

IN NO MAN'S LAND

(By O. A. Gillespie)

No Man's Land on the Western Front is being churned into a bog. (Cable Message.)

HOW well I remember the process. Giant shells bury themselves with a thud in the earth, softened by the autumn rains, and a violent explosion tosses the soil skywards, leaving a smoking hole to mark the place of contact. That goes on day after day—splintering trees, levelling buildings, churning the countryside into a grey waste which the elements will cause to bloom again only when the shelling ceases. Green grass and field flowers hide the man-made scars very quickly.

I remember No Man's Land from the last war. Not all of it, for that narrow, disputed strip of territory ran between lines of sand-bagged trenches almost from the Belgian Coast to Switzerland. But there are long stretches of it I do recall—at Armentières, at Bois Grenier, at Fleurbaix, at the Somme, at Passchendaele, at Messines, and afterwards, at Warneton.

On Patrol

Some of that territory became extraordinarily familiar, for I crawled about areas of it on all fours night after night on patrol, or lay out in specially selected listening posts, peering into the gloom for any movement which might reveal an enemy playing the same game. A weird experience at first, in unknown country but, like all war experiences, one grew accustomed to it after the first few ventures. For my part that is not bragging. I was afraid, very often, with that fear which makes one grow hot and cold behind the ears and acutely conscious of the blood beating in temples and neck. Even one's heart seemed to be thudding like a mechanical hammer, and making as much noise.

When Minutes Became Hours

As soon as the velvet dusk had deepened into night, we crept out of our own trenches in Indian file. Through special gaps in the wire en-

tanglements we crossed into a region which, familiar enough through careful examination over the tops of our sand-bags in daylight, now became as unfamiliar as the country of the moon. Moving stealthily in the dark, never knowing when a German patrol might be lying in ambush in some shell-hole or drain or among the stumps of trees, we used to make our way slowly across and about No Man's Land. Minutes of waiting were hours of suspense.

Those trees of No Man's Land—willows, most of them, whose sturdy, low trunks sprouted bunches of small branches. In the weird half-light they resembled grotesque figures, rather like those in Arthur Rackham's drawings. Again and again we held our breathing, even, until we realised that they were not human beings, motionless and waiting, shrouded in the mist.

Rats — and Elephants!

Soft noises became fearsome thunder, or so it seemed. Wind rustling the dry or frozen grass sounded like an army on the march; rats (and there were hundreds of them about the old trenches) made the noise of trampling elephants. One's imagination played strange tricks with the senses, so acutely tuned to noises which ordinarily would have passed unnoticed. We grew expert at pulling ourselves along on our bellies, creeping from one vantage point to another, checking objects in No Man's Land with aerial photographs of any particular locality. I could still draw from memory I think, some of those stretches of country between our own and the German trenches.

Fogs which veiled the countryside in Northern France added their net of mystery to the night. I remember how it hindered my patrol while we were planning for a raid at Fleurbaix. This meant more than the usual care—creeping out night after night to cut, little by little and noiselessly, gaps through the barbed wire entanglements which protected the German trenches, so that our men could go through as easily as possible. That made the blood run hotter and colder. Empty tins flung into the wire were liable to create a riot of noise, so they had to be removed. Guttural voices of the sentries warned us of any particularly dangerous points. The hiss of a hated star-shell, shooting into the night to burst in revealing flame which fell slowly to earth on its parachute, was the signal to squash oneself flatter than ever in an effort to become one with the mud and the grass, the branches or the wire. Sentries firing at random into the night were another danger, for one of their bullets might possibly find its mark, which was just the sheerest bad luck.

"Entanglements"

Another task always performed in the dark was wiring—repairing the barbed wire entanglements in front of our own trenches or erecting new belts of it. And a nastier, more irritating job was never devised. "Entanglements" was the appropriate word.



The late Major W. J. Hardham, V.C., the first New Zealander to win the Victoria Cross. Major Hardham's Cross was awarded for conspicuous gallantry under fire during the South African War, when he was only twenty-one. When the Great War broke out Major Hardham went to the front again, where he served with distinction, and was mentioned several times in despatches. He was finally invalided to New Zealand as the result of war wounds, and died, partly as a result of those wounds, two years ago in Wellington.

Books For Soldiers

"A million dollars for a million books for a million men" was the slogan with which the campaign for funds was boosted when the American Library Association decided in September 1917, to give library service to the United States army. They called for a million dollars; they got their million, and seven hundred and forty-nine thousand seven hundred and six dollars (and thirty-one cents) over the margin.

New Zealanders are being asked not for cash, but only for books. Can they find fifty thousand?

Label your parcel "Library Service, Military Camps"; take it to your Public Library or send it to the Country Library Service, Parliament Buildings, Wellington.

Rows of iron standards, rather like huge corkscrews, were twisted into the ground and the wire was fixed to them, running through open loops to hold it in position. I must have assisted with the erection of miles of barbed wire in France. Most New Zealanders are familiar with it, in fences, so they can well imagine the difficulty of unwinding it in the dark and at the same time trying to escape its clutching barbs and get it fixed to the standards.

When Accidents Happened

During the winter months that task was made still more arduous when the earth froze solid and the standards had to be placed in position by first chipping holes in the ground as silently as possible. Accidents did happen, when bundles of iron standards were dropped and made sufficient noise to waken the dead—or so we imagined. A stream of whispered curses continued long after the sound had died away, and came from

companions who had flattened themselves against the ground. Usually wiring was a feverish job, to be finished as quickly as possible before returning to the comforting refuge of our own trenches. And only those who have crept about No Man's Land for hours in the dark will ever know how secure those piles of earth-filled bags made us feel.

Perhaps, at this very moment, soldiers in France are doing and saying exactly the same thing.

Italy Not Tied

Italy has again declared that she will remain neutral, and is desirous of aiding a Balkan bloc against Russian aggression. There has been a reshuffle of portfolios in the Italian cabinet, but foreign observers attach little significance to the changes. Italian papers afterwards published a statement that Italy was not tied to anyone's apron strings.