great graves, new made, and at the head of each would be a wooden cross and a few words saying that here rested in God perhaps sixty, a hundred, a hundred and twenty soldiers. No names; just totals. And I think we thought more of these graves than we did of the dead men. But even of these graves we thought but little.

"Some men of the Crown Prince's army, who were there, told us that it was Mars-la-Tour. They said the French were badly beaten there. They said the King and General Von Moltke had seen it.

"Well, after it went through the ranks that we had won another battle, and that the King had been there, we marched on quite cheerful. We thought not of the dead and the wounded or that we ourselves might soon be of the dead or the wounded. We were not tired, and that night we camped as orderly as ever. And we sang a little, too—a *Kamerad* song.

"When, after another long march, we camped on the night of the 17th, we knew we were very near to the enemy. We threw out more pickets, and there was much skirmishing. Prisoners and wounded were taken past us, and once there came a French officer of high rank—from his uniform we took him to be a general. He was in a carriage, and we tried to look at him, but he kept his face down.

"We did not sleep much the night of the 17th. Every little while there would be an alarm and firing, and every time we all turned out under arms. There would come picket firing, and then perhaps a volley, and then sharp orders, and we would all spring up and form.

"The commissary department usually kept us well supplied, and we were expected to carry with us three days' rations, but on this long march the commissary did not keep up with us, and for two days we had no bread. Then we came across some French provision wagons, and we captured them, and we had plenty.

"On the morning of the 18th, the day that there was to be the great battle of Gravelotte, we were up early. We had

had little sleep. We were formed in line, and we all felt ready.

"An adjutant from another division rode up and said to one of our officers—a sergeant heard it and the words were passed along—'Better not form in masses.' And all of us, even the youngest, knew what that meant.

"We had reached the end of our march. We were south of Metz. It is a German city now, for we kept it after capturing it. We had once come near the main body of our army, and had then swung still westward. We all believed that our army was in a separated position, and if that was so it was important.

"We did not get our coffee till seven that morning, and then we knew there was to be a battle, for the men were divided into Protestant and Catholic, and the priest and the pastor spoke each to his own men. Many of the men gave to them letters and messages. But I never knew of any soldier giving them his watch or his money before a battle.

"Well, and so we were to fight. And we were glad, for it was better to fight and to finish.

"We had been separated from the other division of the Guards, but now it came up, and we broke ranks, and friends and brothers greeted each other.

"Then we waited. There were hills about us, and we were in a valley, and we were restless with waiting while the hours passed. And we heard much heavy firing, but it was far away.

"We were in fighting order, and there was artillery with us and there was cavalry. I had kept the colors in their waterproof cover, and now I took it off. They were old colors, and had belonged to the regiment before the time of any of us. When I shook out the colors the men looked stern, but there was no cheer. Sometimes men will cheer when you do not expect them to, and sometimes they will not cheer when you are sure that they will cheer.

"The cannon sounded heavier and louder. It was as if a heavy *Donnersturm*.

"We knew afterward that the battle of Gravelotte was fought all day, and we, the soldiers of the Red Prince, were set to do the holding of Marshal Bazaine from the path to Paris. And that was why

so many French were sent to fight us there and why they fought so hard.

"The *Donner* of the cannon grew louder. It was a great roar, but yet it was not near us. Soon we began to hear the rattle of rifles, and we heard the *mitrail-leuse*. At each fire, twenty-five bullets! And a bad sound, so: *Gr-r-r-r-r!* A rise and fall of sound, a very deadly sound. And we saw shells go sailing through the air like balloons.

"Wounded men began to pass our regiment, and they said the French were just around the corner and very strong. But even the words of the wounded were not disheartening. I saw no sign of fear, and if any man felt it he hid the fear and stayed in the ranks, and it was the safest place for him. But I do not believe there was any fear.

"It was a hot day, very hot, and noon came and our bottles were empty, and the men were very thirsty. Then the major of my battalion allowed a party to go to a near-by village for water—a little village it was, with white houses and red-tiled roofs.

"And the officers, they talked together, and the men, they talked together, standing at will but in line.

"We were marched to higher ground, and we could see, in a way, for miles, except that there was much of smoke. But we could see some of the French. We could see the flashes from cannon. And it seemed better when we could see than when we could only hear. The cannon firing, and regiments running or marching, and batteries galloping—it was a grand sight, but still it was not near us. Even yet our turn had not come. When it did come it was terrible.

"It must have been, I think, about four o'clock when Colonel Von Boehn rode to the head of the regiment, and we all straightened, quick, as on parade. And he said, sharp, a few words, something like, 'Men, the regiment has a good name, and you will give it a still better one.' I was in front, and could hear part of what he said.

"The colonel led us to the left, and we crossed a railroad track and went through another little white village, and then we faced a slope, a long slope, with a village on it which the French had made into a fort, and we, our regiment

and others, were to capture it, and there were many Frenchmen and cannon there. We did not know the name of it then, but it was St.-Privat, and we could understand that it was important, but we did not then know that if we took and held it it was cutting off Marshal Bazaine's last hope.

"The colonel rode on a horse, he and the majors and the adjutants. Our captains usually rode too, but this day the captains sent their horses back and went on foot.

"And soon our first men began to fall, for we came under the fire of the *chasse-pot*. It was hard, for we could not see the enemy. These first ones were many sharpshooters, in a ditch, and the noise of their firing was like that of a coffee-mill—*Kr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r!* They drew off as we went forward. It was only at a walk that we went, a steady walk, just as if there were no bullets there.

"As we got nearer there were storms of bullets. They buzzed over our heads and past us. Many of them struck, for many of our men fell.

"And now we would run forward fifty yards and throw ourselves flat; then another fifty yards and the halt and the falling flat; and each time we could see the village that was a fortress nearer; and we were very fierce with anger, and what we wanted was to reach that village, and many more of us were falling fast.

"And once, when we were lying down, and I saw that the officers were standing, just cool and quiet, it came to me that a man has to pay in such ways to be an officer.

"Now shells were bursting among us, for they had trained batteries on us as we advanced. You can see a shell fall and the fuse sputter, and if you had time you would be wondering where the pieces would go. It is well that a soldier in battle has no time to wonder. You are too busy to think of anything at all but getting at the enemy and killing him.

"I saw the colonel fall. He was shot from his horse and carried back. The wounded men could not be carried back till the battle was over, but of course it must be different with high officers. For them it was right.

"The first major, he took command,

and he galloped to the skirmish line, and he was shot. Then the second major, too, was shot, and he tried to get up, but he could not stand, and he sat on a big stone and shouted: "Go on! Go on!" And he took a gun from a dead man and fired it. And with all of us it was as if there was nothing in the world to do but to get to that village.

"We were ordered to fix bayonets, and that made us glad; but even yet the men carried their rifles on their shoulders as they ran. We were not near enough to charge with bayonets.

"I wish I could tell you what it was like as we got near that village of St.-Privat. The noise, the smoke, the flashes, the falling men, and only one desire in our hearts.

"There were three sergeants in the color section, one at each side of me. And first the one at my right was killed. Then the one at my left was shot. Eight big bullets in his body from a *mitrailleuse*—eight! Yet he afterwards got well, while many a man died from only one little bullet.

"And at last we went at a bayonet charge, and for the first time there was a cheer, a wild and savage cheer, and we ran on, eager to plunge the bayonets; and we could see, as we came near the village, that the French were firing from behind barricades and garden walls and from windows. But I do not believe any one of us thought of death. We thought only of killing the enemy.

"And we looked into the wild faces of the French, and they met us hand to hand. Ah! we climbed over walls and barricades, and we fired and bayoneted, and we fought them in the streets.

"On and on we went. It was a wild time of shooting, bayoneting, wrestling, clubbing, shouting. On and on, but it was slow work and terrible, for the French fought for every step. Now it would be all smoke; and the flash of a cannon or rifle would show men fighting and falling, and then there would be a space clear of smoke, and you could see bayonets lunging and men grappling.

"I was at the front, for I had the colors. There were a few officers still left, and they were shouting and waving their swords, and other regiments storm-

ed into the village with us, and after a while—I can't say how long—the place was ours.

"As I tell it to you it seems perhaps a simple thing. But when the regiment was paraded before the battle began, we were more than 2900 men and more than fifty officers, and we lost in the fight forty officers and more than a thousand men. Yes; that was the loss of just my regiment alone. It was *mörderisch*, but it was necessary.

"Well, it was over. The village was blazing, and many a dead man lay in the ruins; some sat upright, dead, with their backs against walls.

"We bivouacked near the town, and we saw women and children come out of the burning houses. Women and children! And the children were too frightened to cry. And the women came shivering around the wounded, helping a little when they could. And an old man found the body of his son and he buried it. And the old priest came out. He, too, had stayed in St.-Privat. He came with milk for the wounded and he blessed the dying.

"We made our fires and had supper. We had food in our haversacks. Some talked of our losses and of what the battle would mean. But most of us, the first we did was to write letters to the parents at home.

"Well, Gravelotte was over, and then came Sedan, and we marched toward Paris. We were glad to think that our regiment had not disappointed our King, and I remembered that he himself had told me to bring the colors back; and I was glad that I still had them after that terrible fight.

"And one *mittag*, as we halted, my captain spoke to me: 'Guldner!'

"'Yes, sir,' I said, saluting.

"'You won the Iron Cross at Gravelotte,' he said.

"And I could only stammer. 'I?' I said, still standing at salute—like this. 'I?'

"He smiled a little. 'Yes; it has been sent for you. Here it is.' And he handed it to me.

"I have won other medals, service medals and battle medals, but there is nothing to compare with the Iron Cross."

Top Floor Back

BY ZONA GALE

"I ONCE knowed a man in New York city," said Peleg Bemus, "that done some sacrificin' that ain't called by that name when it gets into the newspapers." He looked over at us expectantly, and with a manner of pointing at us with his head. "You come from New York," he said; "ain't you ever heard o' Mr. Loneway—Mr. John Loneway?"

We regretted that we might not answer "yes." Instinctively one longed to make his pointed eyes twinkle.

"Him an' I lived in the same buildin' in East Fourteenth Street there," he explained. "That is to say, he lived top floor back an' I was janitor. That was a good many years ago, but whenever I get an introduction to anybody from New York I allus take an interest. I'd like to know what ever become o' him."

Not so much in concern for Mr. John Loneway as in expectation of what the old man might have observed, we questioned him.

"It was that Hard Winter," he went on, readily; "I'd hev to figger out what year, but most anybody on the East Side can tell you. Coal was clear up an' soarin', an' vittles was, too—everybody howlin' hard times, an' the winter just commenced. Make things worse, some phi-lanthropist had put up two model tenements in the block we was in, an' property alongside had shot up in value accordin' an' lugged rents with it. Everybody in my buildin' most was rowin' about it.

"But John Loneway, he wasn't rowin'. I met him on the stairs one mornin' early an' I says, 'Beg pardon, sir,' I says, 'but you ain't meanin' to make no change?' I ask him. He looks at me kind o' dazed—he was a wonderful clean-muscled little chap, with a crisscross o' veins on each temple an' big brown eyes back in his head. 'No,' he says. 'Change? I can't move. My wife's

sick,' he says. That was news to me. I'd met her a couple o' times in the hall—pale little mite, hardly big as a baby, but pleasant spoken, an' with a way o' dressin' herself in shabby clo'es that made the other women in the house look like bundles tied up careless. But she walked awful slow, and she didn't go out much—they had only been in the house a couple o' weeks or so. 'Sick, is she?' I says. 'Too bad,' I says. 'Anything I can do?' I ask him. He stopped on the nex' step an' looked back at me. 'Got a wife?' he says. 'No,' says I, 'I ain't, sir. But they aint never challenged my vote on 'count o' that, sir—no offence,' I says to him, respectful. 'All right,' he says, noddin' at me. 'I just thought mebbe she'd look in now and then. I'm gone all day,' he added, an' went off like he'd forgot me.

"I thought about the little thing all that mornin'—lyin' all alone up there in that room that wa'n't no bigger'n a coal-bin. It's bad enough to be sick anywheres, but it's like havin' both legs in a trap to be sick in New York. Towards noon I went into one o' the flats—first floor front it was—with the coal, an' I give the woman to understand they was somebody sick in the house. She was a great big creatur' that I'd never see excep' in red calico, an' I always thought she looked some like a tomato-ketchup bottle, with her apron for the label. She says, when I told her, 'You see if she wants anything,' she says. 'I can't climb all them stairs,' she answers me.

"Well, that afternoon I went down an' hunted up a rusty sleigh-bell I'd seen in the basement, an' I rubbed it up an' tied a string to it, an' long in the evenin' I went up-stairs an' rapped at Mr. Loneway's door.

"'I called,' I says, 'to ask after your wife, if I might.'

"'If you might,' he says, after me.