

## POST OFFICE OF THE ARMY AN ORGANIZATION WHICH COPE WITH VAST AMOUNT OF MAIL

Nothing a "Tommy" Likes Better Than to Get a Letter or a Parcel From Home—Difficulties Which Often Confront the Authorities, the Addressees Sometimes Living in Almost Inaccessible Dugouts.

(By W. G. Fitz-Gerald.)

Of all war's social phases, I think this should have first place, so near, yet so far, from the home. It is the first time that every man in the first line, and more or less directly, is home in the Empire. Our armies already run into millions with Overseas contingents which are armies in themselves. The matter of letters and parcels is, therefore, a prime consideration to which Government is keenly alive.

So, after food and munition, the roads of the war zone know no more precious freight than the postal lorries, thumping and splashing through seas of mire in a foreign land, losing their way at night, with all lights out, and ghastrly rockets aloft—those merciless eyes of hostile guns. These postal lorries are often ditched, sometimes under here shell fire, too, with their sacks ablaze and drivers crouching at the wheel, racing the cumbersome vehicle to safety and the common rendezvous. Heroes are not confined to the firing line, as I shall presently show.

In one day half a million parcels were posted for troops in France and Flanders, besides a million and

and overcome. The trench postman sets out after dark, groping his way across No Man's Land, feeling for trip-wires with fearful feet, tumbling into rain-filled craters and dropping like one shot when the flares sail up in wicked constellations, and crackling salvos sweep the ploughed havoc so to foil a possible surprise.

Men of the postal section of the Engineers are wounded and killed on their rounds, yet they persevere. They work up-trench after dark with the ration parties. The mail's in! flashes through the human warren. The horrors of the war fall off, expectant love lights the war-worn theatre of pain and blood. Wistful eyes and dreaming hearts in fond accord with dear ones at home await news.

When were letters ever seized as they are seized here? When were parcels so eagerly opened—not so much for the creature comforts they contain, as for what they mean to the lonely soldier? And every soldier is "lonely" on mail day. His body may be in the ditch, but his soul yearns homeward with invincible sway.

### Organization of Postal Service.

This postal service, all told, now numbers one hundred officers and four thousand five hundred men. It makes no claim at all for itself, being a military branch well aware that not by food alone, nor by munitions, doth the sturdy campaigner live. He must hear from home, he must ruminate on local news, from a "siege of positions" to brood upon life's elements—the summer sun and the grass and the trees, loved faces and places, now far off and doubly dear.

The Postmaster-General himself went to the Front on a tour of organization, after inspecting the machinery of collection at home. He visited general headquarters and all the bases, the rail-head post-offices, and many of the field branches.

There last in their turn send out the laden lorries which delight the men in the village billets. Here a sorting station is established. It may be at the wayside or in a deserted farm well within the "unhealthy" zone. Men of the Service Corps carry in the sacks and shoot their contents on the clean straw. The busy sorters kneel, haply with candles stuck in bottles to light their labor. It involves eye-strain

and quick selective judgment. Meanwhile, guns thunder. Shells roar, and whizz and screech overhead. It is no uncommon thing for the post office to be unroofed, or smashed. Then there is a hurried adjournment underground. Dug-out or bomb-proof is the new post office. The whole system is one of subdivision, down to the smallest unit of our army. Then the trench postman goes his rounds. Try to visualize that round. It is usually done at night. The whole system is a marvel of smooth efficient working from the home collection to the tactful censoring of Tommy's prompt and grateful reply.

What was the origin of this admirable field service? It is worth more than a moment's retrospect. In 1882 the 24th Middlesex—the old Post Office Rifles, a corps made up entirely of post office servants—sent out a contingent to look after the army's mail in the Nile campaign. Again, in the Sudan, we find the Army Postal Corps gliding among the troops in those endless sands.

Lord Haldane's Army Act brought into being the postal section of the Royal Engineers, who now handle parcels by the hundred tons and letters that run into millions for our scattered forces by sea and land. Of course the work grew with our armies. Bear always in mind that this is literally a "world-war"—war in East Africa, where lions invade the trenches; war in the Near East; great garrisons in Egypt, and British prisoners scattered in enemy camps all the way from Doberitz to Damascus.

The Prisoners' Mail. Our prisoners' mail, by the way, is passed on to International Committees in Geneva and Rotterdam in Holland. There is also official and semi-official aid. Thus our Legation in Bern sends bread each week. The Prisoners of War Help Committee dispatched 80,000 parcels for Christmas delivery. Then the Red Cross Society maintains an Inquiry Department of seeing to it that each as almost to merit the name of a private post office.

I must not forget the reading matter which is sent to relieve trench boredom by night and day. Newspaper owners are very generous in this way, and send out tens of thousands of copies daily. The Grand Fleet is looked after by the London Chamber of Commerce. Each week this body sends off 100,000 papers and periodicals, packed in bundles according to the size of ship and the taste in reading of its crew. With regard to books and more permanent literature, we have the Camps Library, under Sir Edward Ward—that tactful co-ordinator of comforts, and Director-General of Voluntary Organizations.

One result of the Postmaster-General's visit to headquarters was the definite enlistment of the post office in the collection of books and magazines from private donors, and the forwarding of these to the Camps Library sorting depot in Westminster. Over two million books and magazines have already been sent. The dispatch is now about 100,000 a week, and the literary range from Plato in Greek to Mark Twain in sheer American.

For this trench comfort the housewife is asked to clear out her shelves and deposit a goodly pile of books and periodicals on the nearest post office counter, unaddressed and unwrapped.

Let us try to form some idea of the postal labors which all these comforts and letters entail. Apart from private supplies, think of those endless funds due to kindly forethought and organized effort on the Imperial scale. Otago and Wellington have their funds in mind; Brisbane and Melbourne, too! Sydney and Perth and the far-flung Isles. Newer did the Post Office play so vital a part in the crisis of national life.

Letters for the Fleet. To the Fleet alone go 4,500,000 letters a week, and 5,000 parcels. Over a thousand military sorters deal with the Army's mail in London. Another 1,500 work the Field Post Office and deliver correspondence at the Front. Besides these staffs, one must include A.S.C. drivers and porters, as well as a host of civilian helpers. Well might the Postmaster-General tell the House of Commons that this vast system calls for efficient organization. "And the rapidity and certainty with which letters and parcels reach the Navy and Army give great satisfaction."

The Army's G.P.O. has long outgrown the busy quarters with which it began at Mount Pleasant Branch, so four acres of Regent's Park were sacrificed. Beautiful velvet turf was torn up on the east side, and a temporary town erected, a rather unlovely town, but one of rare worth—150,000 square feet of wooden, zinc-roofed buildings that echo with Army business. And the town is still growing.

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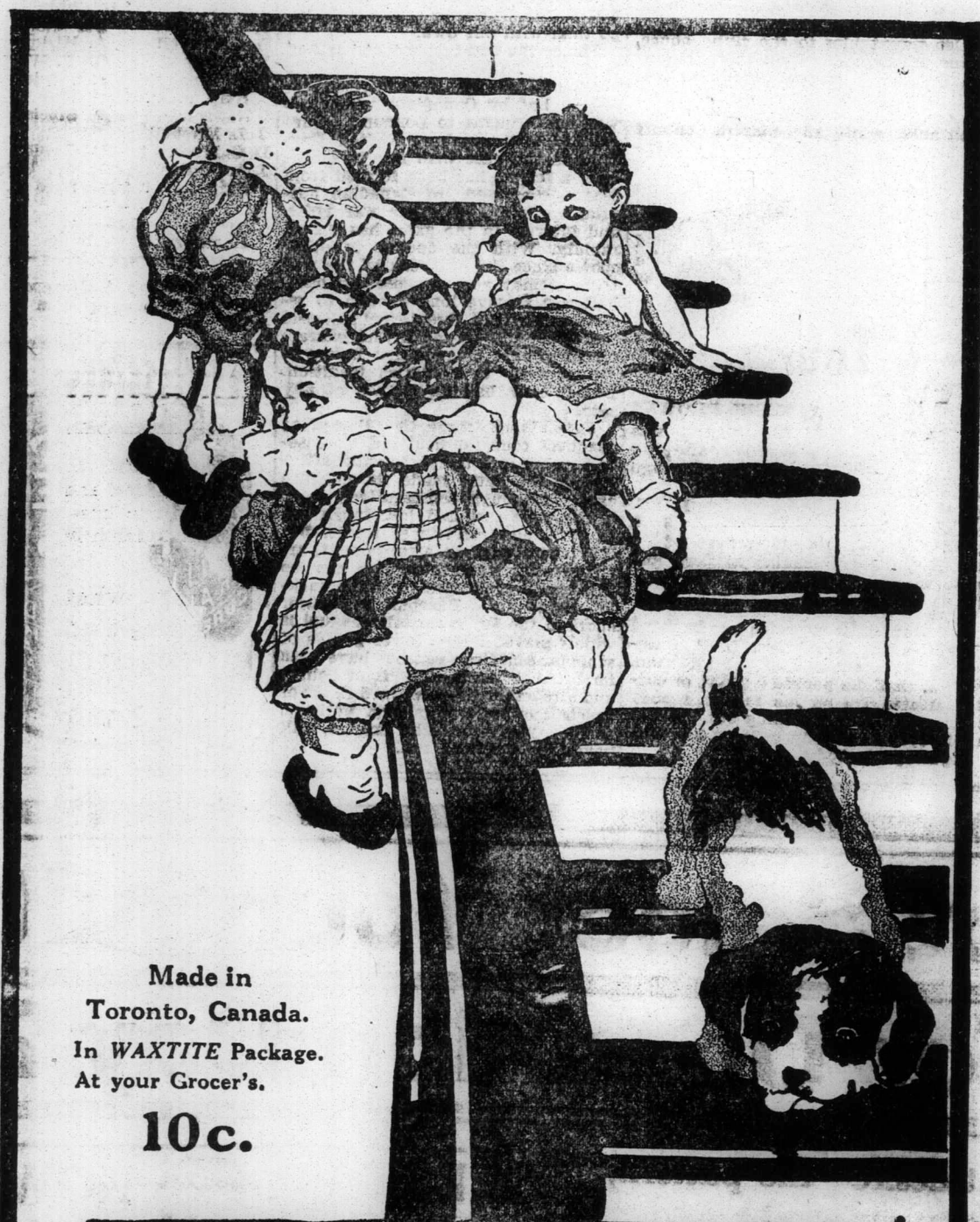


And had been vacant for some time. And Dad was getting mighty peeved about it because he had put up those houses for an investment, not for pleasure. And he was getting hotter every day when I happened to think that a

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