

TRENCH FIGHTING AROUND YPRES

By Owen S. Watkins, Chaplain

As I indicated in my last letter, the stay of the 14th Field Ambulance in the comfort and comparative safety of the convent at Loere was not for long; the veteran troops of the 5th Division were needed elsewhere, so with regrets we handed over to the North Midland Division, and, early in April marched northwards. My regrets were tempered by the knowledge that the quarters I was vacating were to be occupied by a brother chaplain, the Rev. Stanley Bishop, and the opportunities for service denied to me were to be his. Our destination was to be the famous city of Ypres, which meant that before many days had passed over us there would be hot work to do. Our first stay was in the little village of Ouderdom, where the village inn was turned into an officer's mess, and the rest of the place became a hospital and barracks for the men of the ambulance. We knew, however, that these arrangements were only temporary, for the fighting troops of the division had occupied the trenches beyond Ypres, and it was necessary that we should be in closer touch with them.

A Billet in an Asylum

In the narrow Ypres salient, to find billets for all, especially such a unit as a field ambulance, was not easy, and it was several days before we finally moved up to the city and occupied the Women's Lunatic Asylum, just outside the city walls. Meanwhile I had, as far as possible, made myself acquainted with our new line, ridden through the shell-torn town and generally spied out the land. During these rides of exploration I visited several field ambulances belonging to other divisions, and had the pleasure of meeting Capt. Vic. R. A. M. C., an Old Leysian; Lieut. Eric Barnsley, of Birmingham; the two sons of the Rev. W. H. Hart, old Kingswood boys, who are doing their bit as privates in the R.A.M.C.; and Private Leo Lewis, of Acton, whom I had long known as an enthusiastic boys' brigade worker. All of these were serving in the same ambulance and up to that date had not seen chaplain. I am glad to say that since then a chaplain has been sent to the division and the Rev. C. G. Danbury is now attached to that very field ambulance.

Senseless Devastation

During these days I first became familiar with the shattered city. I cannot describe the effect its ruins had upon me. I came away from my first visit filled with rage that such senseless devastation should be possible—the ruined cathedral, the shattered Cloth Hall, its fine timbered roof—one of the finest in Europe—gone up in smoke; the streets, with their beautiful old gabled houses, scarred and torn beyond repair; it all seemed so unnecessary, so irreparable, so wicked. The streets were crowded with people, who went about their business apparently indifferent to the booming of guns; constantly shell bursting in the place; over a hundred casualties that day had been gathered by the ambulances from the streets. In one Rue de Lille—a shrapnell burst, and a woman was carried away by the stretcher-bearers. But the vendors of fruit and other commodities did not move their stalls, the crowd on the pavement did not seem to lessen, and within five minutes busy seekers after "souvenirs" were digging the shrapnell bullets out of the woodwork of the houses with their penknives.

On April 9th we moved into the Woman's Asylum, a building admirably adapted for the purpose of a hospital and considered reasonably safe, although it had already been hit several times by heavy shells. That, however, was many weeks previously, and as the enemy knew it was being used as a hospital it was not anticipated that they would shell it again. As it was a hospital when it was first hit, the ground of confidence seemed of the slightest; but there was no other suitable building available, so we entered into possession with joy, for it was the best billet the 14th Field Ambulance had occupied since the beginning of the war. The chapel of the institution had been wrecked by a "Jack Johnson" a few of the walls had shell holes in their walls, most of the windows were broken, but the buildings as a whole had not suffered greatly, and we found ample accommodation, not only for the officers and men of the ambulance, but also for surgical and medical wards, operation theatre and detention wards, where we might keep trivial cases which, in a day or two, would be again fit to join their units.

A Quaker Ambulance

Part of the buildings were occupied by the field ambulance of the Society of Friends, which was running a hospital for the Belgian army and the civil population. It would be impossible to speak too highly of the work that was done by this hospital, or to over-estimate the bravery, devotion and surgical skill of Dr. Fox and his co-workers. On every hand I heard glowing tributes to the value of their work, and in the days that were con-

ing we, too, had reason to be deeply grateful for their help and co-operation. No medical unit in Flanders has done better work, or is more deserving of gratitude from the stricken people whom they come to help.

The line of trenches from which we had to "collect" wounded was, from our point of view, distinctly a difficult and unhealthy one. Much of the line could only be reached at night, the "carries" for the bearers were long—two miles and more—over very rough ground, and the greater portion was under continual rifle and shell fire both night and day. In order to convey some idea of the sort of work that was being done every night by the doctors and bearers, I perhaps could not do better than describe one night when I myself was called out.

A Perilous Journey

About 9 p. m. I received a message that I was wanted to conduct a funeral in the East Surrey Regiment, which was holding a portion of the line on the Ypres-Commines Canal. The regimental aid post was in a ruined farm, and there I was told I should find the burial party waiting for me. This was a part of the line I had not visited; the medical officer and the bearers who were collecting from that sector had already started, so I had no guide. But with a good map and detailed instructions I started off, prepared to make the best of it, though the night was dark as the grave, and from the sound of gun and rifle fire the enemy were unusually active. Through the silent, empty streets of the darkened city I rode, past the challenging sentries, across the bridge spanning the moat, and on to the country road with its ruined farm-houses and cottages looming up dark and gaunt in the light of the star shells which were constantly thrown up from the German trenches, until I reached a chateau nestling amongst the trees.

Here a sentry stopped me. "You can't take your horse beyond this, sir. You'll have to walk the rest of the way. To ride any further means certain death." Handing over my horse to an orderly, I continued on foot, not feeling too comfortable, for it was new ground to me. I had the haziest notion as to the direction in which the enemy's trenches lay, and so could not judge whether I was under cover or not, or was in view, when the star shells lighted up the whole countryside. Suddenly a voice from the ditch said, "Who are you? Where are you going? I suppose you know you are standing up on the sky line."

A Beautiful Mark for the German Sniper?

I hastily jumped into the ditch, to find an orderly subaltern with a number of men who were digging a trench. I explained who I was. You've over-shot your mark, sir. You ought to have left the road two hundred yards back. Follow the bank there—it's the canal bank—and you'll be quite safe if you keep close under it. Good night, and good luck to you." Now my troubles began. The clay was wet and slippery, the track not easy to see, to use a flash-light was not safe, and tree stumps, holes or tangles of barbed wire constantly tripped me up. "Keep under the canal bank and you're safe," my instructions had been. But if that was a safety it didn't seem like it. Overhead—I tried to believe far overhead—fizzed the enemy's bullets; to the left of me, just clear of the track, I could hear their beating on the ground and every now and then there was the ugly scream of a shell which, in the darkness, appeared to be nearer than it really was. "Zurr"—a bullet passed my ear and struck the ground in front of me. "Fizz"—one came from the opposite direction and hit behind me. They seemed to be coming from all directions, and I began to realize what it meant to be in a narrow salient, almost surrounded by the enemy. I stumbled on my way, the track lighted fitfully by the German star shells and by the light which streamed from the doors of the dugouts, full of men, with which the canal bank was alive. When at last I reached the headquarters of the East Surrey Regiment I was greeted by the commanding officer, Major Patterson: "Come in out of the rain of bullets padre. You've brought us a 'fruity' night. Take my tip and get your burying over as soon as you can, for the squareheads are restless to-night, and it's as quiet now as it will be again before dawn. There are three to bury and the grave is already dug." The medical officer—Lieut. Eccles—and myself went out into the night, he taking my arm to guide us, and with characteristic thought walking on that side of me from which most of the bullets came. When I protested he pointed out that there wasn't much in it, as the bullets came from three different directions and there was no real shelter over the space which separate the farm buildings from the dugouts. In consequence we did not linger there, but crossed it as quickly as might be. The ruined farm reached, I learned that the bodies were already in the grave, so I prevented the bearers from coming to the funeral as they wished, for it seemed senseless to risk their lives.

Few and Short Were the Prayers

Lieut. Eccles, however, insisted on coming with me to show me the way, as it was dark so dark, and his R. A. M. C. corporal said, "Where you go, sir, I go too. Besides I might be useful to help carry whoever gets hit." The rifle fire increased, so when the grave was reached I decided to make the service as short as possible. What a funeral service! There was one tree some yards from the grave; against this the corporal flattened himself, Lieut. Eccles against the corporal, I against Lieut. Eccles. "Get it over quick, padre," he said; "it's getting worse, and soon we shall be unable to get back." I bent down to take a handful of earth for the committal. "Zur-r" went a bullet, and the corporal muttered, "Just stooped in time or that would have had you." Around us the bullets sang, and occasionally with a dull thud hit the tree. "You'd almost think they knew we was here," said the corporal, thinking aloud. "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope—" The service was over, and we were racing for dear life to the dug-outs. Then it came, a perfect fusillade of rifle and shrapnell fire. For an hour we sat huddled up inside, the whole place quivering with the explosion of trench mortars, the bullets beating outside like hail. When the fire slackened Major Patterson said, "Now's your chance padre. Take my tip and be off while you can, for they'll start again directly. Hineson's going your way and he'll guide you. He knows the spots where it is advisable not to loiter. Good-night, old chap; come and see us again soon." But we never met again. The next time I visited the regiment, it was to share with the Rev. D. F. Carey the sad duty of conducting the funeral service of Major Patterson and of every other officer who had been in the dug-out that night except Lieut. Eccles. Lieut. and Quartermaster Hineson is known to chaplains in every garrison where he has served as an enthusiastic Nonconformist, ready to aid in all good things. Throughout this campaign he has been my very good friend and helper, and we all rejoiced when recently he was decorated with the Military Cross, besides being promoted from sergeant-major to his present rank.

A Run for Life

I shall long remember that walk to the place where our horses were waiting for us—the roar of guns, the sudden blaze of star shells, overhead the continual swish of bullets, and five yards beyond the narrow path, which was protected by the canal bank, the beating of bullets with a dull thud upon wet clay. Every now and then Hineson would say, "There's a gap in the bank here. Bend low and run for your life," and we would double down until our heads were almost level with our knees and run like rabbits to the next bit of cover. At last the absurdity of two staid men of over forty playing this Boy Scout sort of game seemed to strike both of us, and we leaned up against the bank panting, and laughed until we were weak; then on again, ready for the next bolt for safety. When at last the horses were reached, my companion said, "Thank God we're through that all right. I've been up here nearly every night since the regiment took over this part of the line, but I've never known it quite as bad as this before." And I thought of the doctors and bearers, who had travelled that road just before us. They couldn't run or bend low, for they were laden with the stretchers and their heavy loads. The sentry greeted us cheerily. "So you've got back safe, sir. Bit warm to-night, ain't it? Hope you'll get home all right, but they're shrapnelling the road a quarter of a mile farther on. Still, with luck you'll get through all right. Good night, sir, and good luck."

When I arrived back I learned that medical officers and bearers had all returned in safety, though each had a story to tell of narrow escapes, of bullets that almost got them, and of periods when with their wounded load, they had sheltered in a ditch until things had quieted down. Their chief item of news, however, was that they had brought in wounded the brigadier of the 14th Brigade, General Maude, who had been shot through the arm and back. It was with great relief that we learned that his wounds were not serious, and his removal from our midst was not likely to be for long, for there is no general officer serving with the Expeditionary Force who has more completely won the confidence and affection of all ranks serving under his command. The days that followed were filled with the ordinary routine of a chaplain's work on service. I have often described it, and do not need to do so again—the service in bivouac and billet, the personal talk with individual men, the visitation of sick and wounded, and the use of the opportunity presented by what had become the "collecting" centre of the division. For in the narrow Ypres salient it was impossible for all ambulances to work, hence special duties were allotted to each. The 14th Field Ambulance, being strengthened by having

attached to it doctors and bearers from Nos. 13 and 15, did the collecting for the whole division. The 15th Field Ambulance became a sort of divisional clearing hospital, and was established in a village some seven miles away; whilst the 18th Field Ambulance still further to the rear, acted as a convalescent home for the men who needed rest, or treatment for slight ailments.

Many signs now indicated that the enemy were preparing for an effort to break through—another desperate attempt to reach Callias. So we also made our preparations to meet the attack when it should come. Fresh troops were continually arriving—the Northumbrian Division marched in, and at last, but not least, the Canadians, as fine a body of troops as have ever taken the field. But an account of the events that followed I must reserve for another time, for that is a long story which cannot be told in a few words.

SIR EDWARD GREY

His Personality

(By A. G. Gardiner, in the 'Atlantic Monthly'.)

His efforts for peace during the last fatal week of July are on record; and no one who saw him in the House during that tremendous time, when the Chamber seemed darkened with impending doom, can doubt either his surprise at the sudden blow or his passionate desire to save Europe from the coming disaster.

When someone met him after his speech of August 3, and rather ineptly offered his congratulations on what Mr. Balfour had called the most momentous speech made in Parliament for a hundred years, he turned away with the remark, "This is the saddest day of my life."

I am told that at the Cabinet council next morning more than one minister broke down under the dreadful strain, and that Sir Edward Grey was among them. But, indeed, there were more tears shed in England in those tragic days than ever before. And they were not tears of weakness, but of unspeakable grief.

His Personality

If Mr. Asquith's intellectual mastery of the House is supreme, Sir Edward Grey's influence is not less remarkable as a triumph of character. In many respects his equipment is undistinguished. He has travelled little; it is jocularly said that he made his first trip to Paris when he accompanied the King there a short time ago. He is not a linguist; he is wholly unfamiliar in his tastes, almost unknown in society, much more devoted to fishing than politics; speaks little, and then in the plainest and most unadorned fashion; is indifferent to the currents of modern life, and turns for his literature to the quietism of Woodsworth, Walton, and White's 'Selborne'; is rarely seen in the House, and then seems to stray in, as it were, like a visitor from another planet.

And in spite of all this he exercises an almost hypnotic influence on Parliament. The detachment of his mind, the Olympian aloofness and serenity of his manner, the transparent honesty of his aims, his entire freedom from artifice and appeals to the 'gallery,' all combine to give him a certain isolation and authority that are unique. His speech has the quality of finality. Mr. Asquith wins by sheer mental superiority; Mr. Lloyd George wins by the swiftness and suppleness of his evolutions; Sir Edward Grey wins by his mere presence, and a firmness of mind which that presence conveys.

It is a favorite jest of his enemies that no man can be quite so wise as Sir Edward Grey looks. Like some other products of the Balliol system, he is more advanced in his views and more popular in his sympathies than his manner and speech convey; but in his conduct of foreign affairs he has adopted a reticence towards Parliament which has been resented—notably in the case of the Russian agreement of 1907, which was published some days after the Parliamentary session had closed, and also in regard to the nature of the military 'conversations' with France, first disclosed to Parliament in the speech of August 3 last.

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