

ARMENTIÈRES AND THE SOMME



Malthus' story is both personal and universal, with a depth of assessment that marks it out as a soldier's memoir.

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Cecil Malthus

had been thrown out of the shallow trench but otherwise neglected. Among them we found one living, and called for the stretcher-bearers for him. I tried to give him a drink of water, and asked him 'Wie geht's?', but he could only murmur 'Kalt, kalt', and within a few minutes he was dead. This was the only time I ever spoke to an enemy soldier. We had seen a number of them in a 'cage' at Fricourt but hadn't been allowed to go near them. I made no scruple of searching his pockets, and found a letter from his wife, which I kept for some years. I wrote to her later from England but had no reply. I also took his safety razor, having just lost my own, and used it for many years. Many of our men made no bones about stripping the dead, friend or foe, of money, watches, etc., though there was a strong superstition that this form of looting was unlucky.

16 September proved to be our worst day, though we had not even reached the front line. The morning was fine and sunny, with the guns of both sides at it hammer and tongs. This of course was routine, and the reader must imagine the exchange as continuous and extremely heavy almost everywhere. The only mitigating factor was that the muddy ground often softened the impact of the big German 5.9s so that they failed to explode. The 1st Wellington Battalion was to assault the Grove Alley line recently evacuated by the Dinks, and our battalion was instructed to move forward in their wake and take over the vacated trench, west of Flers. The intention was that we should then, in what was called a leap-frogging movement, pass through the Wellingtons in Grove Alley and attack the next German line, called Goose Alley. We were just behind the crest of the ridge. All this country was hardly more than undulating, not really hilly, but still there was some cover behind the crest, with full exposure beyond. Our company duly got itself into 'artillery formation': 9 and 11 Platoons were to lead off abreast, about a hundred yards apart, while 10 and 12 were to follow 150 yards behind, 10 following a line midway between 9 and 11, and 12 a line out on the right that would bring us abreast of 11. It was considered safer, in the face of high-explosive shelling, for each platoon to remain bunched together while advancing rather than adopt a more open formation. But

it was a gamble: the eggs were all in one basket. Normally the most important injunction for the infantryman was 'Don't bunch.'

With every officer counting the seconds on his watch, we waited for zero hour, then moved on in good order over the crest. But there must have been some miscalculation. Perhaps our orders had been belated or had been an afterthought. The Wellingtons had already carried out their attack, with complete success, and the rumpus of shelling had even begun to abate. But the enemy had been fully alerted, and the moment we appeared over the ridge every gun was on us. We didn't have even a covering barrage to keep down the enemy's machine-gun and rifle fire, and we had a good 200 yards to go over very heavy, broken ground. 9 and 11 Platoons sprinted for it and got through tolerably well, though their losses were heavy enough. But 10 and 12 met the full weight of a terrible bombardment, plus a sizzling stream of machine-gun fire. My most horror-stricken moment was when I saw a heavy shell burst fair in the middle of 10 Platoon. A dozen men emerged from the smoke, reeling, staggering and collapsing in every direction. More than half the platoon was lost in that moment, seven of them killed.

My own platoon had straggled out somewhat. I stumbled and fell into a shell-hole, scrambled out and instantly felt a terrific whack on the side of the head that knocked me flying back again. I think I lost consciousness, but only for a moment. I came back up from black depths of darkness, panting heavily, and found myself staggering forward again, in blind terror, to reach the comparative safety of the trench in front. In such a moment the primitive instinct emerges: 'Keep close to the herd.'

I got there some time after the rest. One of the men looked at me curiously, suspecting my panic, and asked: 'Been out in the rain, sarge?' I told him I had been hit on the head, and he answered, 'Sure enough, your tin hat has had a bash.' I took it off and found it was heavily dented. My head was not even bruised, but I had a nasty headache for the rest of the day. Our company must have lost nearly half its strength in those few disastrous minutes. The shelling was now directed on our trench, but did remarkably little damage and slowly died away. We were still due for

the further advance, but were spared it because the British division on our right had failed to make any headway.

This terrible setback reminded me strongly of 8 May at Cape Helles, on Gallipoli. In both cases it seemed we could have gone forward during the night and dug in with little loss. I am convinced that is what we should have done at Helles, where the enemy artillery, like our own, was very limited; but here, certainly, our command had good reason, owing to the heavy weight of artillery fire, to be chary of placing too many men in a constricted area. Perhaps we would have fared well enough but for faulty co-ordination.

The ordeal left its mark on our men. It could be noted especially in the deep pouches of fatigue under their eyes. Such a period of strain is incredibly exhausting, even for the most resilient.

At dusk we safely completed a move to our right, where we took over the trenches at Box and Cox and extended them, working till midnight with pick and shovel to complete a memorable day. The trenches were in the area of the 41st Division, but had been 'lent' to us because the division had suffered heavy losses. The other companies of our battalion must have been relatively fortunate, since we were still considered capable of taking over a relatively long front. Box and Cox lay out in front of Flers, just a little to the right. It was flat open ground there, with a clear view in every direction. Sugar beet had been the main crop in the area, but now grass and weeds prevailed.

Rain set in late in the night, and the next day was showery, with swift clouds racing straight along our line under a dark thunderous sky. A truce seemed to have been declared by mutual consent, and I can remember nothing of note of the day except that when rations arrived at night they proved to be rather disorganised, and the condensed milk ration for the whole platoon consisted of one tiny tin. I drank it secretly myself. This was reminiscent of the times on Gallipoli when we got an egg issue of one per 12 or 15 men. We suspected it had started as one per man, but been heavily reduced by pilfering on the way up the hill. On the Somme the commissariat was wonderfully efficient as a rule.

The following day there was still heavier rain and it turned quite cold.

We were reduced to a miserable condition, with deep mud everywhere and no greatcoats or blankets. For night after night, of course, we hardly slept. Sleep was a matter of bits and pieces amounting to very little. One night there was a thin cover of ice on a path beside us. We thought with longing of fires, dry clothes and hot baths. We became unspeakably weary, dreary and sick of it all.

The truce continued, except that one of our field batteries, in a moment of misguided zeal, opened up with shrapnel and mistook our trench for the enemy line. Before it could be stopped we had several casualties. One shell burst right over our bay, and the man sitting next to me, Bert Cresswell, leapt to his feet with a choking roar. A great piece of shell had entered his chest. We held him in our arms as he struggled, but in a moment he gave a last deep shudder and died. Bert had been a long time with us, and had been a good soldier. He was one of many who, as I have said, were strongly attracted to Zoé Duriez, and he envied me because I seemed to be her favourite, although there was no ill feeling. He lay in the trench with us till after dark, when the stretcher-bearers came. By that time his face was the colour of dry dust and his body was rigid. Poor Bert, he was one of the best.

Heavy shelling was resumed that night, but without much damage. The weather slowly improved and became, and remained, fine. For the next couple of days there was not much activity – so little, in fact, that we became puzzled and disquieted at the total lack of life in the enemy's lines. By the end of the day we were taking all sorts of chances in the way of exposing ourselves, strolling about over the open ground without a shot being fired. We got a strong impression that the enemy in our vicinity had completely withdrawn, and that, if there had been any point in doing so, we could have walked over and occupied his trenches. It was an eerie feeling. I suggested taking over a patrol that night, but Captain Dron was convinced there was a catch in it, and he was probably right in thinking the enemy was just inviting us to make a foolish move. Probably the trenches were quite strongly held, at least at night, and the Germans were hoping to size up our strength and catch us off our guard with a local counter-attack. At any rate, for two sunny days there was

improved much. On the other hand, the officer in charge of the raid (I went through to him several times in the front line) was equally in a state of dither, jabbering contradictory instructions from which I had to select the least unreasonable to take back to the major. Yet this officer subsequently had a brilliant career and was rightly acclaimed as one of the best soldiers New Zealand produced in the war. That night one could hardly have divined any difference between the two men, and yet

*Oh, the little bit more and how much it is,
And the little bit less and what worlds away!*

But then Joyce Cary caps that with a striking expression of the opposite view of human worth: 'One reed shaking in the wind may be some inches taller than another, but what are inches in the abyss of eternal contemplation?'³

After pursuing the question so far, I wonder whether after all it will have any bearing in the future. Perhaps our Gallipoli and Flanders war will take its place in history as the last in which there remained a trace of the old traditional glamour. Hitler's war was all abysmal horror and mass slaughter, except in a few places like the Western Desert, where it retained a slight degree of humaneness and decency. And future war will be inconceivably vile – remote-controlled, impersonal, inhuman. What part will be left for individual courage and initiative to play? Our war was terrible and hateful, and I have certainly written of it without any wish to minimise its horrors. But I would not deny that it had in full measure what Stevenson called 'the incommunicable thrill of things'. It had also its moments of compensation, its happy sense of good fellowship, so intensely felt, which was totally different from the modern whooping-it-up to drown your sorrows. It is the keen relish of the brighter moments amid the bleakness that explains a certain degree of unexpected nostalgia, and the fondness for old soldiers' reunions. I certainly could not say with Edmund Blunden, 'The trouble with me is that I stopped living in 1916.'

A far worse experience than mine (and of course there were many such) must have occasioned that moving statement.

'The cooperation of infantry and artillery in this attack,' says Sir Ian Hamilton writing about the afternoon advance on 8 May 1915 at Helles, on Gallipoli, 'was perfect, the timing of the movement being carried out with great precision. Some companies of the New Zealand regiment did not get their orders in time, but acting on their own initiative they pushed on as soon as the heavy howitzers ceased firing, thus making the whole advance simultaneous.'

Oh yes, pretty good show; we were improving all right. Nothing like practice. We were already better than we had been in the morning. In another 18 months, after the Somme, we would be quite good at the bloody game. Then we – the collective, or selective, 'we' that goes marching on – would experience the mess in Messines and the bogs of Passchendaele, not without loathing, but as men who had learnt to tolerate all stupidities. At least by then we would have no need to be ashamed of our own incompetence.

Later we would develop into the wingless wonders, the Kiwis of Minqar Qaim, El Alamein and Cassino, fighting, cursing and drinking, ruthless and compassionate, deathless and godless, loving our brother the enemy and loving to play him at an even bloodier game than that of the Daisy Patch or the Somme.

And later again, would we *really* crucify Christ in the atomic war? The war to end war? The war to reduce mankind to idiot deformity? If we were asked to in the name of humanity, we probably would, and probably should. Let us only pray the need does not arise.

'Soon it will be 50 years,' I wrote on the last page of *Anzac*, 'since we landed on Gallipoli.' Now it is more than 50 years since Armentières and the Somme. There are still many of us who remember those dreary, stirring months. We can muster several hundred when we meet at our reunions. And with us always, present in our memories, are the good friends who died in battle 50 years ago. Their various names are legion to every one of us. I must give you my own list – a roll call of most of

the friends of my youth:

Doug Fraser, Dan O'Connor, Geoff. Fraser, Len Serpell, Micky Maze, Norm. Dunsford, Henry Cotter, Bill Simmers, Jack Dalgleish – all from our first XV:

Let us add to her story some new deed of glory.

...Jim Jennings, Jack Mansell, Shandy Porter, Keith Baker, Charlie Bain, Ray Goodsir, Fred Livingstone, Arthur Boyd – they gave a meaning to our university motto:

Ergo tua rura manebunt.

...Porky Littlejohn, Bert Warnock, Allan Farquhar, Canny Cannington, Reg Thompson, Hector Guy, Bert Cresswell – Diggers and cobbers, gay and undaunted:

Vos moeiture salutamus.

All go unto one place: all are of the dust and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward...?

Who indeed? Who, when we are dead, will remember them?

And now I hardly dare complete the quotation. Will the future finish it as Ecclesiastes does?

...and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward?

Ecclesiastes 3:24

Notes

Introduction

- 1 The Triple Alliance, the secret alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, should not be confused with the Triple Entente, the understanding between Britain, France and Russia that developed as a counterbalance.
- 2 Especially the early chapters of *Griff nach der Weltmacht*.

Chapter One

- 1 Our officers rose to the occasion and ironically addressed us as 'Gentlemen'. This jest didn't pall for the duration of the voyage, but reality clicked back into place when we arrived at Marseilles.

Chapter Two

- 1 'The soil of France was smiling and fair.'
- 2 There I had a taste of French coffee and brioche, the first of many hundreds I have enjoyed over the years.
- 3 Actually I spent it in hospital in Dunedin.

Chapter Three

- 1 I was unaware that for the previous week – 19–25 April, Easter week – all British Army and Navy leave had been cancelled because 'the railway could not cope with soldiers on leave in addition to the holiday traffic'. This preference given to civilians was naturally very bitterly resented in the armed services. To have had Easter at home would have been doubly welcome to them.
- 2 Allan Law of Te Awamutu wrote to me on 8 May, 1967:

Some time ago I read your book on Gallipoli (borrowed, I regret