
LOCAL CHAPLAIN TELLS OF WAR'S REALITIES

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The following letter, received by Mr. J. G. C. Wood, M.P.P., of Alberni, from Capt. the Rev. W. Barton, chaplain of the 7th Battalion, will be read with great interest by all Victorians. Capt. Barton writes:

Since leaving Victoria, one's ideas concerning "active service" have been turned upside down and battered to pieces. When you stand on the pavement or sit in a store and see the lads "dressed in khaki" marching down the street while training for the front, you do not think – and he seldom thinks – of what it all means. I know I didn't. Then came the time that we paraded at Macaulay Point. The people cheered – the men cheered – the bands played, sometimes two of them together and once all three, different tunes, and the dust floated, danced and accompanied with its own silent persistence the hot, perspiring Tommies all the way into town.

How those cheers worried me! It was such an outburst of almost gaiety. Then came the school children in front of the Empress Hotel. Some of us heard them singing and they did their part splendidly. I have had many impulses to write and thank them. Funny too, the psychology of the moment. On the corner of two of the principal thoroughfares stand four men apart, wishing to appear blasé – hands in pockets and a graceful droop to their cigarettes. 'Hullo, Charlie, what, you going? cheer oh!' absolutely ignorant of the causes and consequences of the war. Not so, however, with the hundreds and thousands of women that lined the way. Many handkerchiefs were being used to wipe away a silent tear and then being waved vigorously. Anxiety and pride was clearly visible in the many faces. My personal desire was to dodge away and get on board as a stowaway. You see, I had read so much and heard a great deal more about the effect and range of the modern weapons of war. The Boer War seemed only yesterday. Rapid and machine gun fire had been so very vividly described that I felt a terrible depression as I marched off. Unless the blessing of peace came soon, how many of these brave lads would never come back to Victoria, and how many more would be sore wounded and maimed.

Valcartier Camp was criticized and condemned just as many other things have been by those who were not in a position to judge because they only knew some of the facts. One of Lord Kitchener's dictums is now very frequently quoted. It is as follows: "Four-fifths of the stories and reports – so-called – from the front are untrue and the rest inaccurate." This has now become a truism.

Valcartier Camp a Wonder

Valcartier was wonderful. Never has such a camp been attempted in Canada before. It was a case of planning a city one week and having it fully occupied the next with 35,000 men and nearly 10,000 horses, not to mention accommodation for mechanical transports and ordnance wagons and stores sufficient for at least three days' rationing. Undoubtedly it could be improved upon, but at all events it was infinitely better than our camp at West Down South as far as many conveniences were concerned. It would be unfair to compare them as a whole, because of the many differences in situation and supplies, roads and numbers.

Many find now that the time spent at Valcartier has been very helpful. For one thing the Brigadiers were almost without training as Brigadiers. The Division needed welding. The process of welding, even of engineering a spirit of competition and comparison in the work of the battalions and units, was needed as part of the training. Certainly the primary need was for officers to know the men. In the Medical Department much was accomplished by way of organisation and preparation. Their work was magnificent. Take two points only: (1) Every man in the Canadian Contingent was medically examined, even to the Padres; (2) ninety-nine per cent received two jabs of anti-typhoid serum.

The work of organisation and training the regimental stretcher-bearers and ambulance bearers was continued and completed at Salisbury Plain. It should be very clearly understood that the period of training both at Valcartier and Salisbury Plain was necessary and of tremendous importance, and further, in my humble opinion, it was much better to impart it in England than on the Continent. Until after we had been in the trenches at Ypres and previously even at Fleurbaix, many men expressed the opinion that they would far rather have been in Flanders than Salisbury Plain, but when they had pumped water and stood in mud to the knees for a night of two, they agreed that the Tommmies who had been there through the Winter had had the harder experience. Stilll more was this the case when they had been shelled in their billets when resting after their spell in the trenches. Yes, we had a very trying, tedious and wet Winter undoubtedly, and besides many men suffered from damp, with colds, coughs and worse. The conditions were those of war, the men knew this and commenced to show their true spirit by bearing it cheerfully and with so little "grousing" that the General publicly expressed his satisfaction to the troops.

Unfounded Criticism

I think what hurt so many Canadians were the many false reports spread about their conduct. There was some drunkenness, but not so much as is commonly found amongst any community of 30,000 young men. It must also be remembered that when these men went on leave they were almost invariably at once tempted to drink and worse. Their gallant conduct, absolute steadiness and reliability in the face of the enemy, an enemy far worse than any lion or tiger, has proved up the hilt their true worth . Like Valcartier, the critics did not know the facts.

Briefly to sum up this stage in our movements. When we left Victoria we were a small unit, partially trained and equipped. When we left Valcartier we were an Army Division with full equipment and Brigadiers capable of handling their brigades, and colonels and officers who knew their battalions; field hospitals and general hospitals with ambulances and staffs trained and ready; transport and ordnance prepared for their work of supply. In fact, a Division ready for training.

Salisbury Plain welded the division together with artillery now in a position to take the field. Perhaps the most difficult work was the preparation of the artillery and their training in the mud of Salisbury Plain. Too high praise cannot be given to this arm of the Service, who through the whole Winter were in tents and their horses under the rain and clouds of the sky, with feet in mud and often in water.

First March in Belgium

Our first march from ____ to ____ in Belgium, over the paved cobble stones, about 14 miles, was very trying. The day was warm and damp, the road slippery. The men did not know where they were going or how far. They never do know; such information is never imparted. They were in Winter

marching order, i.e., the added weight of "teddy bear" coats, I should say fifty pounds with rifle and ammunition. Try it if you want to understand what it is like. Mind, you can't stop when you like and adjust the load. You can't take your overcoat off and your coat. You march according to orders, and stop when the word is given to halt. It was dark when the billets were reached. That darkness was a blessing in some ways, because we could not see how tough we looked – all were so tired that they did not stop to see how sore their feet were, and by the next morning they were better.

Then, too, there was so much of interest to be seen. Our billet had some fine holes made by Allemande shells. Other regiments were quartered in the town close at hand, ready to talk about their experiences in the trenches. Night came and we went up to the trenches. Part of the road – four hundred yards – was about eight inches deep in mud in the shallow spots, and about as nasty a piece of walking in the dark as I want. Here we met a stretcher party bringing out the dead body of a sergeant shot through the head in the morning. Nobody could leave the trenches in daylight. Proceeding about eight hundred yards we came to the first line of barbed wire entanglements, built by the finest body of men in our armies – the Engineers. Here we thought we came under fire, becase bullets commenced to fly over and around us. It was slightly foggy and both sides knew that work parties would be out, so both were shooting and sniping over the ground. We know now and appreciate better the danger, for on our way into the trench a bullet struck a brick under Lieut. Jessop's foot, a piece of the brick flying up and striking him in the face. He as walking just in front. The next night our guide, a splendid young sergeant was killed whilst with our work party. In this place not long after, with his work party, we lost our brave and gallant friend and officer, Lieut. Herbert Boggs, besides two of our men shot in the trenches. There was more than mud to meet and deal with in the trenches. The snipers with telescope sights on their rifles and the rifles on fixed rests were to be dealt with. From another part of the trench a friend would be examining the opposite loopholes in the sandbags: a rife barrel could be seen at 250 yards and a bullet put through a three inch hole. No heads could be shown or a bullet came crackling past. Our boys soon acquired the "trench stoop."

In Trenches in France

We didn't stay very long in this part of Belgium. Our next work in the trenches was in France. Here we took over our own line of trenches. The lessons learnt with the East Lancashires and the King's Royal Rifles were invaluable. The men were now in much better shape and took hold splendidly. The Germans shelled the small town almost every day. At times it was quite warm. True, there were not many casualties but there were some in the town. In the trenches also we had casualties almost every day. We were saddened by the death of Major Rigby, who was shot in the trenches and killed instantly.

The work of collecting the wounded at night by the first advanced dressing station ambulances – the transport taking up the day's rations, water, material for work parties, was all attended with a certain amount of danger, but always performed cheerfully and carefully.

How little one understands by reading reports the actual conditions at the trenches. The trenches aren't in a straight line, but zig-zagged and curved and have all sorts of crooks and corners. Some places you walk along standing up straight, the next place you duck your head, the next perhaps you get past quickly and at night and don't cross in daylight unless you have to, because the enemy can get a glimpse – it's not healthy. When you're walking along and a terre (?) light – commonly known as a "flare" – you take cover and don't show your face whilst it is alight. It's wonderful how far you can see a face by the light of one of those flares, and, of course, you feel as

though you could be seen at a thousand yards easily. As a rule you don't stop to find a dry place or any other spot, but just drop flat where you are, a bullet cracking past at the moment makes you drop even faster.

Leaving Billets

It is quite a sight to see the men leaving billet for their stay in the trenches for four to six nights. They are loaded with everything they can carry to add to their creature comforts, and they need them. Many have a big country loaf, which is 14 to 16 inches in diameter, circular in shape, and four inches thick, tied on before or behind and even sometimes both. Packs of wood for lighting the braziers, extra supplies of coke and charcoat, grub of all sorts. Then off they go as it gets dark, with cheerful song, as though they were off on a picnic, instead of from four to six days and nights with little sleep, in a damp, uncomfortable hole dug in clay, with no water to even wash their faces in, no chance to take their boots off until they return. Still they're cheery, and even, the effect of "household pets," which they are obliged to take back with them, because they could not get a change of underwear, is treated as a matter of fact (?). The whole time we were under observation by a great general, but did not know it.

Whilst here the Battle of Neuve Chapelle was fought. The part our boys took was to keep a steady rifle fire all day and be ready to do what they were told at any moment. The order to "stand to" came at 3:20 a.m. Later came the order for more ammunition. On our left the big guns commenced, and in a few moments there was such a thundering of guns as I have never dreamed of, the earth trembled, the houses shook, the very air beat upon the drums of the ear. By and by it produced a real feeling of headache.

Oh what bliss when it became silent! Some will say, "Well, I don't see that the Second Brigade, Seventh Battalion, did much." The General thought differently. "Their steadiness in action was very good. There was no hurry, no unequalness in their firing. They were just like old troops." Incidentally, it showed that the men trusted their officers and also that the men had officers who could command.

Battle of Ypres

After this we had another march to an old town where we rested. Here we spent our Easter. I must tell you something of the Padre's work separately. When we marched out into the country, and spent a nice quiet week on some farms. Another long march and once more we were in Belgium, passing through Ypres. This word has many pronunciations. Perhaps it is better know as "Wipers." Others call it "Eipers," or "Epre," or "Eprr," and, lastly, "Y-prees." We were billeted in the outskirts. The regiment went forward, however, beyond Wieltjhe, and then soon to the trenches on Grafenstafle. I joined my dressing station. Casualties were heavy from the time we went in. The road in was under constant fire. Soon our billets were destroyed.

I shall never forget the sight on the road the day the battle commenced, and the Algerians and Turcos were driven out by the gas. A gas shell was thrown by a big gun and burst just outside my billet, or rather where my billet had been. I had been down to see if I could get any of my things but couldn't. (My bat-man recovered them about a week after.) So I went back to my dressing station with a horrid stinging in my throat and eyes smarting and running tears. The road was lined with people civilians, old men and women just able to totter along, young woman and children with their best clothes thrown on and bundles of all sorts tied up. I saw one woman carrying a tremendous bundle of clothes in one hand, and an empty bird cage in another. I saw an old, old man, so weak he could hardly walk, being pushed away from the house by his wife, who looked as old as he did, but was

more vigorous. Carts, wagons, perambulators – every kind of vehicle was loaded – dogs, mules, cows and horses pulling them, and often a man and a boy between the shafts. Soldiers marching in, ammunition wagons, limbers, etc., rushing past.

The 7th Held the Line

Then came the ghastly stream of terror-sticken, gassed and often wounded Algerians and Turcos. From the 24-29 the stream of wounded men never stopped – staggering, crawling, limping, some blinded, other breathless, in twos and threes, in groups, on stretchers; day and night they came. All the time shells screaming over and bursting all round. Five times we left our stations, because of the shell fire, but always opening up in a new place. You've read a lot about the Kilties – 16th Battalion, etc – and so far nothing about the 7th, because they were not in a charge. The 16th did magnificent, glorious, heroic work, but when the official history comes out, I believe you will find that the 7th will receive praise as high. The 1st B.C. R. or 7th Battalion, as it is know, had to hold the line. All communication was destroyed. Messengers sent never got back. Both flanks were in the air. They were commanded to hold and they held – held like bulldogs – and so stopped the German rush. I may not tell you more, but it's a jolly sight harder to sit tight and be shelled to death, than to die making a charge.

There was where our casualties occurred, holding the trench, and they did it. Grandly they fought, nobly they died, and they died not unavenged, for our men shot fast and hard, and thousands of Germans fell that day. Our artillery did magnificent work.

Col. McHarg's Death

The report that our Officer Commanding, Colonel McHarg, was shot trying to save a private is absolutely untrue. He went out with Major Odlum and an engineer officer (name unknown) to see if it would be possible to bring some of our men up to a different position. When they got into a small house, they looked out of the window and saw the Germans in force watching them, so they doubled back. The house sheltered them for fifty yards, and then they had seventy-five yards open. Just as they got to the open, the Germans opened rifle and machine gun on them. The Major and Colonel dived for a "Jack Johnson" hole, just room to shelter the both, one lying on top of the other. The Major . . . . .

Censored

Once more in heavy fighting. This time it's been our attack, i.e., the British. Again the 1st B.C.R. have had support work, which is by far the most dangerous and most trying. For nine hours one company was shelled by shrapnel and high explosive shells, and could only sit tight and take what was coming. They did it and stood fast. Then the men went into reserve and then again had to take it. I may not give casualties, but can only say we now have only two of the original officers of the 1st B.C.R. with us. And three of reinforcements. We are resting for a few days.

The Padre's work is strange. He holds services in barns and bedrooms, hay-lofts, brewery yards and fields. Holy Communion has been celebrated at 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 p.m. and 4 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. He's buried men behind the trenches, in churchyards, fields, orchards and gardens.

He thanks God every day that he was privileged to be with such a noble band of heroes. Well or wounded or sick, they're always cheerful. When they send a message to dear ones, it's always – no matter what the real conditions may be – "Tell them I'm doing well." What do our boys need most? I think it's letters. Don't wait to hear from them, they can't write for want of time, paper and envelopes. But you, when you think of one you know, however slightly, never mind if you are busy, write tham a few lines to show you are thinking of them. Use your open churches and pray for them; so you can really, truly help them.

Typed by Gillian Klassen
November 2019