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Democracy Marches

BY WILLIAM HOLT
Broadcast in the BBC's Short Wave
Overseas Services

In what was formerly a private residence, in a quiet London square, a number of women are working at high pressure on one of the most merciful jobs of the war. You might easily pass this house without noticing it—it's just a cream plaster-faced house with a pillared porch and high windows, one of a row of similar houses and typical of Belgravia. It's not a hospital or shelter or first aid post, no sick or wounded are carried in, only telegrams and cablegrams arrive and men and women and children come and go, some with a tenseness on their faces. It's the "Wounded, Missing and Relatives Department" of the Red Cross.

The Headquarters of the Prisoners of War Department of the British Red Cross is at St. James' Palace but when I went to enquire there about what happens at this end when men are cut off by the enemy—as at Tobruk—and presumed captured, and what happens to the men, I was sent to that house in Belgrave Square. "The real story begins there," they said.

I've had a peep behind the scenes at that house where I saw rows and rows of files in boxes on white scrubbed plain wooden tables and women were at work on these files too busy to look up. This special section of the Red Cross and St. John War Organization known as "The Wounded, Missing and Relatives Department"—is directed by the Dowager Lady Amptill and works in close cooperation with the War Office, Admiralty and the Air Ministry. If a missing man is found to be in the hands of the enemy, his family is informed by the ministry concerned and his particulars entered on a "buff slip" which is sent to St. James' Palace together with his file. When he becomes officially a "prisoner of war" the women at that house in Belgrave Square have completed their job. I saw them at work handling particulars of wounded and missing. And not only are the men and women in the forces covered by this department, the men of the merchant navy who are missing are reported here too.

It's not difficult to imagine the anguish which is caused to relatives when the one most dear to them is reported missing. Enquiries pour into Belgrave Square by telegrams, post and telephone, and many relatives call personally there and are interviewed by sympathetic women who have been carefully chosen for the job. The door is always wide open and the people who come are given every consideration. Since the big battles began in North Africa the Department has been flooded with enquiries.

I talked to Lady Amptill and she told me how the information usually comes through. It's a very fascinating story. Generally it comes first from the International Red Cross Committee at Geneva in the form of an advance service of telegrams dealt with by the War Office Casualty Branches. The arrangement under which this advance information is telegraphed by Geneva was made shortly after the fall of France, and it's worked out very successfully.

The International Red Cross Committee and the Protecting Power—which in this case is Switzerland—receive diplomatic information generally in list form from the belligerent powers—Germany, Italy or Japan—for transmission to the British Government. This information confirms and amplifies Geneva's advance telegrams to the War Office.

"Of course, information that a man is missing officially comes from the War Office, Admiralty or Air Ministry," Lady Amptill said, "but often news comes direct-

ly to us through the relatives. The official casualty services of the War Office, Admiralty and the Air Ministry are most efficient and complete," she said, "but we fill up the gaps."

She told me that lists were beginning to come through now from Hong Kong and from information received through private letters from escaped prisoners it would appear that prisoners are having reasonable treatment in Singapore.

But while the service Casualty Branches carry out their own inquiries about missing men, the Department, run from that house in Belgrave Square, carries out certain important auxiliary work. In Britain there are Red Cross "Searchers" attached to all principal Military and Emergency Service Hospitals. These searchers visit the sick and wounded and are sometimes able to pick up clues about missing men who were in the same unit or may have been personal friends of those in hospital.

There are times when it happens that friends of the missing men are themselves prisoners of war in an enemy camp and they're able to give information. In such a case it's to the International Red Cross Committee in Geneva that the appeal is sent. A message gets through to the prisoner and the answer comes back. These inquiries are carried out in conjunction with the service Casualty Branches and every possible clue is followed up.

Not only members of the fighting services but merchant seamen, internees and captives from British ships including women and children are traced. Unfortunately the news, when it comes, is not always good; maybe the missing person can't be traced or is found to be dead but whatever the result the relatives are comforted to know that everything possible is being done.

I heard some very touching stories at Belgrave Square of parents and wives who persist in believing that their dear one is still alive although reported dead. "He may have lost his memory," they say. Sometimes they call at that house in Belgrave Square very excited with photographs of prisoners of war cut from newspapers and point to one of the blurred and indistinct faces and say that it is their son or their husband. In the case of one man in a photo six women claimed him as their husband.

Lady Amptill showed me some of the cablegrams which come from all over the world. These inquiries pour in from people overseas who are anxious to find out what's happened to their relatives or friends—whether they have become air-raid casualties in the blitzed areas.

After the Bath raids there was a flood of inquiries from overseas, from civilians, and from men serving in the forces. Cablegrams come from America, Canada, Palestine, Egypt, East Africa, Malta, Colombo, and so on and these inquiries are probably for relatives who may be missing as a result of air raids or whose letters have gone astray. To do the tracing required by these cablegrams, a thousand liaison officers are scattered all over Britain. In most cases, Lady Amptill tells me they are able to send satisfactory replies.

Besides doing all this, the Department fixes up visits of relatives to wounded men in hospitals in Britain and gets billets for them near the hospital and pays for these billets when necessary.

I talked to some of the men and women who were coming in and out of the door of that house in Belgrave Square. One woman had heard nothing of her husband since the fall of Singapore. She was naturally very upset and worried but she was less distressed after her interview. She felt that sooner or

later she would have news.

By an ironic twist in this war men at the front on active service sometimes received word that their mother or father or their little sisters or brothers are missing back home. I saw two telegrams from anxious soldiers overseas. One of them was from a man who was in hospital suffering from spinal injuries. He wanted to know whether they had news yet of his wife. He'd not heard from her for fourteen months. These tragic cases of lost people in total war will hardly bear thinking about. But what would it have been like without the Red Cross?

I heard of one inquiry, however, which oughtn't to have been addressed to Belgrave Square. It was from an Irish wife who wrote from Ireland asking if they could trace her separated husband who had failed to pay his arrears in maintenance. They had to write to her, informing her that the Department only dealt with those missing through enemy action.

Well the majority of men posted as missing are ultimately traced and notified through channels already described as "Prisoners of War." At this stage their files are passed to the next department and their relatives receive as a further Red Cross Service a monthly journal called "The Prisoner of War"—which is circulated free to next-of-kin. The third issue of the journal is already out. It contains photographs of the men in prison camps and all sorts of items of news of interest to next-of-kin. This paper, coming out each month, is bound to make parents, wives and children feel more at ease. Then hundreds of tons of parcels are packed in Red Cross packing centres, collected by the G.P.O. here, shipped to Lisbon. They are transferred there to ships specially chartered by the Red Cross and St. John for shipment to Marseilles. Well, Canadians won't need to be reminded that they, too, are sending large quantities of food parcels to Lisbon for despatching to the prison camps. The Red Cross people tell me that the figure at the present time is about 60,000 parcels per week and we feel very grateful in Great Britain for the grand way you are backing up the men behind barbed wire in Germany and Italy.

From Marseilles the parcels go on by rail to the vast warehouses of the International Red Cross at Geneva and then to the camps in Germany and Italy. But all this is another story and we over here can't tell you in America anything new about looking after the comforts of prisoners of war.

Well, thanks to the Red Cross—founded within the lifetime of many living men and women (it's only eighty years since the Swiss Henri Dunant made his appeal and Gustav Moynier, another Swiss, founded the first committee—there are now National Red Cross Societies all over the world) thanks to the Red Cross the anguish of the next-of-kin is made easier to bear, and the sick, wounded, missing and prisoners are cared for. But not only this—the hopes of Man for real international brotherhood based on humanity are stimulated and nourished, because here is a concrete example of the international mercy and human cooperation going on even in the middle of "total war."

COLLEGIATE

The scene was Napier Field, Alabama, the characters, a raw recruit and an Air Corps classification officer.

The private stepped forward and said, "Harvard Princeton, reporting, sir."

The officer, in no mood for jokes, looked up furiously and asked, "What name?"

The recruit blushed and stammered, "Harvard Y. Princeton, sir."

The officer leaned back and sarcastically remarked, "I suppose the Y. stands for Yale?"

"Yes, sir," answered the soldier simply.

Private Harvard Yale Princeton is now with the Air Corps. Strangely enough, he is not a college graduate—as a matter of fact, he did not even finish high school.



No doubt there are many of you fellow air cadets who would like to know just why the league was formed. As is mentioned in the Air Cadet Administration book Canada is a vast country with many barriers within her boundaries. The people of such a continent have had no choice but to better their lines of communication "a mare usque ad mare". The modern aircraft present an easily solved problem in this respect. The older generation have been brought up to believe that an aeroplane was nothing more than an oversized and very dangerous boxkite, but the younger, being born into an atmosphere of conflicting ideas, namely the rather negative views of over sceptical parents and the bright hopes and prospects of eminent aircraft designers, chose the latter view.

Young Canada took to the hobby of model aircraft building as birds take to the wing, they clamoured for more and more sleek streamlined fighter planes to satisfy their desire for speed. Model aeroplane companies were formed and developed into very successful enterprises. The boys of our province and nation came into the national limelight when they created sensations at the many different model meets all over the country, on the whole everything was progressing splendidly until in nineteen thirty nine the greedy war mongers of Europe struck the freedom loving peoples of the world in order to satisfy their lusts for more and more. The supplies that these various companies had on hand began to run low and young Canada was growing listless. A clamour was raised to the government and these boys, many of whom were sons of fathers in the service, asked for some kind of military project to be formed so that red blooded Canadians could take part in some activity which would be of help in a national emergency such as was at hand. The Canadian government answered their petitions with the Air Cadet League of Canada. Officers were selected and trained during the summer at the various Air Training Stations through the country. Uniforms of the same colour and make as the Air Force blues were manufactured with the sole difference being in the high necked "choker" collars and Air Cadet Albatross on the buttons.

However, as is the case with all organizations which are just making their initial appearance, a difficulty arose out of the scramble. It appears that rumours were being spread to the effect that it was compulsory for a lad to join the air force when he was of age if he participated in the training of the league. Mothers and fathers, I would like to take this opportunity to tell you that if you have a son anxious to join his local squadron do not prevent him for this reason as it is entirely without founding. It is not necessary to join either the Air, Navy, Army or any Auxiliary forces having been a member of the corps.

Young Canada has now the makings of a permanent and very fine organization and I personally wish all the sponsors (who have been in the majority of the cases, service clubs, and have undertaken to finance and officer squads), officers and cadets the best of luck.

Keep 'em flying fellows.

THOS. MASSON.

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