

## PEN PICTURES OF THE WAR.

## PRISONERS OF THE RED DESERT.

(By Captain Williams, R.N.).

The N.Z. Rifle Brigade, on Xmas Day, 1915, participated in the victory over the Senoussi at Mesra Matruh. At this time the captain and crew of the H.M.S. Tara were held captive by the Senoussi at Bir Hakkim, some miles away. Nearly two months before the Tara had been torpedoed off the African coast, and her complement of 70 men were handed over by the submarine commander to the Turks and Senoussi for internment. For the full details of their sufferings, their march into the heart of the desert, their treatment at the hands of the natives, the valiant attempt of their captain to escape and bring help, and their final rescue by the Duke of Westminster's armoured cars, the reader is referred to "Prisoners of the Red Desert," which is obtainable from the local library.

After Mesra Matruh the Senoussi retired westwards into the desert. The subsequent battles of Halazin, Agadir and Sollum saw them driven further west, but still a formidable fighting force, awaiting a favourable opportunity for further mischief. Immediately after occupation of Sollum, the Duke of Westminster's armoured cars, which had hitherto been of invaluable assistance to the infantry, were able to perform a brilliant exploit resulting in the utter rout and destruction of the Senoussi at Azais, as is described in the following extract:—

On this morning of 14th March, the Duke of Westminster's light armoured cars, arrived at dawn at the head of Halfaia Pass, aptly termed "Hell-Fire" Pass by our men, had surprised two Senoussi who had not yet made good their escape. From these two prisoners the Duke had learned news of importance as to the enemy's movements.

With his unfailing faculty for quickly grasping the essentials of a military situation, thought and action usually came simultaneously. Without waiting for orders, or even for permission from his superior officer, like Hotspur of old, he dashed off with his cars in sharp pursuit of the retreating enemy, contenting himself with leaving behind one car to helio to General Peyton, the British Commander-in-Chief, news of what he was doing and to bring on his reply. The reply came long after the armoured cars had disappeared over the horizon, and it was in effect to tell the Duke to do what he was already doing, viz., "to pursue the enemy with vigour."

This pursuing force consisted in all of one Ford car with machine-gun, nine armoured cars, and one light touring car, a 1914 Rolls-Royce, which the Duke always used and drove himself—a truly remarkable machine, which after many months of warfare is still as efficient as ever, and is now in daily use in London. Each car mounted a machine-gun, and the total complement of the ten vehicles consisted of thirty-two officers and men all told. With this force, unbacked by any other, they commenced the pursuit of the unbroken Turco-Senoussi army of several thousands, equipped as it was with artillery and machine-guns.

After covering two or three miles marked by innumerable intersecting tracks, which made very bad going, they picked up the road running westward from the old fort of Sollum, and overtook many fugitives, who fired at them as they passed. Following this road they were able to go at a speed of nearly twenty miles an hour, and after about an hour's run at this pace, shortly before mid-day they sighted the enemy's camp. Immediately, enemy shells fired at them showed them its exact position, one which he had hurriedly taken up. It was on flat ground on the open plain, but between them and it stretched a belt of hummocks having been formed by sand gathered round the roots of the tough and heather-like desert shrubs. This surface was about as bad as it could be for breaking the springs of cars; but the drivers who had now attained to an extraordinary degree of efficiency in such work safely negotiated it. Once through, the cars formed in line abreast, and charged straight home at the enemy.

Never was a surprise attack more effective; the enemy were caught just as they were about to march. Their camels were already loaded, some of the infantry were even then on the move, and many of the guns had just been limbered up. But the remainder at once opened fire a very hot fire on the advancing cars from everything available, machine-guns, mountain-guns, and rifles. As the cars dashed forward the shells whizzed just over the top of them, to burst harmlessly in the open desert a mile or two behind; but by a miracle not a single car was directly hit,

although the gunners stuck to their guns until the cars were right among them. The British maxims, for their part, did deadly work at close quarters; the enemy artillery-men and officers were shot down or captured almost to a man.

In a very short time the enemy were in a state of panic and rout, and, casting away their arms, they fled helter-skelter in every direction, in a vain effort to find some avenue of escape from the death-splitting monsters who pursued them so relentlessly.

The cars continued their work of rounding up the demoralised bands of the enemy until late in the afternoon, shooting down the loaded camels, and scattering his forces to the four winds, until from physical exhaustion and repulsion to more killing, they could do no more. As night fell, they returned to the place where they had first surprised the enemy, Bir Azais, or Bir Aziza, as it is sometimes called.

Another strange incident of the Battle of Azais was an extraordinary phenomenon displayed by some enemy camels. A train of twenty of these animals was already loaded up and moving off when the cars first came on the scene; to prevent their escape machine-guns fire was opened on them, with the surprising result that the poor animals at once burst into flames and then blew to pieces! An investigation disclosed the fact that the unfortunate beasts had been loaded with bombs and petrol.

The final result of this dashing action by the armoured cars was that on the British side one officer was slightly wounded. Against this, on the other side of the scale, was the Turco-Senoussi army entirely smashed up and dispersed with very heavy losses, which included one German and ten Turkish officers killed or wounded, eighty prisoners and the capture by the British of two mountain-guns, nine machine-guns, and a very large quantity of ammunition, food, and stores of all kinds. This by the unaided efforts of a British force of thirty-two; thus were the "Petrol Hussars" justified!

## THE RESCUE OF THE TARA MEN.

By an odd card of fortune a letter written by Captain Williams from Bir Hakkim fell into the hands of the British. By a second card of fortune a captured Senoussi had been, in his youth, at this unknown spot in the desert 125 miles away, and thought he could find the way there. The third card in the hands of Fate was that the daring Duke of Westminster was at hand with his cars and volunteered to rescue the prisoners. The concluding stages of the trip are described:—

But still there were no signs that they were nearing their destination. The guides were arguing vigorously with each other and appeared more uncertain than ever as to their whereabouts. At mile eighty-two they took the cars off the road and headed across the open desert, at first south-west, and then south south-west and then south. Looking round at mile eighty-seven they saw that they had passed round the western edge of the low hills which had been to the southward of them since mile fifty.

The desert surface here was very stony, but fortunately on the whole it was hard going. Ninety miles went by, a hundred miles passed, and still there was no sign. There was a particularly bad mirage that day, and from time to time they would observe what appeared to be villages, horsemen, herds of cattle. But of these the guides took no notice—and, as they grazed, these phantoms vanished into thin air.

All this time they had been looking for a long fig-tree which the guide had told them about; this fig-tree was the land mark by which he would know his position, and it was close to their destination. But neither of this tree, nor of any other fixed mark, could they see any trace, nothing but the deceptive oft-changing shimmer of the mirage.

A hundred and ten miles passed. No one any longer spoke, they were nearly halfway through their petrol, and they had the return journey to make. Every one now believed that to go further was useless, everyone except one man. The Duke of Westminster that day was in a mood which is designated in the vulgar seaman's vocabulary as "bloody-minded," that is to say, obstinate, determined, brooking no opposition to his will, impatient of futile argument against his set purpose. To the arguments of the faint-hearted as to the danger of running out of petrol, he only replied that in that case they could stop where they were and send back some of the cars for more. So long as the guides held out the least hope of being able to find the way, so long as they did not acknowledge themselves utterly lost, he refused even to consider the possibility of failure.

They went on. A hundred and fifteen miles went by, and anxious looks were cast in the Duke's direction. To go

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that meant nothing. He moved that the executive of the Association should concentrate on seeing that the men who had shirked should not have their civil rights restored.

The president: That is the danger. We do not want to see those men back in any political power.

## N.Z.R.S.A.

## WAR GRATUITIES.

The following resume of the principal gratuity anomalies met with has been supplied by the general secretary of the N.Z. R.S.A., published for general information:—

## GRATUITIES IN THE CASE OF DECEASED SOLDIERS.

It was found that in a number of cases where a soldier died either on active service or after return to New Zealand (before gratuity had been paid to him) there was no relative or dependant eligible within the scope of the Act to receive this gratuity. (Those eligible were wife, children, father, mother, or any person in receipt of a pension as a dependant). The Government has now agreed to pay the gratuity to his next-of-kin, or beneficiary under his will, or allottee, or any person or persons whom the Minister of Defence thinks fit. All these cases have to be brought before the Pensions Board for final adjudication.

## PAYMENT OF GRATUITY TO V.A.D.'s

Under the present regulations a V.A.D. had to comply with the following requirements before she could obtain a gratuity:—

- 1.—To have signed an agreement to serve with the N.Z.E.F.
- 2.—To have been paid and administered by the N.Z.E.F.
- 3.—To have served not less than twelve months continuously.
- 4.—To have been domiciled in N.Z. before the war.

The Government was recommended to cut out (3) and (4), as the gratuity should be paid for the period of service irrespective of domicile. It is believed that this will be done, but all these cases have been forwarded to Sir J. Allen for final adjudication, so that nothing definite will be known for a time.

Gratuity in the case of a soldier evacuated sick or wounded from a theatre of war and who re-embarked for active service.

The Government has agreed to pay:—

- 1.—The minimum of eighteen months for the first period of service, plus
- 2.—Gratuity for actual number of days

overseas for second subsequent period of service.

Gratuity payable in cases where soldiers have had six calendar months' hospital treatment after they returned to N.Z., evacuated from a theatre of war.

The Government has agreed to pay the soldier a two years' minimum if he had very considerable periods of hospital treatment both as an in-patient and out-patient after return to New Zealand.

Period of service in New Zealand on Duty:—

No grant to be made for period of furlough service in New Zealand. It was agreed by the Special Committee that the principle of gratuities for overseas services only should be adhered to.

The following will be the itinerary of the War Pensions Board during the next two weeks:—

December 3, Glenorchy; December 4 and 5, Queenstown; December 6, Pembroke; December 7, Cromwell; December 8, Alexandra; December 9, Roxburgh; December 10, Lawrence; December 11, Milton; December 12, Dunedin; December 13, Middelmarck; December 14, Kanturly; December 15, Omakau; December 16, Dunedin; December 17, leave for Wellington; December 18, arrive Wellington.

## APPLICATIONS FOR LAND.

## WHICH BOARD TO JUDGE.

A case recently came before the Dunedin executive of the R.S.A. of a Dunedin man who had made application for a section which was to be balloted for in another land district. He was examined by the Otago Land Board, who reported favourably in regard to his suitability, but the Board which was conducting the ballot did not accept this report; they did not regard him as a suitable applicant and his name was not allowed to go to the ballot. The man in question was of the opinion that the rule in such cases was that the report of the Board which first examined him, in this case the Otago Land Board, must be accepted, and he therefore felt aggrieved at being excluded from the ballot. The Dunedin executive referred the matter to the Lands Department for a ruling, and the Under-Secretary in reply stated that an outside Board might examine an applicant and forward full particulars for the information of the local Board, but that the latter body was the sole judge of the eligibility of the applicant to participate in the ballot. Men seeking land in districts other than their own would do well to note this fact.

## A GALLIPOLI MEDAL.

## TREATMENT OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS.

A meeting of the executive of the Returned Soldiers' Association, Dr Poxer presiding, discussed the question of a Gallipoli medal for members of the N.Z. E.F., who took part in the campaign. The secretary reported that the Government was keeping the matter steadily in view. A petition to Parliament was suggested.

The president stated that only 10 per cent. of New Zealand soldiers who went abroad ever saw Gallipoli. He thought many would prefer a special medal to that awful thing, the 1914-15 star, a disgraceful medal. All that the British War Office proposed was special battle clasps. The issue of a medal to New Zealanders and Australians was held up by the British War Office.

It was resolved to await further advice. The question of the treatment of conscientious objectors was considered. It was stated that there were 2000 shirkers still at large in the Dominion. The president said the Prime Minister's recent announcement meant that the 2000 remaining objectors would be deprived of their civil rights.

Mr T. E. Seddon, M.P., said there would be civil prosecution.

Mr E. Leadley, of Christchurch, said