



THE END OF THE WINTER CAMPAIGN

(By OWEN S. WATKINS, Chaplain to the Forces.)

In the old days when the British warred in Flanders, with the fall of the year the army went into winter quarters, and waited until the spring before they again resumed activities. The line meanwhile was thinly held, the centres of the opposing forces fell into a strange sort of intimacy, passing the news, taking snuff together, exchanging jokes, and rarely, if ever, firing a shot. Since then the times have changed, and in nothing is this more marked than in the absence of all traces in this war and in the ceaselessness of the operations. Not for a moment can either side relax its vigilance, and at no point dare they weaken their line by withdrawing troops—whatever the weather conditions, however great the exposure, the line must be held, and, if possible, advanced. The result has been that throughout the winter months the British Expeditionary Force has been continually on the alert, constantly under fire, and has lived in conditions which nobody can imagine who has not actually experienced them.

True, even modern warfare, with all its scientific appliances, its guns, aircraft, motors, etc., is not independent of the weather, and anything like a general advance over the water-logged mud flats of Flanders has not been possible. But there has been no use of the historic phrase of General Jeffrey—the ceaseless "nibbling" at the enemy's line and the consequent heavy payment in human lives.

In my last article, written many weeks ago, I tried to picture the sort of life we were living, and the kind of work we were called upon to do. In the days that have followed the conditions have hardly varied, and there is little that I can add to the picture—deadly skies, bitter winds, pouring rain, driving sleet, mud which has given new meaning to Bunyan's description of the slough of Despond, and always the scream of shell overhead, the explosion in our midst, and from the trenches, night and day, the sound of rifles and machine guns.

Change of Quarters.

To the 14th Field Ambulance the New Year brought one change; instead of rotating, as in the earlier part of the winter, between Branouire, Neuve Eglise and St. Jans Chappel, we were now established permanently at Neuve Eglise. This meant that we no longer got a periodic rest at St. Jans Chappel, as did the other ambulances in the division; but it had its compensating advantages of a fixed abode and a regular routine of work. The 14th Infantry Brigade, commanded by one of our ablest brigadiers, General F. S. Maude, C. M. G., D. S. O., also now took up permanent position, continuing to hold the same line for nearly three months and providing its own relief. The immediate result that under the energetic direction of General Maude not only was our position so greatly strengthened that the enemy gave up attempting to break through, but the trenches were so improved by draining operations and other means that the troops no longer lived knee-deep in liquid mud, and the number of those suffering from frost-bitten feet dwindled, and at last ceased. The list of our casualties was now very small and quite a large proportion of these were not from the trenches, and from the billets to Neuve Eglise, for the little town was constantly under shell fire, though usually from guns of small calibre.

We look back on those days with great pleasure, though at the time they seemed very monotonous; but they were days of comparative peace, were full of service, that it was a joy to render, and the social intercourse such as we have seen little of during the campaign: The Field Ambulance was quartered in a convenient school, admirably adapted for our purpose, and its school-theatre made one of the best "dressing stations" we have yet had, the stage being used as an orderly room. In the evenings this room was utilized as a concert hall, the men of the ambulance, under the leadership of Sergeant Plume, providing most excellent programmes for the men from the trenches who were resting in the village. So successful were these concerts that Sergeant Plume was at-

tempted to more efforts—he developed into playwright and actor-manager, producing plays which won the enthusiastic applause of everybody, from the general down to the newest-joined recruit.

Tommy Atkins at Play.

Only less original and ingenious than the plays were the costumes of the actors, but everybody who knows Tommy Atkins will be familiar with his genius for "dressing up" and producing wonderful costumes out of nothing. Eventually these concerts became a regular institution. Twice a week a performance was given to a crowded house. The regiments took a hand in providing programmes and there was keen rivalry amongst the various units to "go one better" than their predecessors. They really were the best concerts I ever attended, and amidst many outstanding features perhaps the proudest pinnacle of fame was reached by the "Ambulance Mouth Organ Band," conducted by Private Vic, using instruments provided for the purpose by one of the many generous friends who have sent me gifts for the troops.

On the other evenings of the week meetings were held in "the boiler-house" of the convent, conducted sometimes by the Rev. D. P. Winniffrith (Church of England), at other times by Lieutenant Grenfell, or myself. A great help in gathering the congregation was a small portable harmonium, a present from the same lady who provided the mouth organs. The organist was Trooper C. H. Hanson, of the 11th Hussars, who, since the beginning of the war, has been my servant, has looked after me as though I had been his only child, has filled many parts, and has proved himself an excellent accompanist and soloist. The popularity of our meetings so greatly increased that if we had continued in Neuve Eglise we should have had to seek a larger room, and to many of us the memory of those gatherings is amongst the most precious of the campaign.

But during those weeks no services were so fraught with blessing and spiritual refreshment as the united service which Mr. Winniffrith and I used to hold in the concert hall on Sunday evenings. The stage was our pulpit, everybody was there—the general, his staff, the officers of the resting regiments, and the men mud-stained from the trenches. Most of those who then gathered with us have since been either killed or wounded, and it is good to remember those days of fellowship, when all doctrinal differences seemed to drop away and we knew ourselves as servants of the same Master, travelling towards the same home above.

More Troops—More Work.

For myself the days were full of varied employment, and linger as a memory of long hours in the saddle, services in barns, farmhouses, village schools; a wonderful class-meeting with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in Bailleur, and an almost equally wonderful morning service in a huge loft over a distillery. Also, with the coming of fresh troops, my duties as senior Wesleyan chaplain increased, and there were visits to be made all along the line held by British troops, sometimes on horseback, at other times by motor car, and any one of those visits would provide me with enough "copy" to fill many columns if I wrote journalistically inclined.

Especially memorable was one journey made in the car of Mr. Brock, of Exeter, who has placed himself and his car at the disposal of the British Red Cross Society and has done yeoman service throughout the war. We covered ground over which, in the earlier days, the 5th Division had fought, passed places where once we were billeted, villages in which I had seen our men fight and die, and here and there were the crosses by the roadside marking the last sleeping-places of comrades whom we had laid to rest. The memories of those days, which already seem so far away, almost overwhelmed me.

In the Trenches.

And what of the men in the trenches? Has it all been services, visitings,

concerts and fellowships? No. Through it all they have strongly held the line, and day by day there has been the constant drain of casualties; night by night the funerals near the trenches the hiss of the sniper's bullet, and the gallant "collecting" work of the doctors and bearers of the R. A. M. C. I have described it before; I could keep on describing, but I should never bring you to know one-half of the heroism that it embraces. My proudest boast will ever be that I have served side by side with these men and, in a small way, shared in their labors.

Towards the end of February I enjoyed the privilege of a week's leave, a privilege extended to those who had served three months at the front since last they had been permitted to visit England. What those days in the peace and quiet of the Old Country meant none can tell but one who for months has lived in a village which is shelled every day, and where constantly the wounded and maimed are passing through the hospital. It was all too short, but I returned to my work a new and refreshed man. I was met at Bailleur with ill news. "We've been having a bad time since you left, sir," said the man who brought my horse to the station. "They've been shelling Neuve Eglise worse than ever. Putting in high explosive as well as shrapnel, and six-inch shell of that. There's been a lot killed and wounded in the village. Then yesterday Major Pavcett, he was invalided; and just as I was leaving to come and meet you they brought in Lieutenant Martin-Row from the trenches. He was hit last night—shot through the spine, they say—whilst going out to get the wounded, but I don't quite know the rights of it." Arrived at Neuve Eglise I went straight to see Lieutenant Martin-Row, and found that the ill news was only too true. He was still his cheery self, but quite conscious that he was seriously hit; you cannot hide from the surgeon the probable consequences of his hurt. Calmly he discussed the question with his brother officers of the ambulance, and it was hard to believe that this man, who had been one of the most active and athletic of us all, was considering whether or no his fate was to be that of a hopeless cripple. Later, I rejoice to say, tidings came to us from the base that the X-Rays had revealed that the bullet had missed the spine by a hair's breadth and our comrade was progressing favorably.

I shared a billet with Major F. G. Richards, and there I found him, just returned from strenuous days in Ypres, where he had been sent on special service to advise and help field ambulances newly arrived from England—work which has earned for him the high praise and cordial thanks of the A. D. M. S. (assistant director of medical services) of the division concerned. After breakfast there came the work of evacuating the sick and wounded who had been collected during the night or come in that morning, and for a time there was a crowd and bustle in the dressing station. But at last the motor ambulances were loaded and off to deposit their loads at the nearest casualty clearing hospital, the dressing station was left with only a few "detained" cases in it, and the nursing orderlies were busily bringing things back to their usual condition of spick and span. Lieutenant Clarke, the orderly officer for the day, still continued in the building; the rest strolled across the narrow garden to the mess, and there for a while we chatted, I learning of all that had happened during my brief absence, they asking for news of the England that they, too, had hoped to visit, a hope postponed, as all leave had been stopped two days before.

High Explosives.

As we talked there came the scream of a shell in flight, and the sound of an explosion. I paused in the middle of a sentence, listening; but the others laughed. "High explosive shell, padre. Bursting down in the square, I expect. They have hit brigade headquarters twice this week, and I expect they are again trying to bag the general." It's wonderful how he sticks it. You'll find a lot of difference in that end of the village when you take a walk round. Several houses have been knocked down while you have been away, there are some huge shell holes in the square, and the place is strewn with granite sets which have torn up and thrown in all directions. A few seconds later there came a terrific explosion, the house shook to its foundations, and everybody but Major Richards and myself rushed from the room to see what had happened. Almost languidly he rose from his chair, smiling at me. "It's come at last, padre. That was in the dressing station, which means work for us to do." Together we rushed across the garden to the dressing station; a second later another shell struck the path down which we had gone, passed through the wall into the next garden, where it came to rest without exploding. The scene in the building was indescribable, and as we entered we were met by dazed, dust-covered, bleeding men coming out; a six-inch explosive shell had entered through the roof and burst inside. Lieutenant Clarke was wounded in the back of the head,

one nursing orderly was killed and three of the patients, while a number of N.C.O.'s and men were wounded. In the paved floor was a huge hole some four feet deep, and in the timbers of the roof hung the mangled body of a man who had been blown there by the explosion. Feverishly we worked searching the debris, helpers springing from all quarters—Captain Bell, Lieutenants Chesney and Hay, Sergeants Robinson and Casey, and many others doing heroes' work, with Major Richards in command. Fortunately the thing had been foreseen, and only the day before Colonel Crawford had got his officers together, and had allotted to each his task in the event of the hospital being shelled. So, whilst those cleared the wreckage, others were getting the men out of their billets, marching them to safety, and removing the horses from the zone of fire.

Ambulance Heroes.

Major Richards had just got the last wounded man on a stretcher; we had reported to him "All the wounded are now clear." And he shouted "Then all get out of here at once. Leave the dead for the present. There will be another shell in a few seconds." He walked out of the door into the school yard, and I passed out of the other door into the same yard. As I stepped out there was a sudden roar behind me; the whole creation seemed to rock, and building appeared to have collapsed like a house of cards—bricks, glass, plaster, beams showered in all directions; another shell was into the midst of us. I didn't trouble about Major Richards. I knew he was out of the building; but Lieutenants Chesney and Hay were still there when I had left, and I couldn't find them. It was too horrible. Then Lieutenant Chesney came running. "Come at once, padre; Major Richards is dying, and is asking for you. Stay with him." These, as we hurried to the house close by to which they had carried him: "As you know, Hay and I were in the building; so was Bell. We were thrown in all directions. Bell is badly wounded in the arm; Hay and I are alright; but poor Richards met it as he went into the yard, and knows he's got his number. A lot of our bearers and orderlies have also been hit." As a matter of fact the concussion has ruptured both of Lieutenant Hay's ear-drums, leaving him permanently deaf. There were nineteen wounded in all.

The Awful Toll of War.

I will not dwell on what followed. Major Richards died as he had lived, bravely and with no thought of himself in his mind. He was a fine Christian, a gallant gentleman, and we all feel we shall never see his like again. We laid him—and those others to whom the call had come—to rest in the churchyard of Neuve Eglise. The service had to be held at night, for all through the day the enemy continued to shell the village, and it was as much as a man's life was worth to approach the place. It was the largest "active service funeral" I have ever seen, for he was greatly loved, and from the general downwards all felt that we had lost one of our bravest and best. Mr. Winniffrith and I both took part in the service, for we knew he would have wished it so. Then sadly in the darkness we found our way to the farm out of the shelled area which, for the time, was to be our new home. As we set in the farm kitchen and realized that of the twelve officers who had mobilized with the field ambulance last August only four were left—Colonel Crawford, Lieutenant Grenfell, Mr. Winniffrith and myself—the sadness deepened, and our hearts were very sore. Now only three are left, for, a few days later Mr. Winniffrith was invalided to England. Others have since come to us, and again the ambulance is full strength, but we do not forget the comrades with whom we spent so many strenuous months, and we know that No. 14 can never be quite the same again.

For a while we lingered in the neighborhood of Neuve Eglise, then moved farther north, and were billeted in the convent at Locre. Here once again we took up the thread of our work, collecting wounded from around Mount Kemmel, and spending many strenuous nights and days. Of the new arrivals who joined us, the most noteworthy were Major Hannafin, who was transferred from No. 13 Field Ambulance, and the Rev. D. F. Carey (Church of England), whose work at Sandhurst amongst the cadets has made his name known and loved by the army. We anticipated much joy in our labors, for the position was almost ideal, the resting troops were easily accessible, the convent was being used as a temporary convalescent hospital, and there seemed every prospect of a long stay. But it was not to be; there was other work for us to do, and in a little over a week we were on the move—but that is another story. The week, however, was well spent; it included Easter, and the Good Friday services especially were memorable. Not lightly to be forgotten, either, was the visit of the Bishop of London, en route to spend Easter Day with his own Territorial regiment farther south. His words will linger in the hearts of all who heard them for many days.

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