

CHRISTMAS DAYS AT THE WAR

(By O. A. Gillespie)

THE first Christmas Day of my war years was the most memorable. For the first time in my life I suffered the unpleasant sensation of hearing the zipp of real bullets speeding angrily past my head, to spatter into a million burning fragments against the solid rock of the Egyptian desert near Mersa Matruh. Christmas dinner was a grim affair, consisting of half a tin of bully beef, a granite-like army biscuit, and a drink of tepid water from my water bottle. It was hurriedly eaten on the side of a donga while we sheltered behind the rocks in one of our brief moments of waiting during the attack on the Senussi, who were holding a sort of gully known as Wadi Majid. We spent the day dislodging them from their stronghold and, late in the afternoon, saw them scatter in flight across the desert.

Never, I think, have I been so hungry as on Christmas Day, 1915. Our last meal (the eternal porridge and stew) had been eaten in camp before day-break, before we left the security of Mersa Matruh itself to be "baptised" in action. Lunch for me had become an absolute necessity, because we had been trudging over rocks for hours. I was with "C" Company, 1st Battalion of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade. We got into action in the front line at noon, just when we should have been thinking about the traditional meal at home.

It was an exciting and emotional day, for most of us were under fire for the first time in our lives. I remember that I had the utmost difficulty in preventing my hands from shaking, the result, I now realise, of a combination of fear and excitement. When we got near enough to the Senussi to use our rifles, the trembling disappeared as if by magic. Older soldiers (I was only twenty) told me that they had experienced the same sort of thing.

No Carol-Singers

We moved out of camp at 5 o'clock on Christmas morning, the hour when carol-singers were just beginning to torment and rouse the householders at home. Excitement stirred every man of our Battalion. Before us, along the desert road which had known camel caravans even before the days of Antony and Cleopatra, we could see the barren countryside, grey and arid, devoid of all growth except some stunted shrub rather like tufts of dwarf manuka. We were supported, if I remember correctly, by four small pieces of artillery and some armoured cars, these last the pride of the Duke of Westminster. High overhead we saw one tiny airplane, our only air unit; and out at sea, following us along the coast, we had the support of H.M.S. Clematis, a small British gunboat. Thus, despite their size, we were a complete unit. And it worked perfectly. The airplane did the "spotting" and

bursting shells (not many) from the gunboat left picturesque puffs of smoke which were most comforting. Up to that time it was all rather like a perfect display of manoeuvres, with each unit of the forces represented. Before 8 o'clock the first Senussi bullets started spattering on the rocks. Horrible things they were, thick, blunt, soft-nosed pieces of lead which broke into tiny fragments on anything solid and tore holes through anything human. We found cases of them afterwards in the donga and discovered that they were originally intended for big-game hunting—elephant bullets, someone called them.

The full story of that Christmas Day would take too long to tell here. I became adept at ducking every time a bullet pinged past me or cracked wickedly on a rock. That was a habit which was to remain a part of me long afterwards. Ducking and skirmishing round sheltering rocks, we made our way slowly forward, sometimes in short rushes in the open. By 4 o'clock in the afternoon the tiny battle was over. At 5 p.m. the Battalion was re-formed, but it was so dark that we had to stay out in the desert till 4 o'clock on Boxing morning, when we began our return to Mersa Matruh by the light of the stars. There was grousing, of course—the usual "mucking about" variety—but we felt that at last we were real soldiers, blooded in action, with established reputations. And I have no doubt that General Fulton felt proud of our behaviour under fire. Personally I felt as though a horse had rolled over me, the result of physical exertion helping to carry some of our dead and wounded over the rough country, but one day's rest was sufficient to remove all traces of my first real endurance test. Most of Boxing Day was spent bathing in the harbour of Mersa Matruh.

In a Flanders Trench

By the time my second Christmas arrived I was familiar with trench warfare and the French countryside. The battle of the Somme was a memory. We had taken over a sector of "quiet" line in front of Fleurbaix and Bac St. Maur. One early Christmas "present" was an issue of new box respirators which replaced former masks we had been using in the event of gas attacks. I remember that we went back into the line on December 23, in bleak and miserable weather, the whole countryside grey under leaden clouds. Heavy rain had turned that part of Flanders into a sort of bog, but our trenches were comparatively dry and well drained. It was by no means a merry Christmas, but it had its compensations. My people had sent me a cake and a plum pudding, made richer by the long voyage from New Zealand and kept moist by packing them with apples. We poured some issue rum over the pudding, watched

the blue flames heat it, and declared that a pudding had never tasted nicer. At that time we had coke and charcoal braziers in the front line trenches, and it was pleasant, when opportunity offered, to sit near one in the narrow sand-bagged trench, eating Christmas cake and drinking thick tea from a dixie. Our rations were increased and we did our best to keep the party spirit alive, but there was no mistletoe. Moreover it is rather difficult, when artillery shells are zooming overhead and occasionally throwing young geysers of mud and water into the air, to express seasonal gaiety. And it wasn't the atmosphere for Christmas carols.

Our people had evidently decided that a quiet, peaceful day was to be discouraged. From early morning our artillery sent over a heavy, intermittent bombardment which must have worried the Germans and disturbed their celebrations. However, there was little retaliation. After dark the situation became livelier, for we staged a dummy raid and set the enemy's guns in action, but it was not until New Year's Day that Fritz let himself go. Then he shelled our lines unmercifully all day long. Fortunately for us, we had been relieved that morning and listened to the thumping and crunching of enemy artillery from our billets in and round Fleurbaix.

The Real Thing in England

My next Christmas Day was spent in England while I was on leave and there, for the first time, I sampled the season with all its tradition of holly and mistletoe, turkey and plum pudding, punch and crackers. Driving snow had turned the London streets into slush, but despite that and the third year of war, England was celebrating as she had done through the centuries. After spending part of Christmas Eve in the Turkish baths to rid myself completely of the soil and vermin of the trenches, I donned a brand new uniform and took train to Surbiton, to realise the sincerity of a welcome into an hospitable English home. After many months living entirely in the open in France, the change was too much for me—soft beds, rich food, and comforting fires brought on a violent cold from which I did not recover until my leave was over.

On the Way Home

When next Christmas Day came round I was on a troopship, sailing for home. We had left Tilbury two days before. The war was forgotten, outwardly, but the life of the past years and the friendships made had become associated with such a feeling of permanency that I felt rather bewildered by the sudden break and change in ways of living. There was a fancy-dress party, I remember, with weird and wonderful doings, for everybody was bright with determined gaiety. Few of us had any sleep. The celebrations which began on Christmas Eve lasted almost over the whole week. It seemed that everyone on that ship was trying to forget four years of war—and some of them were succeeding.

Personal

Lieut.-Colonel Kenneth MacCormick, the well-known Auckland doctor, is attached to the Medical Corps of the 1st Echelon for duty overseas.

Lieut.-Colonel D. G. S. Urmson, O.B.E., Royal Indian Army Service Corps, is now attached to Army Headquarters in Wellington. He retired before the war, after 29 years of service with the Army.

Major G. H. Thomson, popular New Plymouth doctor, is with the Medical Corps of the 2nd New Zealand Division.

Major S. F. Allen, N.Z.S.C., a graduate of Duntroon Military College who later saw service on the Indian Frontier, has been appointed to the 2nd New Zealand Divisional Signallers.

Major J. C. Sherston, D.S.O., M.C., who has been farming at Porangahau, is now with Headquarters, Central Military District. He is a retired British officer.

Captain Stewart Hardy, barrister and solicitor of Wellington, is now on the staff of Army Headquarters, Wellington. He is an officer of the 5th Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery.

Captain A. J. Breach, formerly of the Accounts Branch, Railway Department, is now D.A.Q.M.G., Central Military District Headquarters. He served with the Canterbury Regiment during the last war.

Captain C. M. Devery, D.C.M., who served with the Wellington Regiment during the last war, is now D.A.A.G. at Headquarters, Central Military District. He was formerly well known in business circles in Wellington.

Flight-Lieut. G. S. Hale, who has been appointed Adjutant of the Weraroa Air Force Training School, served with the Worcestershire Regiment during the last war. He is a farmer from the Tolaga Bay District.

W. S. Austin, a son of the late Lieut.-Colonel W. S. Austin, D.S.O., is training with the Royal New Zealand Air Force to become a pilot. Colonel Austin commanded the 1st Battalion, New Zealand Rifle Brigade, during the last war.

C. S. Pepper, J. S. Best, G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas and F. Solomon, four All Black Rugby players, have gone into camp to train as n.c.o.'s for the 2nd Echelon.

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