
THE BALLAD OF SERGEANT O'LEARY

by G. AUSTIN SCHROTER, '28

Dedicated to Master Sergeant Joseph Laracy, Corps of Engineers, U.S.A. Retired,
formerly Instructor—Military Science and Tactics, C.I.T.

I'm more adept at lashin' spars or riggin' Kapok bridge
Than tellin' tales or spinnin' yarns, that you could best abridge.
For forty years, in blue and drab, I've served the Engineers
In Oahu and Cristobal I have slung their bandoliers.
From Manila to Alaska (where you change from ducks to
wool)—

I have packed a service pistol for a mem'ry more than full.
The chevrons of a non-com have been here on my blouse—
And bein' broken back-to-ranks has never made me grouse.
In service-life, it's men you meet, a lifetime to enrich—
Regardless of your station or your last and final hitch.
From raw-recruit to soldier-man, and so on, up the grade,
I've seen all kinds, and types of men, join up with my parade.
A few were common gold-bricks, but *their* stay was never
long—

And some were broken gamblers, and a few were rich men's
sons—

And taken in minority, a few were simpletons.
For such as these, I'll spare no words to have my simple say—
When I have a person close at heart I'd rather much portray.
Of all the men I've soldiered with, who really played the game,
I'll take a homely Irish mick, O'Leary was his name.
Though history tells of famous men who led through shot-
and-shell—

O'Leary was the kind of man you'd follow clear to Hell.
He had a simple order, when to duty we were bid—
It went like this: "Let us go, men, there is work that should
be did."

At cut-and-cover shelter, or in riggin' apron-wire—
There never was a squawk or beef, regardless of the fire.
It might be simple ponton-drill the Sergeant led us to—
Or rear-guard demolitions just to drop a span or two.
Or routine policin'-up at a sleepy peacetime post,
And maybe buildin' wharfage on some far-off, foreign coast.

But I call to mind an action, in the springtime of a year—
When Sergeant Joe O'Leary showed the World an Engineer.
His forward combat outfit wasn't on no peaceful lark—
A'layin' down a footbridge for the Doughboys to embark.
The crossin' was disputed with machine gun and grenade—
The Lampert boats were broachin' from the deadly enfilade.
When good old Joe O'Leary plunged into the bloody stream
To hold the span upon his back, and so the fight redeem.
The Top-kick had one thought in mind, which Duty under-
bid—

No honor or tradition, but a job "which must be did."
And when the fight was over, and the enemy in rout—
A few of us still walkin' had to pull the Sergeant out.
They took O'Leary back to base, and on his shoulder-straps
They stuck a pair of silver bars. They made *us* feel like saps
A'standin' there in pourin' rain, and tryin' hard to miss
The blushin' on O'Leary's face that grew with every kiss.
The Sergeant took their medals, and he hid them in his pack
For fear a man, among his men, would voice a clever crack.
And when that War was over, and O'Leary drop't in rank
There never was a mention of the bridge that damn-near sank.
And that is why we loved him so, a kindly, modest man,
Who never had to raise his voice to carry out a plan.
I can't forget the feelin' that can choke a man all up—
That clutched at every man of us who quaffed that bitter cup
With O'Leary at attention, as we passed in smart review
To honor his retirement . . . when retirement day fell due.
So here's to you, O'Leary, you modest Irish mick—
And to the day that soon must come, when I have served *my*
trick—

And if beyond the last Retreat I hear your gentle bid,
I'll only ask to serve with you, on work "that should be did."

—Taken from an incident of the World War. O'Leary is a fictitious name.
The events and conversation are based on fact.
Reproduction without permission of Author forbidden.