

IVAN'S LETTER (PART 1)

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Editor's Note: The following cipher puzzle appeared in the May 1930 issue of The Enigma, the official publication of the National Puzzlers League. Erik Bodin (1896 - 1975), known as 'Viking' in the NPL, offered a \$10 prize to the first person to discover the secret message in Ivan's letter, hinting only that the letter encoded "the name of a point to be attacked, the date of the attack, and the troops involved". The cipher is unquestionably difficult; according to a brief note in the October 1930 Enigma, no one ever solved the puzzle. In the original article, the letter is presented in handwritten form; the slightly modified typewritten version given below preserves (and, in fact, makes somewhat easier to detect) the hidden message. The second half of the article, giving the solution to the cipher, will appear in the next issue of Word Ways.

Time moves slowly in rest camps. Sergeant Major Drummond sat alone in his office. Before him lay a list of men killed in action. On the blotter was the following notation: SGT. E. OWEN -- GONE WEST. Having completed his daily anagram he tried to build a square on DYNAMITE. It turned out to be a wreck.

"You and your old puzzles!" came a voice. "Every time I look at you I think I'm a man short." Heavens! The Division Commander and another roasting!

"Close the doors, Sergeant, I wish to speak to you in private."

Drummond took his time and meanwhile tried to recollect any recent shortcomings. Oldtimers are strong for preparedness.

General Davis broke the silence. "Sergeant, you and I have soldiered together everywhere. In China, Cuba, the Islands, and here, in this frog-eating country. Your service has been honest and faithful. Frankly, I'm worried and need your help. Reports from observers indicate our plans are pretty well known by the enemy. You understand what that means. But who is it? I can't accuse anyone. I don't dare confide in officers. You see my point? I must obtain evidence!" He emphasized the last word with a loud bang of his fist.

"Our system of censorship is extremely weak. Company officers examine the correspondence of their immediate commands, which affords grand opportunities for dirty work. Sergeant," he went on, "take this

note to the Military Post Office. You'll be given all local mail. Bring it here and we'll look things over."

Drummond brought the packet in less than five minutes.

"You know the men better than I do," resumed the general. "Go ahead and open all those letters. See if you can discover anything of suspicious nature. Hand me each one when through with it. I'll give it a final glance."

Here was a problem for a puzzler. If solved, it meant death for the guilty person. Probably life for thousands of others.

For a full hour they worked. Neither said a word. Not a thing did they discover. At last the task was completed.

"I don't know what to make of this," grumbled General Davis. "I'm positive there is some kind of secret communication. Guess I'll have to call on G-2 after all, probably to be handed a nice fat, juicy razzberry. Now, seal those letters and call the mail orderly."

"Very well, sir," answered Drummond. And then an idea struck him like a cold shower. "Dammit, General, I GOT IT! Hell and damnation, there is something radically wrong! Why, the sneaking, slant-eyed, double-crossing hyena! Where is it -- here, sir, see this letter? Sent by Private Petrovich -- it's clear as army coffee! He's in my outfit, and Petrovich CAN'T WRITE! Some one else wrote this letter!"

Old man Davis took the letter. It was addressed to Mlle Marie Didier, 28 Rue de l'Enigma, Paris and had been censored by Captain Smith, commanding officer of headquarters company, --th infantry. There was nothing suspicious about it. Everything appeared to be in order; just a letter to a "petite amie," in no way differing, apparently, from many thousands of other soldiers' letters.

"Check up on your memory," suggested the general. "I failed to see a thing wrong with this."

But the sergeant major was right. The records read:

Petrovich, Ivan. Private.
Age 27, white, born Vilna
Russia. Character "Excellent."
Illiterate, signs with a cross.

"That settles it," roared the general. "This is worth investigating and you are the man to do it. These are my orders: find out what's in this damned epistle. I've chided you about your puzzleistic affiliations. I've told you time after time to become a sane, normal human being. You solve this mystery or I'll reduce you to the grade of lance corporal, a good four grades below sea-level." And he burst out laughing, a horrible breach of military etiquette. Generals never laugh before enlisted men; not if it can be avoided.

He jotted down Mlle Didier's address, picked up his hat and riding whip and turned to Drummond, saying, "I want the solution in an hour!" Then he left the sergeant on his own.

Ivan Petrovich
P.O. 183

Somewhere in France,
Sept. 20th, 1918 -

My own Marie,

Cheer up darling! You may not be right about it. We'll soon return home. The United States Army has now turned the tide and the troops have taught Fritzie a lesson. About four or five more months now, no more.

Nanette is well and happy but Aunt Henrietta just does not get along with Gertie. The same old story. She's been very unpleasant recently. Really she is a case.

Why worry dear? This can't last long. Dad says that you must come home with me and each time that he writes he asks about you.

Sweetheart, really, are you going to Oiselle? Lucky girl! Write. I love you!

Ivan

Censored by:
Wm. M. Smith
Capt U.S. Inf.

THE CROSSWORDS CLUB

Do you miss the New York Times Sunday crosswords edited by Will Weng, now retired? If so, The Crosswords Club (PO Box 5555, Lodi, New Jersey 07644) may be for you -- for \$24.75 per year, members receive four puzzles of size 23x23 each month. (The first mailing, for November 1981, contained puzzles by Weng, Bert Kruse, Tap Osborne and Stephanie Spadacini.) A faithful solver of the Times Sunday crossword rates these as somewhat easier; she was surprised to see several unusual words (BITT, BOLA, AMIN) appear in two different puzzles. The typography is attractive, and each puzzle contains a brief introduction by Weng.