

"To some of you chaps who have just been out a short time—say anything from five to ten years, began the General, "it might be interesting to hear how we beat the Hun underground, back in the early part of the war. You all know how we pushed him back out of France and Belgium—the wonderful infantry attacks and artillery shows we put on until he 'dug in' here, on his Berlin line and held us at bay.

"I am going to tell you, in as few words as possible, omitting many of the details, what was done under the ground by what were known then as the Mining or Tunnelling Companies. It is so long ago now that they are not only forgotten, but most of you chaps have never heard tell of them. Very few remember now the work that was done in this line, back in '15, '16, and '17.

"To make a long, tiresome story as short as possible, the War Office was badly in need of men—mining men—to wage war with old Fritz under the ground. A number of Canadian Companies were formed, and rushed out to Flanders and France to act in conjunction with the Royal Engineers for this particular work. At first they had nothing but uninteresting defensive work to occupy their time, while on their right and left, in the adjoining trenches, were the R.E.s, who by this time were just as good—with a little to spare—as the Boche was, despite his early start.

"Our Canadian miners, however, took readily to their new task, and it was not long before they had trenches to themselves, with orders to go ahead and strafe Fritz to the best of their ability. These 'gentlemen' just mentioned became aware of the fact soon, too, quite often to their sorrow, and our men were in the best of spirits. There is nothing that can please an old miner better than a good square fight—and there were some good fights too, down there, thirty, forty, fifty to one hundred and fifty feet under the surface. Those were the days! The Hun blew us and we blew him, and the fight went on below, just as fiercely as above on the surface. At that time, the honours were about even, but they were not always to be, as a great day of reckoning was coming for the enemy—a day when he was to be surprised as he was never surprised before.

"Did we lose many men? you ask. Well," replied the General, "we had casualties certainly. It was inevitable, working as we did in close touch with our opponents all the time. But if we had our reverses, we had our successes too, to buck the boys up, and, knowing that we were beginning to get the upper hand, it gave us the necessary incentive, and we kept on digging. We dug and dug, and our galleries nosed their way closer and closer to the German lines.

"The scheme entailed miles and miles of underground galleries, and working twenty-four hours a day, our progress counted at from one-half to three feet per hour, perhaps you can grasp the magnitude of the operation. Twelve feet per day was about the minimum, and was made in wet, falling ground, absolutely unadapted to this sort of work. The earth in this kind of ground fell in time after time, leaving large, gaping holes above the face of the gallery, so that we often wondered if it would not run through from the very surface.

"I wish that I could give you some sort of mind-picture of what it was really like. It was well nigh incredible. The men toiled and toiled, wet to the skin, and covered with dirt and clay. Every shovelful of dirt meant a bag filled, and this bag to be hauled through the galleries for yards and yards—the maximum haul being perhaps three-quarters of a mile! Of course, it was impossible to stand up in the galleries, the average

height being about four feet. Added to the discomfort of pulling the small truck, used for carting the bags out from the face of the gallery, necessitating a crouching, half-bent position, was the bad air. Ventilation was a big problem, as there was no way of getting pure air to the men down there, except through the hose from the air-pump, worked by hand on the surface. To give you an idea of what the air was like, there was so little oxygen in those galleries that a candle would not burn, and electric plants had to be installed in the shaft-house or in a dugout built off it for this purpose. The depth of these galleries varied from forty to one hundred and twenty-five feet, so you can see what we were up against as far as ventilation was concerned.

"It was in ——— 19—, that we were called together for a conference, and the whole scheme was laid before us. Up to this time we were working according to plans passed on to us from Army Headquarters, and as much in the dark nearly as to the ultimate object in view, as the infantry in the trenches, who looked on us as some uncanny, weird sort of tribe, who were a necessary evil, and had to be endured, whether they wanted us in 'their' trenches or not.

"Needless to say, the scheme was an absolute success. The places and dates you may possibly have heard tell of, but none of you can imagine—even in your wildest dreams—the stupendous crash that followed the blowing of these mines we had laid, on that quiet June night, twenty-three years ago now. We had done our work well. Everything, to the most minute detail, went off according to schedule. There was not a hitch of any sort. Nobody, except those directly concerned, had the slightest knowledge of what was going to happen, and I may tell you that for those of us who were employed for any length of time on this work it was a great and fitting triumph. Nothing to compare with the great upheaval that followed the firing of the mines, had ever happened before. We all expected big things, but we were surprised ourselves, more than we cared then to acknowledge. The great trembling shock, followed by the tongues of fire that leapt hundreds of feet in the air, and the falling stones and earth! It was almost paralyzing in its effect on the mind. 'But, Lord, it was great, and we were amply repaid for the years of work that we spent on it. To the Germans—or those who were fortunate enough to survive—it was as though an earthquake had been sent to punish them. I often wonder what their mining engineers, those wise, be-spectacled, old savants thought when the news reached them, and how many went back to Berlin in disgrace for the manner in which they had been fooled. It was the greatest night of my life, I think, the supreme moment. Our work was finished. We had done our bidding and well. The fight was over, and we had won. That was all that seemed to matter then. It was as though our lives stopped there.

"On the following morning we visited those pits of hell. With a feeling of pride that might well be forgiven, we looked down into those gaping craters. Holes in the ground they were, some well over a hundred feet in depth and four times that width. How many of the enemy lay buried around in the débris, we could not imagine, and how many were blown to pieces, or sent home to spend what was left of their lives in an asylum ward, we did not think about, nor did we care."

At this point the General stopped for a minute, took off his glasses, and closed his eyes, as if deep in thought. Not a word was spoken by any of those around the fireplace, but he soon broke the silence again.