

A Visit to the Firing Line

(By COL. THOMAS CANTLEY, NEW GLASGOW)

The rare privilege was given to Col. Thomas Cantley, Manager of the Steel Works, New Glasgow, of visiting the trenches where Canadian troops are engaged. This is probably due to Lord Kitchener, with whom he conversed with on the subject of munitions of war, which are being manufactured under his direction. We take from the Presbyterian Witness the following outline of lecture delivered by Col. Cantley on the subject of his visit:

"Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, the difficulty which faces me to-night is really where to begin and what to talk about in regard to the impressions formed and things seen along a battle line of 20 to 30 miles in France and Flanders. The subject is so colossal, so many sided. The numbers of men engaged in the strife, the area over which the war is being waged, and the methods employed differ so greatly from what we have read of past experience in war that it is difficult to know where to begin, what to relate that might be most interesting to you of all that was there seen.

The word liberty conveys different meanings to possibly each of us, and so does the word government—or rather Responsible Government. If you wish to understand the full meaning of both these words, even the preparation involved in a visit to the battle front in France and Flanders would give you some idea along that line.

In ordinary times if you were in London and wished to go to the Continent, you bought a railway ticket and travelled to France or Belgium, Holland or Germany, in much the same way you might buy a railway ticket in New Glasgow for Montreal, Toronto, Boston or Chicago. But if you attempt to get to the Continent today you will find it a totally different matter. There are many parts of the Continent that you cannot get to at all. Probably a week is spent in getting all the necessary permits, passports and documents of one kind or another. In all there are eight to ten papers. First a permit to embark on the train—then a permit to embark on the boat at Folkestone, another to disembark at Boulogne—a permit to get out of Boulogne, and many others. After all these were supplied, and in company with Col. Carson and Col. Carrick, we left London on a Monday morning early in May at about 8.30 a. m., and were in Boulogne about noon. Here having the necessary papers we immediately disembarked. The other passengers were all held up—their baggage being examined, all of it turned out on the ground, search made for false bottoms, etc., and in many cases the outer clothing removed from some men who were more or less suspected.

At Boulogne we met Capt. Blacklock the Assistant Red Cross Commissioner for Canada in France. All Red Cross work here is under the control of Capt. Blacklock. In addition to which he looks after the transportation of the wounded to England, and to give you some idea of the enormous amount of work entailed and the awfulness of this war, I may say that for eight days before we reached Boulogne, 3000 wounded per day had been sent to England. That is 24000 men had gone through in eight days being sent across the Channel and on the Base Hospitals in England. Practically all the casualties result from shrapnel or high explosive shell fire. The effect of rifle fire is very small: all our old ideas in regard to weapons are being thrown aside. Britain has today an enormous amount of small arm ammunition, but the great need is for large sized shells. Later I think, through the pictures to be shown, you will be able to see, or at least get an idea, of the reasons for this. Now this is a very informal talk. It is nearly impossible to speak connectedly. Before me are notes made usually at night, some in a sheltered spot at the front, written up in many different places and under unusual conditions, put together like a connected narrative on the homeward voyage.

Before bringing on the pictures I referred to the fact that we had landed at Boulogne. Before leaving that city we had to get a permit from the Provost Marshall, vized by the French officials. The first thing noticed on entering the car was that the chauffeur had a loaded rifle beside him, while on the seat were clips containing about 40 rounds of spare ammunition. On the rear seat lay another rifle with a similar quantity of ammunition. This was suggestive of what might be in front of us.

We passed through the Calais gate which is much like the old gates of Quebec. A few minutes later we were stopped at a barricade. There is no possibility of rushing through there, and we had to stop irrespective of sentries. This barricade consisted of two lines of big trees placed cross the street on the top of these were placed old farm wagons and carts. Our permits being examined, the time marked thereon, we were allowed to proceed. In about an hour and a

half we reached St. Omer. This point was then the Headquarters of General French and was about half way to the battle line. Here it was necessary to get an entirely new set of passes from the Provost Marshall and these had to be vized by the Belgian officials as the battle front to which we wished to go was then on Belgian territory.

We passed out of St. Omer and over the Canal near Arques where there is a remarkable hydraulic lift, which transports the Canal boats 40 feet from the lower to the higher level. The Canal here is carried in an aqueduct over the railway. The lift here is much the same as the one at Peterboro. We had supposed the lift at Peterboro was the only one of its kind in the world, but this lift at Arques has evidently been in existence for some time previous to that of Peterboro.

A little later we reached Cassel, which occupies the only high ground in that district—a round hill perhaps 600 feet in height. From here you have a magnificent view of the surrounding country. Leaving Cassel we passed through Steenvorde to the Belgian frontier at Eavorde, and then on to Poperinghe.

From Cassel eastward to Poperinghe we met a continuous procession of refugees from the latter city. Of all the sad things seen perhaps nothing impressed me as the condition of numbers of these homeless people. First came team wagons piled with household effects, with the women and children perched on top, then single carts drawn by cows, and carts with men and women in the shafts and pushing behind. Multitudes were on foot—men carrying great bundles and the women dragging the little children. It was a most pathetic picture. Dusk was coming on—a thunderstorm was gathering in the sky, they had abandoned everything but a few household gods and goods. The children were tired, dusty and worn out. Many gave up the struggle and lay by the wayside, having almost abandoned hope.

I might just say here that the roads one time magnificent, were now badly cut up with the tremendous heavy motor transport traffic. The number of transports met was marvellous. I was told that the British have over 8000 motor trucks in service in France, and nearly every British maker is represented. Practically all are three ton trucks.

Poperinghe was an old city, containing a very old Cathedral, built some time previous to the 13th century. At the time we passed through it only the tower of the cathedral had been destroyed. A big shell had crashed through it making a great gap and totally demolished the house opposite. The whole street was ruined, nearly every house being damaged. If you can imagine every house on Provost Street from Bell's Corner to the Norfolk Hotel as practically demolished, the street littered with bricks and debris of all kinds, you can get some idea of the main street of Poperinghe.

For some miles before reaching here we first heard the sound of heavy cannonading. Leaving Poperinghe we passed out along the road to Lamerling, and thence along the Ypres road eastward. Coming to a cross road we turned at right angles north through a narrow, crooked road about 1½ miles, and again turned at right angles when we reached the main road from Ypres to Elverdinghe.

Just as we reached this highway two British biplanes flew immediately over the roadway. These were there being bombed by the German batteries. At the first they fired 15 shells and 23 at the other. These air craft were so directly overhead that we had to put our heads out of the car window to see them. The evening being dark with a gathering thunder storm approaching, we could clearly see the flash off he shells as they burst, after which small clouds of smoke remained and slowly drifted off. The Germans bombarded the biplanes most persistently, but the airmen apparently paid no attention to them.

At this point all further progress being completely blocked by a great body of French troops returning from the firing line at the Yser Canal, about two miles distant, and threading their way through troops were great convoys of guns, ammunition of supplies pouring through to the front. Here we left our car and proceeded to the Chateau of the Three Towers.

The front trenches here at that time were held by the Canadians, supported by the French and Algerians. These, however, were being withdrawn.

Entering the Chateau grounds we came into a big square, all the buildings being surrounded by a big wall which enclosed the barns, outhouses, and at night the cattle, horses, flocks, men-servants and maid-servants are all gathered into safety.

The Chateau of the Three Towers is a massive brick building with towers on the several corners. It is what is

here called a moat house, and rises like an island out of the water. The Moat is perhaps fifty feet in width and entirely surrounds the house—the access to it being over a drawbridge, which gives entrance into a large entrance hall about 25 feet wide which runs through the whole depth of the house. The first thing noticed on entering the front of this hall was fortified with a rampart of sand bags, making two walls about 8 or 9 feet high, which extended clear across the hallway, one overlapping the other by about eight feet, with a passage of two feet between.

The hall was very fine—about 20 feet high, pannelled in oak, with oak beamed ceiling and tiled floor. Going through the barricade we went to the rooms at the rear. Those on the left side were occupied by General Alderson and staff. Across the hall were great large reception rooms. These were beautifully appointed and furnished. Here were pictures on the walls, bric-a-brac on the mantles—everything was in order. Just as it was left—a remarkable contrast to the way in which the Germans leave the buildings and towns which they enter! The two upper storeys were occupied by the General and staff as living rooms.

In this vicinity German shells thrown from the left bank of the Yser Canal were falling at various points on the headquarters grounds. Just at this moment while talking to General Wood, the Quarter-Master-General a large German shell fell in the corner of a hedge nearby. A number of French Algerian soldiers were sitting on their hunkers around a half dozen fires, over which they were cooking their evening meal. The shell landing near them practically wiped out the whole group—killing one outright.

Possibly that had some effect on me—at any rate General Wood suggested that I might like to see the retreating dugout, and I gladly did so.

Entering this dugout we found it was simply an enlarged trench with right angle chambers roofed over first with round timber covered with sand bags, these covered with earth and sods and trees placed on top. This place was quite comfortable and capable of defense against anything except heavy howitzer fire. Of course a high explosive shell would tear a tremendous gap and the dugout would afford absolutely no protection against this fire.

The Chateau grounds were repeatedly shelled during the two days previous to our being there—the Germans had the correct range of the place, but were evidently sparing the building—why they were doing so the staff officers could not say, although they ventured the opinion that it may have been because the owner's wife was a German lady—and further as the German trenches were only about a mile and a half distant they may have some thought of occupying it as their headquarters in the near future.

Leaving the Chateau we passed out to the front of and under the fire from a battery of 60 pounders. The wall the battery was concealed was little less than marvellous. The general practice is to conceal them behind hedge, or underneath a haystack. The whole country is dotted with these stacks, barns not being used for housing hay or grain.

We resumed our journey to St. Omer, passing through Poperinghe. As met by streams of refugees—a great many lying by the roadside, weary and tired—almost ready to give up the struggle. Some had built small fires around which they sat.

The next day owing to the fact that two brigades of Canadians were being withdrawn from the trenches to a rest camp, and we could not see them until they were settled—and as our time would be wasted in waiting—decided to go to Boulogne the following morning. Visited the various hospitals there and among other wounded Canadians saw Major Hanson who is well known to many in New Glasgow, and Capt. Robertson. Both these men were in the same room, and the contrast between the two men when we first entered was marked. Major Hanson was quite cheery but Capt. Robertson covered his face not wishing to be seen. Major Hanson assured him however, that we were friends, when he chatted with us. May of these men are much like wounded animals. They are sick and sorely stricken and don't want to see anybody—in fact they look upon all strangers as enemies.

There are quite a number of Hospitals in Boulogne. We visited several. At No. Seven we found Lt. Reggie Tupper son of Sir Hibbert Tupper, who was very seriously wounded. I have not heard since coming home whether he survived or not, but I would not be surprised if he had not.

At the Anglo-Canadian Hospital, equipped and maintained by Lady Hadfield, who spends all her time there in connection with the work, we saw, as I already mentioned, Major Hanson and Capt. Robertson. Both spoke highly of the work of Lady Hadfield was doing.

No. 6 Hospital is a tent outfit at which we saw quite a number of the 5th Royal Highlanders.

Late in the evening we returned to

St. Omer. The following morning we went to Ypres. On the road we passed extensive wire entanglements, and mile after mile of trenches which had been used by the Germans in their first wild rush through France. Here a great section of the country was being counter-trenched by the Allies for reserve trenches. Large numbers of Belgians were engaged in this work, and in some cases this was most gruesome work. For instance, in one trench which they endeavored to deepen, they came on a line of bodies five deep—and at the back or rear of the trenches they found the same thing—the bodies piled one over the other with but a thin covering of earth. The whole trench was thus lined with bodies for a long distance. The reason for this was that at the time the Germans had occupied the trenches the fire from the British was so continuous that they could not get their wounded or dead out—and the dead had to be disposed of in this way. While of course not knowing how many men were disposed of in this way, the number must run into the thousands, as over a great area, where the British tried to make reserve trenches the same conditions were found.

Further on the conditions were different and here a great number of Belgians were employed digging new reserve trenches, and cleaning up the ground. Many of these natives were boys from say 12 to 14 years of age—all too young to join the army.

It is quite impossible to give any adequate description of Ypres. First I may say that the main road to the front and such places as St. Julien, Hiltzie, St. Jean, etc., lay through Ypres. This road is used by the British for all their transport service to the firing line of say 10 to 15 miles in length. The city was bombarded daily by the Germans, their lines at that time being about two miles to the south east. As a result of this bombardment the streets of Ypres at times were impassable and the transport trains had to make wide detours to either side of the town to reach the lines.

A few months ago Ypres was a typical well built old time Belgian town. In the 16th century it had a population of about 200,000 and was the centre of a very flourishing clothing trade. Later the plague, war and other causes reduced the population to about one seventh that number.

It is doubtful if there is a building standing in Ypres that has not been damaged by shell fire. The main street was covered with debris from the shelling of the surrounding houses, to a depth of about two feet above the permanent pavement, and a large number of natives were employed levelling the debris off so that traffic could proceed.

The Cathedral and Cloth Hall were almost totally demolished, and when stood inside the building of the latter, nothing remained but a portion of the walls—the entire roof and inside having been destroyed by shells and subsequently by fire. It is but a short distance from the Cloth Hall to the Station House Square. In the centre of the latter there is a beautiful flower pot, probably 50 yards in diameter surrounded by a masonry wall, crowning which is a fine example of wrought iron scroll work. On one side of this a high explosive shell had fallen destroying about one-third of it, and left it looking as if an enormous goudge had bitten a piece out of the side.

About a hundred feet further to the north is a crater formed by a 42 centimeter (16½ inch) shell. This hole is 135 feet in circumference, and say 15 yards across. The depth is unknown, but an ordinary locomotive and several cars could be buried in this without any of them projecting above the level of the surrounding square. This instance may give you some idea of the tremendous damage done by a large high explosive shell. I may say that some 43 people were supposed to have been killed by that same shell. On the afternoon on which it fell, the late Capt. Guy Drummond, Lt. Cantley, and the afternoon on which it fell the late another Canadian were at lunch in a house near the square. On hearing the shell burst they finished their meal and went down towards the square. There Capt. Warren suggested the others should wait for him while he went into a store nearby to procure some trifles that he wanted. While in the shop the 42 centimeter shell exploded killing Capt. Warren and the others in the store. Drummond, Cantley and the other man escaped. This incident is perhaps illustrative of the many narrow escapes our men have, the uncertainty of life there, and that the men nearest the shell are not always killed.

While we were in the square a considerable number of wounded British Tommies were passing through in groups of three, five and eight and singly—probably 50 in all, within the space of about five minutes. Practically all had received more or less first aid attention from the Doctors in the Emergency Station close up to the lines. These men came with bandaged

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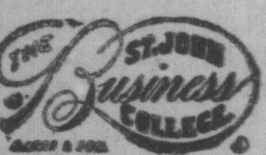
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