

Hopping the Bags

by John Jennings and Michael Olsen

Cast:

- DANIEL: Fresh from training, young, unsure of what to expect.
- ROB: Late 20's early 30's, survivor, right on the edge of insanity and crosses over at times.
- LES: Early to Mid 30's, in command of the section of the trench due to lack of other living people. Seemingly in control.
- OFFICERS: Various voices, offstage.

In the darkness we hear an old recording of Murray Johnson singing Pack Up Your Troubles (see <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1916.htm>)

Curtains open on a World War I trench, early morning, just before dawn. The back of the set should be the wall of the trench. It should be solid enough that at the end our three soldiers can actually climb over it. There should also be a walk way running across the stage, a collection of old planks really. And mud! Mud everywhere! If a set can be constructed that actually has mud that would be ideal.

Across one end of the trench a flap of canvas hangs down over a dugout in the side of the trench.

Daniel enters. A young recruit. He clutches his rifle. He looks fresh, nervous and uncomfortable, looking very out of place with his clean uniform. He has just enlisted and has no idea what to expect.

Throughout, we hear the random burst of rifle fire, plus a machine gun burst or two. Daniel reacts when he hears them, the other two are used to them. These should not be planned. Let the sound person just play them at any time, so that the performers are not able to be prepared for them.

An arm is visible at the top of the trench, hanging over and down into the trench. It is the arm of a German soldier who almost got into the trench.

It's cold, wet and totally miserable looking. The soldiers are wet as well, and the old hands should be scratching themselves from the lice that infested the uniforms.

Daniel keeps looking back at the arm, as if waiting for it to move or something.

He puts his cricket ball away and lights up a cigarette, looks back at the arm and decides to move it. As he gets to it, and touches it...

ROB: (off) OI!

Daniel snaps his hand back, and spins around.

Rob storms on stage. He is older than Daniel and is looking a little worse for wear. He's been in the trenches for a while now and his clothes and general appearance reflect that. He stopped worrying about things like cleanliness a while ago. He is missing one boot and the other is caked with mud.

ROB: What the hell do you think you're doing?

DANIEL: I was just—

ROB: Were you just?

DANIEL: I mean—

ROB: I mean, I mean...

DANIEL: (Snapping to attention—about all he remembers from basic training:) Sir!

ROB: (Giving a snort of derision:) Sir? Fuckin' "Sir?" Don't give me that. Jesus protect us from raw recruits.

DANIEL: I'm—I'm sorry.

ROB: Jesus, did you hear that Fritzy? Now the boy's sorry. He doesn't know what the hell he is.

DANIEL: Daniel.

Rob just looks at Daniel.

DANIEL: I'm Daniel O'Brien. This is my—my transfer form.

Daniel holds out a piece of paper.

ROB: Now he's telling us his name, Fritzy, like he thinks he's gonna be 'round long enough for me to remember it.

DANIEL: I'm sorry but who is Fritzy?

Les enters from behind the flap of canvas in the trench. He's been sitting in the dugout listening to the conversation.

LES: The arm.

Daniel spins around, to see Les. Les has been here as long as Rob, but has kept his sanity a bit better it would seem. His uniform, whilst not pristine, is much more presentable. He's carrying a pair of boots, not particularly good ones, but at least there are two of them. He hands the boots to Rob. Instantly Rob grabs them, sits down and starts to put them on.

DANIEL: The arm?

LES: Yes. The arm, there. Old Rob here has taken quite a liking to it.

DANIEL: *(slowly)* Alright, but it's gonna start to really go off, isn't it?

ROB: Well the poor bugger hasn't had a wash since he arrived has he?

DANIEL: What about—I mean, he's gonna rot. There could be disease and—

LES: What are you? A doctor?

DANIEL: My dad's a doctor.

LES: Well, I can see we'll have to be on our toes around you. A doctor's son hey? Well well well.

ROB: One that can read and all. We'll have to watch our manners. Actually, I've got this little itch here—and here—and here—and—

LES: Alright Rob. Don't worry. I'm certain Daniel here will meet his new friends soon enough.

DANIEL: My friends?

ROB: Lice, mate. Lice. Don't know which is worse: them or Gerry.

LES: The lice. At least Gerry will leave you alone for a bit.

ROB: You forgot to tell him about the rats, Les.

DANIEL: The rats?

ROB: They're the only ones getting fat on the food around here.

DANIEL: From all the food that the soldiers drop?

ROB: Well not so much from the food they drop, more the soldiers once they drop. I tell you, Doc, these black buggers get to such a size you could ride them.

DANIEL: My God.

ROB: But that's not the worst of it.

DANIEL: It's not?

ROB: It's not. Those bloody Germans, they've been training those rats to infiltrate our lines. Trained them to walk upright, march and everything. They put them in our boys' gear, sneak them over no-mans-land at night, and in the morning . . . !

Daniel pops his head over the trench, but as soon as he does we hear a shot. Daniel falls down into the mud.

ROB: *(Half yelling, half laughing)* YA MISSED, REINHARD!

LES: *(grabbing Daniel up)* What are you doing you crazy bugger? You want to get your head blown off?

ROB: *(Again half yelling, half laughing)* WHY DON'T YOU JUST PACK UP AND GO HOME? IF YOU CAN'T HIT A BIG HEAD LIKE HIS, YOU CAN'T HIT SHIT!

LES: Reinhard is our resident Gerry sniper. He's been out there for weeks and our boys haven't been able to hit him yet. He's collected a few scalps. I don't want yours to be the next one.

Daniel nods, relieved.

LES: *(to Rob)* Boots alright mate?

Rob pulls out the inside tongue of one of the boots.

ROB: Yes. Two sizes too small so they're just perfect. I must write to Pvt. Mitchell's family and thank them for their son's sacrifice so I don't get trench rot. Mitchy, I never knew you, but I salute you.

Rob salutes.

DANIEL: That gerry's still got his boots. Why not get his?

LES: What?

DANIEL: That Gerry. . .

ROB: . . .Fritzy?

DANIEL: Fritzy, still has his boots, if you need new boots, why not just take his?

LES: Rob here might have something to say about that.

ROB: You're not touching him.

DANIEL: But he doesn't want his anymore, does he?

Les shakes his head.

DANIEL: What is it?

ROB: Good luck charm.

DANIEL: Good luck charm?

ROB: Jesus Fritzy, does he ever do anything but repeat what I say?

LES: It was only a couple of days ago, during the usual fun that takes part in the morning.

DANIEL: Fun?

LES: Well every morning, after breakfast we each have a few shots at each other, to keep up appearances, but this one morning things got very serious indeed and the Germans sent a whole heap of their lads over the top.

So Fritz here, being a little more enthusiastic than the others, runs at us, full pelt. Never seen a bugger move that fast before. Anyway, Rob here stands up a little higher than he should to get a clear shot. Suddenly his rifle jams, and then, through all of the smoke and noise, for a moment I can clearly see Reinhard in his trench, he's seen Rob stand up a little higher, he swings around, takes aim and just as he squeezes that trigger, old Fritzy here gets in between!

DANIEL: He shot his own man?

ROB: Damned it he didn't get this peaceful look on his face. So peaceful. One second he was like the devil himself, coming for my soul, coming to add me to his tally, the next, why it could have been the archangel himself.

All of a sudden he had no more worries. The lice didn't itch any more. He wasn't hungry. He could just lay quietly down and sleep the rest of this war out.

DANIEL: I still don't—

ROB: He took the bullet that had my name on it. He took it into himself, so that I might live. So ever since, Fritzy here has been my good luck charm. Me and Fritzy like it that way.

DANIEL: Fritzy and I.

ROB: What?

DANIEL: It's Fritzy and I, not me and Fritzy.

ROB: Permission to kill this little snot, sir.

Rob lunges for Daniel.

LES: *(With great authority, this is a voice that is used to being raised over the noise of battle and being heard and obeyed:)* Enough!

Rob stops right away. He knows the tone and that the commands from the voice have saved him more than once.

LES: *(to Daniel:)* Don't do that son. Don't correct anyone like that, not here. We really don't care if you speak the King's English.

And Rob, give the kid a break and try not to kill him, alright? Leave something for the Hun to do.

ROB: Yes sarge, sorry sarge. Me and Frit—sorry—Fritzy and I shall be on our best behavior sarge.

DANIEL: Shit, I mean, I'm sorry, sir, I didn't realize you were an officer, sir.

Daniel again holds out the form. Les takes it, scans it a moment, tucks it into his top.

LES: Leave all that stuff for the Captain and the higher ups. I'm not actually the sergeant anyway. It's all unofficial. Besides, I don't know why you're giving this to me, we're due to be taken off the line.

We got all chewed up the last push, so it's our turn to be sent back to have a little rest before we get assigned to other companies. That's the one good thing about this war, it's run by the book.

ROB: The book? There is no book! If our sergeant can't be bothered coming back, you're the one for us. Besides you've done more than he ever has. Lazy bastard.

DANIEL: Where is he? Didn't he come back from leave?

ROB: *(chuckling)* Yes, one morning he got a special invite to join the Germans for a little party, so off he goes, all happy and whistling. Why I swear he leapt this trench in one bound. Skipping merrily along, when he decides to just take a little rest, you know, lie down and do a little sun baking in this wonderful weather.

DANIEL: What?

ROB: Yes, look come here mate.

Rob gestures Daniel over to the trench wall, where he bends down and picks up a trench periscope. He has a quick look through it before handing it over to Daniel.

ROB: See over there? 'Bout half way between us and them, over to the left. Well right in the middle of that pile of bodies, that's the lazy bugger there. Look at him. Just taking it easy, enjoying himself. *(calling out)* You bastard!. Get up! Stop enjoying this war!

Daniel is looking rather shaken from what he has seen over the trench.

DANIEL: You just—left him there?

LES: You see, back when it was all civilized here each night the medical parties would go out into no-mans-land and collect them and bring them back. It was like a game of swaps. If you give us that British Captain, we'll give you two of your infantry and the assorted body parts of three others.

But of late, the brass has decided things are a little too nice and friendly down here and so they've been shelling the Germans all night. So no-one's been able to get out and tidy up.

DANIEL: It must scare the hell out of them.

LES: Scares the hell out of us.

DANIEL: Why?

LES: How well do you think it goes down with the Germans? What do you think they do once we start lobbing shells at them?

DANIEL: But, there's nothing now.

ROB: Which is even worse than the noise.

DANIEL: How?

ROB: 'Cause you can hear your thoughts, and you get to see all those craters out there filled with ANZAC soup.

DANIEL: ANZAC soup?

ROB: You get a lot of it here at the wonderful Café Abattage. Firstly you take an artillery shell, now some will tell you it doesn't matter if it is ours or theirs but for me, I just find that the English ones have just that hint of home about them.

Now you fire that shell and wait for it to hit the ground, the shell will make a bloody big hole if it's been prepared correctly. Leave it for a couple of days, let the rainwater collect in the bottom, then just when it's nice and muddy, order an assault, and wait for an Aussie or New Zealander to be lovingly

tenderized by a German machine gun, because remember, love is the secret ingredient.

Let the body marinate in the hole for a day or two if you're in a hurry, but for the best results leave for at least a week, longer if possible and voila! ANZAC stew, specialty of the front!

LES: Alright Rob, come on now. Let's not scare the lad too much.

ROB: *(grinning)* I think Reinhard's done the job already.

LES: Look lad, just stick with us, we'll look after you. We've been here for nearly six months now, and we're alright.