

Diggers Were Bogymen of German Recruits

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Erich Maria Remarque, the German writer, who achieved world fame by his war book, »All Quiet on the Western Front,« has given our special correspondent in Paris an interview in which he speaks of his experiences of the Australians as fighters on the Western Front.

»For the Australians as fighting men we Germans had nothing but respect,« said Remarque, »and it was recognised on our side that when it came to hand to hand fighting the average Australian was one of the toughest propositions we had to tackle. Some of the grimmest fighting on the Western Front took place between the Australians and ourselves, and the fighting value of the Australian units was so clearly recognised on our side that none of our commanders felt easy unless the lines opposite the Australians were held by the most seasoned troops available.

»It was the habit of the veterans to try to scare the youngsters on our side by such remarks as, ›Wait till you meet the Australian soldiers. Then you will know what fighting is.‹

»The Australians,« he went on, »had the reputations with all sections of our army as being men who neither asked quarter nor gave it. I think it is true in the main that the Australians did not ask quarter, but were content to fight to the death when in a tight corner, but, of course, one must put down as an exaggeration the suggestion that they did not give quarter if it were asked. Probably this idea had its origin in that our men, knowing the reputation of the Australians as hard fighters, were slow to ask for quarter, but just fought to a finish.

»No section of the allied armies on the Western Front had a more demoralising effect on our troops than the Australians. This was mainly due to the audacity with which they carried through their raids. They moved so silently and stealthily and came at such unexpected moments that it was impossible for the nerves of even the most seasoned troops to stand the strain for long, and it was generally recognised that troops in line opposite the Australians had to be relieved earlier than usual because of the extra nerve strain from which they suffered.

»The first warning one had of a raid of the Australians was hearing a shrill ›Coo-ee-ee‹ echoing and re-echoing along the communications trenches. At the same time a rain of grenades thrown with deadly accuracy would descend on us from all quarters. As a rule our men were too demoralised by the unexpected nature of the attack to make effective reply, but after a time we looked upon these attacks as II in the night's work as soon as we knew we had Australians in line opposite us.

»Reserves were hurried up on one occasion after a disastrous onslaught by the Australians, but the Australians had withdrawn by the time the front line was reached, save for a handful who had stayed behind to have a frolic in the captures trench. This little party was trapped in a dugout, and all exits were barred by the reserve troops.

»The Australians were called on to surrender and told that they were in a hopeless position, but for answer they shouted defiance and sent a shower of grenades to us. They had taken refuge in the dugout that was a store-house for our hand grenades, and as they had plenty of

ammunition they were in a position to make themselves very dangerous to our men. We tried to rush them at intervals during the night, but they were liable to shower bombs on us at any time you can imagine we had a very uncomfortable night.

»Had it been left to us who knew the Australians and their ways we would gladly have let them go their way but our commander had other ideas, and we had to put up with the discomfort of having these unwanted guests. There were only about 20 of them, but they gave us as much trouble as a whole army corps, and though the troops then in line were seasoned their nerves were soon on edge with the continued strain of the unexpected outbreaks of these guests in our front line trench.

»In the morning, without so much as by your leave, the Australians came out from their dugout, and with bomb and bayonet fought their way into No Man's Land, after which they dodged from shellhole to shellhole until they reached their own lines with no more casualties than three wounded. That was characteristic of them.«