

# DRAWN SABERS

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

*For a long, miserable winter, this troop of Canuck Horse had served as infantry in the mud-filled trenches, but now they were withdrawn and rehorsed. The Boche threatened the Allied lines, and these hard riders of the West were ordered to stop them.*

*"I don't want to go up to heaven,  
I don't want to go down be-low,  
"Oh, is there no place just betwixt them  
That this poor ol' buffer may go."*

**T**ROOP SERGEANT WATSON of the Canuck Horse sang lustily, despite the smash of German shells which thrashed on a wide Front from bristling guns to the north of Péronne. After a long miserable winter of trench warfare, when the cavalry brigades served as infantry, they were withdrawn, rehorsed, and now, when the Boche threatened the Allied lines with a smashing blow, the hard riders of the west were going in, mounted, to show the enemy war lords up.

There was swift bustle at the horse lines, where fresh eager mounts snorted and plunged; where troopers chaffed, whistled and sang. This was the great day they had yearned for throughout a tedious winter. Now they could avenge themselves on Heinie, who had smashed at their mud-filled trenches for months.

Troop Sergeant Watson burnished a bit in accompaniment to his song. With the coming of night, his troop—B—the troop from the western prairies and cattle ranges of Alberta and the United States, would go forward at the gallop.

Suddenly Tom Watson's lips tightened, as a clanking of spurs rang out on the brick walk of the billet Farmstead. He recognized the step, as that of his troop commander, Lieutenant Combe. From the corner of an eye Watson watched the tall frame of Combe clank up past a section of troopers, who, seated on a ration limber, put the finishing touches to the cleaning of ammunition and arms.

These men were Watson's buddies, men who had ridden out with the 1st division when the Canucks had hit that flaming hell-pit, Ypres. Watson had ridden the

ranges of Alberta and the States with these hard riders, serving under him, on many a round-up. In short, he had been their boss—their top hand, since they first forked a cow pony. And throughout many hard months of campaign on the Western Front, they had all cemented a friendship which was above average.

Friends from the crack supporting batteries of Canadian horse artillery had dubbed Watson's troops, "Watson's Guts Brigade," and this name had been cribbed by the whole of the corps.

But during the last month in the line while on infantry duty, there came Lieutenant Combe, a disciplinarian of the first wave, whose first object as a line cavalry officer seemed to be a reorganization of Watson's cow-pokes; and he had kept up his O.T.C. methods until, now, the boys were fed up. They no longer respected him, and, at his approach did anything save spring to attention.

Watson watched them now. This breach of harmony was not the best thing, when in a few hours the gang would be called upon to ride to death, or glory, or both, at the command of a man they hated.

WITH a screaming whirl, and accompanying scuffling roar, a German long range heavy plummeted down into the out buildings of B troop's billet *Karr-ash!* Then the whirring chorus of shell fragments, the shouts of men, who dashed to the heads of plunging, screaming horses.

"Back, you men, back, I say!" Lieutenant Combe's voice was heard by all, but no one paid any heed. The mounts were in danger. They must be cut loose, or——.

*Voo-oo-oo—z-z-z-ee—karr-ouf! Crumph—karr-umph!* A sleek black gelding screamed piteously, reared, and pitched forward to a quivering mass.

Combe yelled another command, but, with the passing of the Black Prince, the four-year-old who

had scored the majority of points at a previous international army meet, the troopers turned a totally deaf ear to this bombastic young officer and his threats. In five minutes horses were freed and ridden, plunging and snorting, out of range of those searching naval shells.

It was then that Lieutenant Combe singled out the troop sergeant who had just risen to his feet from the side of a quivering body.

"Mutiny, sergeant! You've about ruined your troop, which is now but a pack of undisciplined Comanches. There isn't time for me to take disciplinary action just now, but I want you to understand that you are all technically under open arrest"

Dick Watson's upper lip curled up as he shot the big-framed officer a look of mingled disdain and hatred.

"Don't smile, Watson," jerked the other, who had entirely mistaken Watson's expression of disgust for a sneer. "There is still time to deal with you, if you play your cards in that way. All I have asked of your troop is discipline, and smartness on parade, cleanliness and—"

"In action you'd have a bunch of straight-laced tin soldiers, riding out like they was going to a church picnic," cut in Watson. "You'll excuse me, sir, but I raised them cow-pokes. Brought 'em up on the open ranges, where there was nobody to dish up rules of discipline, save the law of a man's own conscience. Before you joined us, we've been complimented by the brigadier on our action and resourcefulness. You think the troop is out to buck you, out to cut loose from all the principles of respect and common ethics of soldierin', if they is such things in the army. But, sir, you're mistaken. Them boys is like that caw of plunging broncs. They want a free head, then believe me, they ain't no Heinie outfit'll stand up to them. I know it for we've gone into mounted action together a number of times. We've—"

"That'll do, sergeant! Your lecture has been most educative," sneered Combe, "but one thing you've forgotten and that is—I'm running this game, this particular troop of the Canadian cavalry brigade, and yes, by gad! I think I'll continue to run it in my own way. You'll remember that, eh?"

For a moment Watson was silent while his narrowed eyes flamed directly into the eyes of his officer. Then his heels clicked smartly, and his hand quivered in a perfect military salute, "Very good, sir," he drawled. "I'll remember that!"

And, as he wheeled about, Combe started at the touch of irony in his sergeant's words. Then he shook his head, and told himself of another success. He had called, bluffed, and defeated the leader of that undisciplined crew known as B troop.

It was at supper that Sergeant Watson got a chance of mingling with his riders, as a body. Supper! That last meal back in billets, when the cooks had done themselves proud. Ordinarily B troop's mess would have been the scene of rollicking choruses, and roars of laughter, but, as Tom Watson clanked into the tiled French barn, there seemed no sign of the old spirit. It was gone. Hell, he'd have to revive it or the coming action would prove a fizzle, an indifferent canter into hell and death.

His was the toughest break, but Watson forgot his own grouch.

"What's got into you damn silent Simons?" he barked. "All hands lost a grandmother apiece? Or mebbe you've got the wind up, eh? Pry loose with some information, some of you hombres. What in hell's took the guts out of you? Them few naval shells got you all down on your knees, huh?"

Watson hated to rub it in to the boys. But, it was his only chance of restoring the old pepper. He grinned as he watched a red head jerk up from a mess can of mulligan. Here it came! Just like a hurricane, Jim Nolan, his corporal, an Irish-Yank, with the best one-two punch on brigade, was on his feet

"You know what's got us, sarge. Don't think we're still wet behind the ears. You know that silk-putteed child from the O.T.C. has ridden us clean into the mud, an' if you think we're gonna stand fer that, shure sarge, you're out a mile. We're through!"

And the way Nolan hit the crude billet table with a trench knife was convincing. Furthermore, inwardly, Watson endorsed the sentiment absolutely. But, this was no time for the gang to crock up. At any moment the trumpeter would call them to the saddle. Already the horse artillery had gone clattering up the cobbles. No, the gang must be brought around.

"Well—" Watson finished a can of coffee, and jerked himself up from an upturned ammunition box. All eyes were now turned on the sergeant, eyes that saw only the real top hand he was. There was a tense period of breathless silence as Watson stowed a slab of plug tobacco into his cheek. "What're you bozos going to do?" he jerked. "Mutiny?"

There was no reply, and his steel eyes ranged the gang searching for some comment.

"You're going to lie down on me, eh? All because a pompous little dude looie rides you with a lot of O.T.C. discipline. You're the big sword-slashin' cow-pokes, with all the guts, eh? An' you crock up on me just on the eve of battle, leave me to face all the music alone, huh? Well, I don't blame you for feelin' awful peeved at Combe an' his tin-soldierin' methods, but, cripes, he's only a unit, who'll be a man on a horse, same as the rest of us, when we streak over in open order. But, I do blame you for a damned rotten showin' of lack of faith in me. I've pulled you hombres out before, when the looie didn't show savvy. Now—you can all go plumb to hell!"

With that Sergeant Watson turned and clanked out to the stables. Outside, he paused. An idea flashed to his mind. He could see the squadron commander, Captain Wright, a westerner, who'd have staked his soul on B troop. But, Watson thrust the thought from him. Hell, no! He was no squealer. He'd have to handle Combe alone. He knew that his little lecture would have the desired effect on the gang. He had called them, challenged their loyalty, their guts; and already his challenging statements were bearing fruit. Out of the billet clanked B. In groups, or singly, they stamped out to the water troughs. And Watson's heart thrilled at the music of their ringing spurs. No better gang forked cavalry mounts in any army, than his Guts Brigade.

"TA, TA—t-t-t-ta-ta— ta-ta—t-t-t-ta——" Clear, penetrating, the trumpet call rang out in the crisp March twilight, followed by the rallying clatter of newly-shod hoofs, and the music of jangling spurs.

"B—troop. B—troop m-o-u-n-t!" As one man, B swung over their saddles, and the restive horses commenced to strain at the bits.

To the north roared the swell of a ponderous battle tide; thunderous drumfire, and the stab of chain-flame which lapped at the overcast dusk of early night.

Combe's troop sat stiffly in the saddle. The brigade head had already moved off. Then came the order.

"Sections r-r-ight! Walk march!" There was a clatter of accouterments, sharp snorts from the mounts, then the rhythmic beat of shod hoofs, as B troop swung into column of route.

"T-r-o-t!" Men eased on the bits, and the horses took the cue. Down the cobbled road, on to the hard pavé swung the hardest fighting troop of swordsmen on corps. Men thrilled as they caught the weave and bob of well-trained cavalry mounts at the head of the column.

Then, their eyes focused on two figures—tall, erect, Lieutenant Combe and Sergeant Waton stood out perfect silhouettes in the deepening dusk. The one, their pal, and recognized leader; the other——

The trotting column swung around a battery of heavy howitzers, and mounted a stiff climb. At the crest of the hill Sergeant Watson pressed his horse closer to his officer. Flaming shrapnel crumped ahead and Watson sensed the menace to his troopers, who still rode on in close column formation.

"Hadn't we better extend the column to four horse lengths, sir?" he asked.

"Don't worry over such matters, sergeant," snapped Combe. "For heaven's sake, try to realize who's commander of this troop. I'll extend the troop when the time comes, and I won't stand for any more advice from you. Understand?"

*Karr-ack! Phree—karr-ash!* It was followed by the scream of spraying shrapnel pellets. Sergeant Watson wheeled his mount about on its hind legs. The troop narrowly escaped the murderous thrash of that sinister spray.

"Pass the word back for four-length extension," he snapped out to a trooper. "Open formation!" Which meant that the troop would ride in two files at four horse lengths intervals, a file on either side of the road.

Then Watson trotted back to the head of the column, where Combe was having difficulty with his plunging mount. Spurs slashed at the frantic bay, and Combe's heavy crop handle swished down with socking thud each time the horse reared. This sickened Watson, who loved his troop horses second only to his regard for the men.

When at last the plunging bay settled down to a restive, broken trot, Combe's temper was at a flaming height. He had caught the change of formation in his troop and knew that Sergeant Watson had given the command.

The main column of the brigade was nowhere in sight. Each unit had dispersed to its own respective point of assembly. Dark night was settling full, and not a star peeped out of the chill murk to give direction to Watson.

They were going east, he could tell by the stabs of flame which spread out in vivid fanlike spray at the enemy lines; and then the arc of fluttering calcium flares which marked more clearly the German zone. But, it occurred to Watson that they had come too far east. According to his recollection of a brief map reading, they should have swung north along an old artillery

road, after passing the last battery of eighteen-pounder field guns.

Those flares, ahead, seemed devilish close, and—God! Watson's horse sheered to the ditch as the mad, crisp clatter of a Maxim broke out not two hundred yards ahead. Then came the retaliating crackle of a Vickers, and Watson realized in a flash that they had ridden right up to the infantry emplacements.

Fritz had sighted the column which Combe had led forward. A coal box cracked overhead, and Watson pulled his horse up on its hind legs. They must get back, for that sinister crack of the five-nine had been a register shot from the German batteries.

"Better withdraw, sir," he called. "We're too far forward, on the wrong road. We'll be cut down with machine gun and shrapnel, if we don't move quick."

But Combe's O.T.C. pride was touched. This wild western sergeant was too damned interfering. Combe snatched his horse's head about viciously.

"Get back to the rear of the column, sergeant," he snarled. "There is no longer a place for you at its head. Send forward Sergeant Jones to take your place, and that order of things stands from now on."

It was then that Sergeant Watson could have forgotten his training and his column. Here this youngster had called him before the troopers, had not only called him but plucked him, and for the first time in his career he would go into action at the rear of the line.

*Karr-ack! Roouff! Crash!* It came as Watson had warned. Salvo after salvo of shrapnel and H.E. thundered around the heads and flanks of the column. Behind them, before them, and on all sides was dropped a perfect box barrage.

Maddened horses tore at the air with striking lunging forehoofs. Men yelled, pitched forward to the clay, or hung from a stirrup to be dragged by a frenzied mount.

It was then that Watson hurled his defiance into the face of his officer, and the snarling, thrashing fiends of war. Clear above the crash of battle his whistle shrilled thin blasts.

"Files about! Extend!" was the interpretation of that order, and men swung about to carry the order into effect, while a fearful fanlike spray of screaming lead intensified.

Ever alert, Watson caught, in a flash, a new turn of events. The enemy had spotted the cavalry. Those mounted men of the west must be stopped, and the only way to do this was to lunge forward into attack.

Back of the German lines, field gunners were jerked to action. They sprang to the breeches. Fuses were cut, and the order for barrage fire given. The *verdamnte* Canadian column was going into action! It must be stopped, krushed out!

"F-i-r-e!" and with one united smash the muzzles of a hundred extra guns belched their leaping flame.

Watson spurred his horse after the line of extending troopers. Not caring a sou what happened to Combe, he slipped the whistle between his thin lips.

"Stand to!" One long blast, and it meant, "Hold fast!" Watson was ready for action, and he knew by the response of his buddies that they were with him to a man.

RAKED by a devilish fire, B troop clung desperately to the cover of a shallow sunken road. The cover was meager, for Heinie had the range of every foot of Somme terrain down to a hair. He had previously occupied the sunken road.

Sergeant Watson's mind, keyed up to a tense degree, worked fast. On the heels of this fearful barrage would come the infantry attack, and his troop, he knew, was no match for storming grenadiers and bombers; not to mention the sweep of light Maxims.

Initiative was a factor for which the sergeant and his cow-poke buddies were famed; but there was an officer on the job. At least there had been.

Suddenly it occurred to Watson that Lieutenant Combe had not joined the troop. This was alarming. He might be hit, or, if foolhardy enough to try and stick out the barrage, he might easily be taken prisoner.

Watson felt a wave of pity steal over him. Pity for young Combe, who hadn't a vestige of yellow in him. He had joined the regiment a few months before, coming up with a high rating; had infantry experience, and a decoration. But the jack pot B troop found itself in was directly due to Combe's inexperience on night patrol work.

"Sarge," Watson recognized the voice of Corporal Nolan, who had dismounted and was leading a crippled horse.

"We got to get to hell outa this, sarge," breathed the non-com. "Four men hit already. What's happened to that damn looie? See what we get for tying up with a dandy like that? Now it's up to you, sarge. Anything you say, goes."

Nolan stood by for orders, but Watson could not, it seemed, decide on any definite plan of action. Hunched in the lee of a low wall, his hand on his horse's bridle reins, he struggled for a solution to the enigma.

Then came the shriek of a phosphorus shell, followed by the mad lashing of hoofs. A man yelled, and Watson heard this yell tail off in a strangled gasp. In a flash the sergeant was on his feet.

"Get a rider through to our batteries, Jim," he jerked. "Wait a second. I'll give you location. That's Etricourt Wood, half right, eh?"

Then Watson speedily oriented his position, heedless of the swish of Maxim lead. "Now there she is, corp." The sergeant had scribbled his position on a message sheet. "Get this through to our guns. If they'll bust the wire on the right flank of the woods we'll go through, and outflank the enemy guns back of the woods. It's a hell of a thing to attempt, but we'll never make it any other way. We can't go back in this barrage."

And Watson was right—a lone rider would have to run a fearful gauntlet, but there was always a chance for him, while an almost full troop would suffer annihilation.

At this point the infantry line was a mere chain of scattered outposts. Communication was done by rocket signal, so Watson was forced to act as he did. The main line of brigade cavalry would operate to the north. Faint as it seemed, there was a possibility, if any of B troop got through, of connecting with the dragoons to the left.

"Off you go, Jim," called Watson. "Have the dispatch rider get through to brigade H.Q., so they'll know our plans."

Then Watson tied his horse, and stole over to his scattered line of troopers, who had pulled their mounts into every conceivable bit of cover. Horses trembled in deep shell holes, and the western riders did all they knew to pacify the keyed-up brutes.

Watson told the boys of his plans, which were thoroughly endorsed. There was no trooper in B who would have preferred a withdrawal to the chance of a forward charge in open order.

Connection must be made now, with the infantry, and Watson handed over his command to his junior sergeant.

"Hang fast, Jones," he called, above the crash of thundering barrage fire. "I'm going to belly over to the infantry posts."

"But, hell, man, you're crazy," bristled Jones. "Plumb bugs, Wat, if you think you can beat that hellish barrage. Look, man!" and the junior sergeant pointed to the seething cauldron which was the space between B troop and the infantry posts.

Watson chuckled, dryly. The job was a facer, of that there wasn't a shade of doubt, but it had to be done!

Watson had bossed the scouts in the infantry days up at Festubert. Those days when the 1st division sneaked over to Heinie's wire with a dozen homemade bombs, and created a flaming little hell. He was an expert at night patrol in No-Man's-Land. But even with all his experience and an iron nerve, he shuddered as he slipped to the stinking clay and commenced to snake his way forward into the teeth of a hurricane of sweeping hot lead.

His keen ears sought the direction of machine-gun traverse. A gun could sweep only so far laterally from right to left, and Watson prayed inwardly for a lane between those deadly fanlike traverse. Overhead, coal-boxes cracked, and the low trajectory whiz-bangs seemed to scream past his ears.

The enemy was restive, despite the great showing of his artillery. Fokker planes had reported the massing of British and French troops, and the German command knew that sooner or later their Somme positions must go down. The best they could do would be to put up a bluff attack—one of those swift action sacrifices in order that their main forces could be protected in the case of a forced retirement.

As he inched along, Watson searched the area for a good lane of attack. The grim skeleton forest loomed up on his half-right like a muster parade of gaunt specters, the more hideous when lighted by the sickly green of bursting flares. A hard pock-marked road followed the crest of a hill and wound about the right flank of the woods. Watson made a mental sketch of this.

His ears now numbed to all sounds, save an incessant throbbing, which threatened to burst the drums. He slipped a degree to the left, got to his feet and plunged to the cover of a shell hole.

Machine-gun bullets thumped in on all sides, and a ricochet cut through the strap of Watson's bandolier. The westerner grinned, and drew the back of a hand across his forehead.

"Pretty close, son," he muttered, "mustn't take any more fool chances." For a moment he was forced to duck, then gradually he raised his head. There came a sinister scuffling sound from a shell crater to his left, and Watson could have sworn he heard a groan.

"Hell," he muttered, as his fingers closed over the grip of a .45 Colt at his belt. "Now what in the name of God can that be? Sounds like a Heinie is tangling with one of the——"

But the unmistakable jangle of cavalry accouterments soon changed his mind. Watson jerked himself erect. "Good God!" he breathed. "That's a horse; and the groan—it must be——"

His whole being galvanized into action and he leapt the rim of his protective crater. Out again into the flaming open he sped across to the other large shell hole. At the burst of a phosphorus shell he flattened, paused a second, and then suddenly there came a piercing shriek. A horse!

Watson sprang to the crater lip, and a gasp of horror escaped him, for, thrashing wildly, its rider trapped, was Lieutenant Combe's bay.

WATSON groaned as he whipped out his Colt. He hated to shoot a horse, but the bay, which now screamed in agony, was beyond all possible help. Caught in a stirrup was the apparently lifeless shape of B troop's officer.

*Cr-ack! Crack! Thupp—tnupp!* Watson sickened at the sound of those striking bullets. In a flash he sprang forward and swung the dead beast's head over. His joints cracked as he forced the stiffening animal over so that he could cut the officer free.

Combe was breathing, a gargling, wheezing sound issuing from his laboring chest. But the sergeant was glad of this. He would have been sorry to see Combe go out.

Despite the fact that time was precious, every moment now was golden. He must get Combe out to another crater and administer first aid. So with a stupendous heave he raised the limp figure to his shoulder and floundered back to cover.

A shattered leg and damage to the officer's chest seemed to be all that Watson could locate. It was enough! Too much, in fact. For the chest, he could do but little. The leg he secured tightly with an improvised splint and puttee.

B's rum issue must be brought into play. It would help ward off pneumonia, for the night was chilly, and a sleeting snow had commenced to fall.

Combe gasped, struggled for his breath. Watson raised the lolling head and at last the officer seemed to breathe more norally.

"Who—who are——" his query spluttered out.

"Don't worry, sir, it's me, Watson," breathed the non-com. "Lie back and rest easy. I'll get you out later. I've got to go now, sir. Got to save the infantry and B troop."

Combe raised his head, feebly, and the sergeant felt

his arm gripped. "Good boy, sergeant. I was a fool," came the feeble statement. "But—I guess I'm out of it now, eh. I—was trying to hook up with infantry, when my horse was hit and played hell with me. Go ahead, sergeant," he breathed faintly. "Sorry I messed things up. Tell the—the boys!" Then his struggle faded, and Watson let him slip back into the claim of unconsciousness.

It was hard for the tough westerner to suppress the lump which rose to his throat as he left the crater. Combe had meant well. Now he was badly smashed.

A quick spurt and the sergeant made an emplacement which was manned by a Lewis gun crew under an officer. In quick precise sentences Watson outlined his plans. There was a sharp consultation, and soon an infantry runner was despatched to the flank posts.

A CHILL driving snow swirled about the battery emplacements of the Canadian horse artillery. It was nearing a dreary dawn as a spent horse floundered into the copse which served as a screen to the guns.

Almost gone, dripping blood, and scarce able to sit his saddle, a cavalry trooper slipped from his saddle. A battery sergeant yelled and two gunners dashed forward to catch the plucky member of B troop, who was pitching to the sloppy turf.

Watson's message had come through and it stirred the right flank battery, which bore more than the usual amount of regard for Watson's Guts Brigade.

There was no hesitation. The C.O. was responsible to brigade, but operated independently. His orders were now jerked briskly to signalers and gun officers. As a unit, the gunners sprang to position, and in less than five minutes came the ringing command to fire.

There was a single flash of flame. One throaty cough and four light fieldpieces rocked back on their recoil slides, while forward over the heads of the waiting body of chilled troopers, a flight of shrapnel screamed to the road which flanked the skeleton woods.

"Got 'em! Dead centre, Jim." Sergeant Watson lay on his belly observing the thrash of deadly shrapnel.

"Now watch us go!" Troopers collected. At their left rear, dug in, was the infantry detail with Lewis guns at the ready. Together with the infantry officer, Watson had laid his plans well. Soon would come the German thrust. The enemy would be allowed to rush forward to empty outposts, then at a given signal the Lewis guns would crackle to action, and Watson's horse would go out—and over, in open order.

Watson issued a half ration of rum, for his troopers were chilled to the marrow. They slapped at their horses, and moved the shivering beasts as much as they were able in the confined area of the sunken road.

All at once the enemy barrage centered in deadly intensified earnest as the old line of outposts.

*Karr-ash, Karr-up—umph!* Fearful eruptions, which shocked the nerve of the hardest front liners, snarled, but at nothing. For half an hour the enemy gunners battered the outposts to a sloppy pulp. Then came a lull, a lengthening of the range to a point behind the cavalry.

“Stand to!” Watson jerked his command. “Prepare to mount!” Troopers stood to, while their leader ranged the rim of the woods for enemy movement.

It came! A swift rush from the woods. Then the crash of German hand grenades.

Almost breathless, a hand on his stirrup, Sergeant Watson waited. Out to the left flank a violent hurricane of shell fire broke loose. Brigade was on the job with a vengeance, and it seemed that a thousand field guns were ripping the soul of the sector from out the quivering Somme plains.

A faint smile spread over Watson’s set features. His plans were working to order. That is, his left flank was adequately protected and there remained now but the swift gallop of his troopers around the woods, which move would cinch, for the British, a permanent command of the heights which had long and terribly been contested.

A whistle shrilled. It was the infantry officer’s signal. Came the chatter of his Lewis guns and the crack of rapid rifle fire.

“Mount!” Watson bellowed his command. There was a clanking of equipment. The sergeant’s whistle blasted and the troop swung off in file at a walk.

“Trot!” Watson was timing well, and his troopers swung on to the hard road which ran to the northeast.

Horses were eager, but not nearly so eager as Watson’s rangemen, whose right hands clung close to their sword hilts, ready for that shrill whistle which signaled: “Draw saber!”

A faint streak of dawn flitted to a sullen eastern sky. The snowstorm had spent itself, but the storm of battle continued with increasing fury, as Watson led his troopers forward at a stiff trot.

The horse artillery had done its work well. They always did, and at that moment, scarce heard above the thrash of battle, gun wheels thundered forward, as the batteries galloped up to further support the hard fighting troop of cavalrymen.

A flash of flame burst from the edge of the woods to Watson’s front, followed by the scream of shrapnel shell. The sergeant started, for here was an unlooked for addition to the menace of the German position, so well fronted by Maxims. A forward field battery! Hell!

*Crash, crash, crash, crash!* Four deadly overheads burst with devilish fury. Horses plunged and Watson caught the effect of that deadly burst as a couple of his riders pitched to the snow-covered elay.

That devilry tripped the delicate, high-strung mechanism which was now the sergeant’s mind. B troop’s leader saw red, and his keen sword flashed out. It waved above his head, then his lips parted and the troopers caught the ring of his command.

“Open order—extend! C-h-a-r-g-e!”

Horses reared and wheeled to either flank. Watson gave his mount its head, and emulating the actions of their leader, B went forward in a gallop, a small body of horses which plunged into the rim of hell at the woods.

There was now no need for further command. Gun posts were leaped, and swords cut down with keen, swift effectiveness. No heed was paid to the inevitable call of “*Kamerad*” for, back of the German front-line gunners, other Maxims cut loose a terrific hail and the field guns were firing at point-blank range.

Men of B troop fell, struggling gloriously to hold on. The remainder cut and slashed on either flank of their heroic leader. Occasionally would ring the yell of a rangeman. B had been called “Comanches,” but that never bothered them. When in sword action, they went to work with all their wits, strength, and initiative serving them to the utmost. It was theirs to cleave a way to victory; and at a signal from Watson they bore down—a yelling twenty men—on the battery of 77s.

IT WAS a devilish thing to attempt—the storming of that closely guarded battery of guns in action. No one realized this more fully than Sergeant Watson, whose face lay close to his plunging horse’s neck, in that mad gallop. But that battery was in the way. The main tide of battle raged furiously to the left. Watson’s troop must connect with that charging line; the honor of his Squadron depended upon it. Because Combe, young at the cavalry game, had blundered, was no reason why B should let the regiment and brigade down.

Watson pulled his horse over to the left in a sun-fishing wheel, and his Colt cracked sharply as he swung past a light Maxim post.

There was a sputter of fire and a bullet grazed the lobe of his right ear, to sear a furrow in the neck of his horse.

Though the footing was far from good, the wounded black, stung by the red-hot tear in his hide, commenced a frantic bucking which gave Watson the ride of his life. There was still a Wurtemburger alive at the Maxim, while Watson's black swapped ends, plunged and thundered through a variety of range tricks in endeavor to shake that torment which clung to his neck.

"Steady, blast you!" growled Watson, who begrudged the precious time given to handling his mount "Settle down you—cripes!" A Maxim bullet tore across his ribs and for a moment he felt his legs lose their grip. His head was whirling dizzily, but he ground out a curse, and mustered all his reserve of will.

His spurs commenced to play with raking force now. It was one of the few times he had ever raked a horse; but now the plunging black was getting out of hand, so Watson cast all sentiment from him.

Then came a yell from Corporal Nolan. From the corner of his eye Watson caught the blur of Nolan's leaping mount. The swish of a sword rang sickeningly above the crackle of the Maxim. Nolan had leaped the post, wheeled, and struck, a devilish saber stroke which slashed deep into the neck and shoulder of the gunner.

Watson's horse settled down at last, and the sergeant moved up to Corporal Nolan.

"Better take a couple of files, Jim. Ride 'em back towards the infantry. Seems like they might be having a tough break. Pull up that light Maxim and a belt of ammunition. It's likely you'll need it. Don't worry about us. God! Look!" The sergeant waved his Colt to a fringe of the woods, where a dismounted trooper battled with a German battery *feldwebel*. It was sword versus bayonet, in a fearful struggle.

Spellbound, for a moment, the two non-coms watched the fight. The trooper was more than holding his own, but the German sergeant major was an expert with the bayonet.

"That's Ellis, Jim," breathed Watson. "Best swordsman in brigade, but why don't he end it with his .45?"

Nolan grunted. "Can't get to his gat, sarge. That Heinie's a bear with the knife." Then Watson's keen eyes caught a sinister movement in the underbrush at the fighters' left. A sniper was moving in to finish the B man.

Watson's wrist jerked to action. His Colt belched, and he heard the telling thupp of his bullet. His glance shifted again to the battlers. Ellis was tottering and his sword swept now in wild circles.

With a shout to the corporal, Watson dug in his spurs. He jammed his forty-five into its holster, and when his right hand came up it was hitched to his long cavalry sword.

Ellis was down, and the German backed momentarily. Watson caught the meaning twitch to the *feldwebel*'s shoulders and he hunched for the death lunge.

"Y-arr-r!" A mad yell, the thrash of hoofs, then a swift downward cut with the sword. Ellis was saved!

"I was all in from a shrapnel wound in the shoulder, sarge," offered the man, apologetically. "I was beat before— Gawd, look out to your back!" Watson wheeled, to meet a bayonet charge from the troops guarding the guns.

His whistle shrilled. There came a clatter of equipment, thundering hoofbeats and the wild yells of B's remnant.

Colts barked, and then at a signal the line of swords swept to action. There was no pause in this new drama. Watson led on in a slashing attack. On, through to the guns, about which he wheeled.

It was then that Corporal Nolan picked his men and rode back at a trot to the support of the infantry outposts. Between them the riders packed a Maxim and ammunition. Heinie would be caked in a circle of fire now, and Nolan could support Watson's final dash through to the north and the main brigade line.

AT THE 77s, gunners fought desperately to first hold the position, and later to destroy the breeches, but Watson's riders were determined on complete capture. This was B troop's big moment. Once this battery was smothered, the British and French line would go forward to the complete recapture of all Somme positions.

With the downfall of these emplacements and destruction of the German outposts in the Etricourt sector, the Allies could cut in behind the main German line, consolidate, and later go forward from well established positions.

These thoughts, which stirred in Watson's mind as he continued to drive at the battery position, were good thoughts, but another note of menace had leapt to the chorus of the Somme gods. German main-line troops were coming forward.

There was a shriek of deadly pineapple grenades, and that spiteful crash which marked the plundering detonation. Jagged strips of casing whirled through the air, and the cavalry mounts became maddened with pain.

Watson felt his black buckle beneath him, and he slipped from the saddle as the beast rolled over to lie still, with a gaping hole in its left side. The troopers pressed forward, then swept down in a yelling circle. The guns were taken, but at their backs this newer menace was something to think about. At the back of a line of bombers came the German bayonet men. From the enemy rear guns, there thundered a savage box barrage, and Watson groaned. He and his detail were completely cut off with the odds fifty to one or more against them.

The sergeant yelled to a couple of riders, who dismounted and moved up to his side. Watson's battle mind was keyed to the highest degree. There was still a way out, although the situation seemed hopeless.

A battery of Canuck field guns had been flashing from the crest above the woods. Watson knew in his heart that the guns would be no other than those of the Canadian horse artillery. If he could get a rider back to the battery, his troop and the entire line would be saved. Gunners could operate the captured Heinie battery also. In the meantime, he would make a stand with two Maxims which lay silent in their ghastly emplacement.

He ripped out a message book and scribbled a note. The rider was mounted and disappeared in a veil of flame-spattered smoke.

Then Watson mounted the Maxims. The pain from his wound sickened him, but save for having it crudely bandaged he paid scant heed to it.

Horses were withdrawn to cover, then with his hands at the Maxim grips, he commenced a tattoo of hell, which was accompanied by the other gun at his right.

Germans crumpled, and pitched to the sodden clay, but on came the main line of bayonet men. *Cr-r-at-a-tac-a-tac*. It was thrilling, that chainlike rattle of death, as the Maxims continued to belch their orange flame. Troopers, not at the guns, opened up rapid fire with carbines, and their united effort was telling.

*Phree—ee-crash!* Two pineapples split at Watson's rear, and his assistant watched the sergeant's body telescope. The gun spluttered and stopped, but in a few seconds it recommenced its deadly chatter. Watson was literally out on his feet, but refused to take the count.

At the gun pits were a number of fused, enemy potato-mashers and Watson suddenly thought of these. He yelled to his riflemen who ducked forward.

Now 45s, Maxims, rifles and bombs tore loose a bedlam of whines and eruptions. But the enemy

numbers persisted. The man at Watson's side collapsed and his face chocked into the clay.

Watson groaned inwardly, but outwardly he cursed through his set teeth and his fingers increased their pressure on the grips. There came a temporary halt in the enemy line. A brief consultation of officers and non-coms, then the troop sergeant saw the German bombers deplore. They spurted forward in small circling groups of bombers and bayonet men, while from the main line came a covering hail of machine-gun fire. No situation looked blacker than that at the Etricourt woods, but Watson shut out all extraneous, ghastly thought.

He could hear the thunder of battle on the left, the well of the tide was rolling nearer. It was more intensified than ever and he knew in his heart that soon the main line would crash through.

*Karramph—karramph!* The sharp stab of flame and its fearful accompaniment marked the bursts of a hail of German egg bombs. A trooper yelled. His cry awakened all Watson's last reserve of strength and fighting spirit. He leapt from the gun and jerked up a couple of masher bombs. Then his buddies thrilled as they watched the bleeding form of their top-hand sergeant dash forward.

Watson jerked on a string, and lobbed. There was a sickening report. Again the plucky sergeant lobbed. Another trooper dashed forward with an armful of bombs.

Lugers flashed, and Sergeant Watson rocked back, hung for a second, then spun around, to topple back.

DOWN the slope to the woods thundered four guns of the Canuck horse artillery. Back at the main emplacement two pieces split forth a covering fire. Three troopers of B squadron plunged madly into the woods, at the head of the gun teams.

Then a whistle shrieked, and the battery horses whirled. Such action is what made those gunners' names a byword in the history of the war. They needed no further word of command for, before them, toe-to-toe, rocked the gallant remnant of Watson's Guts Brigade.

"Point-blank!" The range was open sights. A salvo shattered, then a simultaneous crash of shrapnel. Spare gunners whipped over and wheeled the captured whiz-bangs, and soon the skeleton forest awakened to a chorus that was loud and deathly.

On the left flank Hotchkiss guns crackled. Yells sounded, and it was these that awakened Sergeant

Watson, who opened his eyes to blink vacantly at the flame-shattered day.

The ground rocked beneath him, as he shook his head and struggled to his knees. Through scarcely seeing eyes, he caught the stir of slinking forms, and his Colt swept up into action. Leaning against a battered oak stump he opened a murderous fire. Then suddenly he clutched at his shoulder where a wound had been reopened.

A yell arose at his back. Weak from pain and loss of blood, Watson could hold out no longer. His knees buckled, but he struggled to reload his gat.

*Cr-ack! Cr-ack!* The automatic belched, then Watson felt himself seized from behind.

"Lie down you gol-blistered old savage, you! Damn you, sarge, don't you know when to quit!" It was Jim Nolan who eased his buddy back to the clay.

"Jim!" Watson's voice was feeble, and scarcely audible.

"How's—how's the main line, Jim?" he stammered.

"Cripes, man. Can't you hear?" thundered the corporal. "Lookit the dragoons go by. Yee-ow, but look at 'em pigstickers gallop!"

Nolan pointed to the main line of the Canuck cavalry brigade, which, due to B troop's valiant attack and stand, were now able to crash through to complete victory.

"Here, sarge," Nolan lifted his water bottle to Watson's lips, "slide a quart of this rum into yer gizzard. I pinched it back at the battery. Anyhow, you'll need enough pepper in you mighty pronto, for they'll be a barrel of brass hats all wanting to kiss yer at onct."

Watson spluttered, then passed the bottle back. "O.K. Jim, boy. Now leave me. Go round up the rest of B and see the boys and horses are fixed up. I'll be all right. Gimme a smoke an' I'll settle back on the verandy here and watch the rest of that open order—charge!"

And Watson watched his galloping mates, but not for long, for soon his weary frame succumbed to the lure of sound sleep and he slumped back against the battered tree stump, with a sigh of gratitude and satisfaction. B had had its day and come through with the same old glorious success.