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**Occasionally one of our stories will be called an "Off the Trail" story, a warning that it is in some way different from the usual magazine stories, perhaps a little different, perhaps a good deal. It may violate a canon of literature or a custom of magazines, or merely be different from the type usually found in this magazine. The difference may lie in unusual theme, material, ending, or manner of telling. No question of relative merit is involved.*

BUSHFIGHTERS

"THE BUSHFIGHTERS," by Hugh Pendexter: A tale of the French and Indian War in New York, and of the dark year 1755, when Ticonderoga was lost and folk trembled lest the scalp-yell rise in the streets of Albany. Israel Putnam—"Wolf" Putnam—does the work of many men in killing Montcalm's "praying Indians." A full book-length novel complete in the next issue, by a man who knows.

Other stories in the next issue are mentioned on the last page of this one.

THE EIGHTY-ONE*



by
Hugh S Fullerton

Author of "Throw It Over on John Lund," "On One Wave," etc.

THIS is the story of the Eighty-One as told to me by Lester Bancroft—Number 72—in a German prison-pen near Benain on September 10, 1918, the night before the Kaiser and his chief advisors narrowly escaped death and a number of his staff perished.

Bancroft asked me to write the story if I lived to reach the United States. I'm writing it, conscious of the fact that there are many things that never will be known. I have done my best to verify the story he told me.

The War Department professes entire ignorance of the Eighty-One and scoffs at the tale.

However, I have learned from L. Koenigsberg, agent of the building mentioned, that the meetings described by Bancroft were held there during January, 1918. The city editor for whom Bancroft and I worked is, unfortunately, not in position to confirm Bancroft's statements, although his assignment book records the fact that Bancroft on February 3rd was sent to an address on East Seventeenth Street, New York, to report a meeting from which he never returned. I have learned that on February 4th three motor busses filled with men went from the East Seventeenth Street address to a ship on the North River and that the men immediately boarded a sub-chaser which crossed to where the *Leviathan* lay.

I have learned from a member of the 308th Field Artillery Replacement Company and from two members of the 127th Engineers that shortly before the *Leviathan* sailed a number of men were taken aboard from a sub-chaser, that during the trip they were kept apart from the others of the twelve thousand men aboard and that considerable curiosity

was excited especially among the two hundred aviators aboard as to the character of the mysterious group.

Further than that I can offer nothing excepting Bancroft's bare narrative as given on the night before—I feel certain—he perished in an attempt to carry out one of the strangest missions ever conceived by men. If any member of the Eighty-One lived through the war—which I doubt—let him come forward and tell the whole story. I shall try to tell it as nearly as possible as Bancroft told it to me, as we huddled over a smoky fire in the cold barracks in Benain, with the roar of distant guns telling us of the advance of the Allies.

This is Bancroft's tale:

I WAS coming down in the sub the morning of February 3, sore on the job and fretting because I couldn't get into the war. I had been turned down twice for officers' training-camps, and the Old Man couldn't see me as a war correspondent. I was like a lot of fellows, wanted to do my bit, but was lazy and soft and dreaded the training worse than the fighting. I had determined to enlist in the Marines after the next pay-day because I wanted quick action; and I got it more quickly than I expected.

I always had a habit of reading want ads, funeral notices and all sorts of queer corners of the papers, looking for a news story hidden away, and that morning an ad caught my eye that read:

Wanted—One hundred men who intend some day to commit suicide. Desperate cases preferred. Families provided for. Ask for Wallace at No. — East Seventeenth Street.

★ This is an Off-the-Trail Story. See second contents page.

The ad puzzled me. I figured it was some sort of an insurance come-on scheme and forgot it by the time I reached the office.

The Old Man was waiting for me. You remember the uncanny way he had of figuring the kind of story each reporter would work best on? Well, he had cut out that ad and was keeping it for me.

"Find out what this nut is up to," he said, throwing me the clipping.

"I read it coming down," I said. "Sounds like some fake insurance scheme."

"No insurance man would put that kind of ad in a paper. This reads to me as if it is on the square."

I put the clip in my pocket and started up-town again with no idea that it was my last newspaper story. I feel guilty now because I got that story and never wrote it. If you get back I want you to write it and tell the Old Man I didn't throw him down on the assignment.

Going up-town I planned what to do. I would present myself to Wallace, whoever he might be, saying I was tired of life, and figured the best story to tell him was that I had been crossed in love, which was true enough as I had been crossed and double-crossed half a dozen times, without, however, causing me to have any idea of suicide.

I was directed to an office on the third floor. Two men were waiting—one was Craighart, afterward my chum, and the other a brute named Reckley, a bum and a drunkard. Craighart looked like a man who had staked everything, lost and was ready to pay. Reckley was a drunkard with a wife and children, of whom he was passionately fond excepting when drunk—when he abused them. He had determined to commit suicide so they could have his life insurance.

These two were called into an inner office one at a time. Reckley emerged with the expression of a man reborn, his face showing a half-insane determination. I tried to talk with Craighart, but he froze me. Yet twenty minutes later, when he emerged from the inner office, he slapped me on the back and said—"Cheero, old top, this is worth while."

These two went into a rear room, and as the door opened I could see other men and hear talk and laughter which aroused my curiosity. I was determined to learn why these two had seemed as if they had discovered something new in life. The door opened and some one called—

"Come in."

I found in the room a man about forty-five, well-dressed, healthy-looking and seeming cheerful. He seemed pleased over something but when he saw me he frowned and studied me. I never saw a man show determination and suspicion more plainly. Not suspicion; fact is,

he knew I was an impostor the moment he saw me and I knew he knew it.

"Sit down," he said.

"You're Wallace? I read your ad."

"Want to commit suicide?" he asked without seeming to regard the question as shocking.

"Yes."

"Why haven't you done it?"

His question spoiled my carefully rehearsed story, rattled me, and he kept watching me, smiling a little.

"Well," I stammered, "I hadn't exactly set the hour. I'm a newspaper man—there isn't much in the way I've lived and I decided when I got tired, or broke—"

"Figured life isn't worth much. All right when things break easy, not worth troubling over or suffering for? Married?"

"No, my girl—"

"Girl?" he shook his head dubiously. "Fellows that kill themselves over girls do it right away. If they don't kill themselves the first week or two they get over it and get another one. I'm afraid you don't want to die."

He said it so regretfully that I felt a bit ashamed of not wanting to and hastened to insist that I was in earnest.

"Glad to hear it," he said. "Understand, I'm taking you at your word. You're as good as dead now."

"I'm glad you're glad," I said. "What's the idea?"

"I'm glad for the sake of our enterprise, not for your sake," he said. "Fact, I'm sorry you're such an idiot as to want to die. Life is pretty good but I need your kind. Most of the fellows who decide to kill themselves are a poor lot; drunks, bums, quitters, yellow dogs. I've got seventy-one of them in this house—not more than a dozen of them worth much—food for a colonel or two, or a major, but no ambition."

He shrugged disgustedly.

"Notice that Britisher chap who came in ahead of you?"

"Yes."

"That's the sort!" he rubbed his hands with satisfaction. "Game chap; glad of a chance. If he isn't worth a general or something big—"

He stopped and eyed me.

"Still determined to kill yourself?"

"Yes."

"Sign here."

He pushed a card toward me and I read it slowly. The signer agreed to obey implicitly the party of the first part, Laurence G. Wallace. In return Wallace agreed to deposit in any bank designated four thousand dollars to the credit of party or parties named by party of the second part, pay all expenses, provide transportation and adequate expense money.

Wallace watched me narrowly as I read. I

reached for the pen and he stopped me with a quick motion of his hand.

"Young man," he said with a cold stare, "don't sign unless you are in earnest. If you sign I'll make certain you do not live and I'll guarantee a quick and not painful death."

He meant every word of it. I never posed as a brave man and I came near weakening. I'd have made a jump for the door or window if I hadn't been ashamed to do it. Fact is, I think most heroes are fellows who are afraid to let any one know they're cowards. Besides I was stubborn and wanted the story. I managed to hold my hand tolerably steady while I signed. Then Wallace reached over and shook my hand, gripping it hard.

"Good," he said joyously. "You'll make good and die game."

That didn't comfort me any. I got up and Wallace came around and put his arm across my shoulders.

"That's better than sneaking into a room and shooting yourself, or swallowing some nasty poison or jumping into cold, dirty water, isn't it? You're dead, as certainly as if you had done all those things, you get four thousand dollars for your family or friends, and you'll help save the world."

He was so confounded tickled over it he gave me the creeps.

"What's the job?" I asked. "War work, I hope?"

"Yes. I'll tell you details later. Give me the names of those you want to have the money and join the rest of the band. Needn't tell them your name unless you want to. No one knows more than you do and won't until we get started. I'm glad to get you. I may give you the big job, or the second chance, if I fail. Wish we had more like you and that bally Britisher Craighart. Trouble is so few men of brains want to kill themselves."

He appeared quite annoyed by the fact. I wrote the name of my Aunt Elizabeth, who had been good to me after Mother died, for three thousand dollars, gave five hundred dollars to Burke's widow because he had died leaving nothing, and five hundred dollars to Bill Brandt as a joke, because Bill never had that much cash in his life.

[Note—I have investigated and find that, on February 5, 1918, Miss Elizabeth Mackey, of East Cleveland, Ohio, Mrs. Peter Burke, of Brooklyn, and William Brandt, an itinerant newspaper writer, received the sums mentioned by draft, and never knew anything beyond the fact that the money came from Lester Bancroft—F.]



I WANTED to save some for funeral expenses, and the idea seemed to amuse Wallace.

"Don't worry over that," he laughed.

"That's part of the joke—make 'em pay the funeral expenses, if there are any and, my boy, you have a chance to get the finest obituary notice ever written."

Wallace's sense of humor was on my nerves. I was trying to figure a way to get that story and get it to the office, but he gave no chance.

"I'm closing the books at five o'clock," he said. "Wanted a hundred men. Lucky to get eighty now. You're seventy-two and there are some more waiting. Run back and play with the boys."

The crowd in that back room was the queerest ever gathered on earth. They were sitting around, smoking, talking, playing cards, but the majority were arguing and trying to guess what Wallace hired us for. Craighart was puffing away contentedly on his pipe, smiling and listening. One guessed Wallace intended to use us to blow up German ships, another that he planned a revolution. They made all sorts of guesses.

The hoplessness and desperation was gone—every one was keenly interested. Craighart finally took his pipe from his mouth.

"What's the odds, mates?" he asked. "I told him I'd do anything he said, saving against my own country, and he gave his word we were serving instead of attacking the Allies. Here we are, jolly well fed and found, money to pay our debts of honor and a bit for those that need it, besides saving us the trouble of doing it ourselves. Beastly messy work killing oneself! Makes one feel like a blooming slacker even when it's the decent thing to do. What's the odds how it comes?"

Craighart was a leader from that minute. He and I talked for a time; then we found cots in a room on the fourth floor and turned in. Some time after dark Wallace brought in big baskets of sandwiches and pails of coffee and told us the chow would be of the best the next day. During the night he brought in a big bunch of drafts, checks and money-orders made out in the names we had given him, gave each fellow envelopes and allowed him to address them and inclose the checks. There were eighty-one in the house, including Wallace. I counted them while he called the names.

We mailed three hundred and twenty thousand dollars and I was convinced there was something bigger than Wallace back of the thing when he brought in a mail man, placed the letters in a bag in sight of us all and told the mail man to register each letter separately. I knew then that Wallace was sane and sincere.

If I were writing the story I'd work in some psychological stuff about the situation in that back room. Just as soon as it became certain that it wasn't a joke, but a real adventure, I felt enthusiastic. The bums, the brutes,

the whisky soaks braced up and appeared to have found something worth while just when they became certain that they already were as good as dead. The nervous, half-insane fellows were excited and interested; the sullen ones waked up and became jolly.

You would have thought we were going on a pleasure trip.

I didn't sleep much that night. Wallace promised me he would send word to the office that I was on a big story and would not be back until I landed it. Before daylight we had breakfast down-stairs on the third floor, and Wallace ordered us to get ready to move in parties of twenty. I was in the third busload with Craighart and Lyons, a highly nervous fellow who had smashed trying to smash the stock market and was a defaulter. We went west, turned around Union Square, went on Fifth Avenue a short distance, then toward the river.

Somewhere on West Eleventh Lyons tried to jump from the bus but was jerked back by an ex-convict named Jere who threatened to save him the trouble of killing himself.

Lyons cried all the rest of the way.

We drove on to a pier and were hurried aboard a sub-chaser. As soon as Wallace came aboard we cast off, crossed the river and ran alongside the *Leviathan*. Ten minutes later we were in quarters apart from every one else and informed that we were to remain in the three sections and have no communication with any one else on board. It was just getting daylight when we went aboard. In spite of that I saw two men I knew.

[Note—Bancroft named these men to me. Both were aboard the *Leviathan* on that trip. One, a member of the 127th Engineers, died in France. The other has no recollection of seeing Bancroft or his party aboard the *Leviathan*, although he says he was on deck early the morning the ship sailed. F.]



WE WERE four days out before Wallace gave us a hint. We were getting restless, confined below decks. The weather had been bitterly cold for two days, until we hit the Gulf Stream. Then it was warm and we fretted. Most of us rolled in bunks, others smoked or played cards. Wallace simply got up, rapped on a bunk for silence and said:

"Fellows, I know you all want to know where we are going and why. Maybe I'd better tell you my own story. My doctor told me I had a cancer and no chance and I decided to kill myself to escape the suffering. I figured to set my business in order, scatter my money among friends and finish it up nice and quiet and easy.

"Then the war came. I was pretty bitter; always wanted to do something for my country and now the chance had come I had an incur-

able disease. I decided to finish it that night. Would have—but I had a sudden idea. I decided not to go without taking a German with me. I planned to get into Germany, kill the biggest officer I could reach and keep on killing them until they got me.

"That idea grew. I had half a million dollars as useless as I was and figured there were a lot of fellows in the country fixed the way I was and that a hundred men can do more than one. So I fixed it with certain persons and advertised for you fellows.

"That's the plan," he said simply. "When we get to England each of us will be supplied with what he needs to get to Germany and turned loose. I don't mind saying that the Government of the United States and that of England had nothing to do with this and, while certain persons may wink, you'll get no aid. I want each of you to figure out his own plan, consult me before we part, and don't let any hint of this reach any one outside.

"That's all," he added, smiling. "Excepting that I have arranged quite carefully that if any one has been insincere in his declarations of his intentions, the act which he professed to contemplate will be performed for him."

He spoke pleasantly, but every one understood. You may imagine my feelings, for I still cherished a keen prejudice in favor of living. The cold chills crept up my back when Craighart began clapping his hands and saying—"Bravo."

After Wallace sat down Craighart took the floor and said:

"My lads, I propose a vote of thanks to Mr. Wallace for giving us this great opportunity. It is a chance to serve, and much better than messing up some cheap lodging house."

We applauded, but I confess the applause was not boisterous. The idea chilled us, but it was one that grew on a fellow and continued to grow. After a short time every one commenced to take interest, and in spite of myself I began to get enthusiastic, and to take a delight in planning what to do.

Ought to work some more psychology into the yarn here. I wish I had the chance to write it. The big interest to me was the way the men took to the scheme. I began to understand why the bomb is such a favorite with the anarchists—it appeals to the self-interest and the sense of the spectacular. Nine-tenths of us wanted to make a spectacular finish, to blow ourselves up with a bunch of generals. Selfishness—we almost quarreled as to which could have the chance at Hindenberg, although most of us secretly aspired to blow up the Kaiser. Hearn, a drunken little Cockney bum, said—

"Blimy hif Hi don't load me bloomin' rear pockets with bombs hand let the bloody Kaiser kick me."

We made a fast run across—seven days. We outran our consort and picked up the British consort off the Irish coast. By that time we had begun to pair off quietly and study maps. Wallace was busy night and day conferring with different ones and advising us. The joking and bragging was done and every one got down to serious business.

Craighart and I drew closer together and talked of trying it as a pair, but he was too typically English to fit my scheme and besides that Wallace decided we should work alone—said he could not risk losing two smart plotters at once.

My plan was approved by Wallace. My boyhood was spent in Wisconsin in a Swedish community and as a kid my imitations of their dialect and quickness in picking up the language amused the family. After I went to New York I frequently wrote and told Swede stories.

My plan was to pretend to be a Swede, returned from America, and to engage in running supplies from Sweden into Germany.

I told Wallace of the plan. Now, while Wallace always declared he had no sanction from any government he certainly had a pull and he agreed to provide proper papers and passports and working capital.

Craighart was in the dumps from the day we reached his native land. He grew bitter and had dark moods which I could not understand.

He was the bravest man I ever knew and he was contemplating the greatest sacrifice a man could make. Dying had rather aroused his enthusiasm. He wanted to die clean, to square accounts for the way he had lived and wasted, to die serving his country and the plan he evolved meant worse than death—it meant eternal damnation in the eyes of every Englishman.

His plan was to play the rôle of traitor, an Englishman selling his country for gain. His soul had revived at the thought of dying to win back the respect of those he had disgraced—and he decided to make the sacrifice of everything.

Wallace gave us addresses in London and Liverpool and we scattered. Craighart and I went to London, lay low for a week. Then I got my necessary papers and money and went to Sweden.



I NEVER saw any of them again—excepting Craighart, Wallace and a little Irishman named Cleary. I saw Cleary, just a glimpse of him, as a Berlin mob tore him to pieces after he had blown a military car loaded with officers to pieces with a bomb. Craighart I saw in Berlin but dared not speak to him. Wallace I met twice and the second time was two days before he died, trying to blow up German Grand Headquarters.

I heard from Wallace that the band was

doing well and that it had caused a reign of terror among German high officials. That we scared them is certain, for they issued strict orders to watch the American prisoners, having an idea it was escaped prisoners who were doing the work.

It was Lyons, the little embezzler who tried to run out in New York, who stole a Canadian uniform, made his way to the front, allowed himself to be captured and, while being taken to the rear near Douai, saw a motor-car loaded with officers passing and blew seven of them and himself to eternity.

I was winning confidence. Wallace had appointed me to get the Kaiser, the Crown Prince and Ludendorff. I was running copper wire, butter and fats from Sweden. No one suspected me but it was difficult to get to the interior of Germany.

It was June before I managed to find a pretext for visiting the capital. In fact, I was commanded by a grafting German colonel to take food supplies to his family in Berlin. I protested that I would lose days, lose the profits on another voyage, but he sent me, on a pass.

I met Craighart, who was drunk or pretending to be. There was no chance for us to talk, but he brushed drunkenly against me and whispered:

"I've done for three of the blighters. I'll get the Big one yet."

I knew what he meant—the Kaiser, I understood too, how three officers, two members of the general staff, had died. Berlin was in a turmoil over the killing of these three in two weeks, and two German officers were under arrest charged with the murders. I never knew whether or not they were convicted.

It was just a week later that Craighart failed. A guard drove his bayonet through him and spoiled his aim as he fired at the Crown Prince.

Craighart's failure made my job harder. The high officers were more closely guarded and every one was under suspicion. I was forced to make another trip to Sweden.

When I got back I handed my friend the colonel a special package of food for his family. At that time one could have bribed half the General staff with a roast of beef.

Several officers wanted my friendship, among them a big secret service man. He told me the — Americans were escaping from prison pens and killing officers and that a great plot existed among prisoners to die taking German officers with them.

I mentioned the fact that I had spent several years in the States, and added that I hated the Yankees. He took me to other officers and, for a sum of money, I agreed to be put into prison pens with the Americans, pretending to be a prisoner, and to uncover the plot. I've been doing it for six weeks—and the big plan is working out.



SO BANCROFT finished his tale.

"Your plan?" I inquired.

"I'll report to Headquarters," he said calmly. "If eminent personages are there to hear my report we will have a blow-out."

He spoke lightly, as if the end would be a relief.

"Anyhow," he added smilingly, "tell the Old Man when you get back that I didn't throw down the assignment."

"You mean to go through with it?"

"A fellow has to finish his assignment, hasn't he?" he asked and, rolling into his bunk, turned his face to the wall.

That is all I know. The next day some German officers came and talked with Bancroft and he went away with them. Perhaps

an hour later there was an explosion not far away and great excitement among the Germans. In the afternoon German officers, purple with rage, went through the pen and struck at American soldiers, sick or well, with swords and cursed us violently.

Half a dozen of the boys were dragged out and put through a third degree. I never knew what happened, but I overheard a guard say many were killed and that the Kaiser escaped getting his just dues only because he had become so terrorized he refused to permit any, excepting a few trusted ones, to enter a room with him.

Perhaps when confidential German reports are printed the complete facts may be known.