

WAR DIARY

THE TRAGEDY OF THE REFUGEE

By O. A. Gillespie

WAR'S greatest immediate tragedy is the refugee; the old men and women, young wives and their children who are defenceless against the invader. Overnight their whole world disappears.

At this very moment of writing, as Northern France is once more the scene of armies in combat—armies equipped with more terrible weapons of destruction than history has ever known—the refugees are in flight along the roads of that fair land. The soldier realises war. He is trained to withstand, as far as is humanly possible, its hardships and suffering and demands, but war sweeps the pitiful stream of refugees before it, leaving them homeless, hungry and helpless. Behind them their little world is in ruins; families are parted in the confused flight for safety.

Clinging to the Farms

Those of us who fought in Northern France through the last war know something of the plight of the refugee and of those brave people, both Belgian and French, who were overwhelmed by a conflict lasting four years. Their courage was a flame. Some of them, old and bent with years, clung to their farms near the firing line, as close as they were permitted to stay. I remember them on those farms behind Armentières and Bois Grenier and Fleurbaix when we first took over a section of the trenches. Many of those humble homes still wore gaping holes, others had been crudely repaired because of the lack of materials. But the people clung to them.

"C'est la guerre" was their only reply to the grumbling guns. "C'est la guerre" they said when the shells tore down buildings with screaming force, or ploughed craters in their fields of corn and potatoes. "C'est la guerre"—it ran through the conversation like a sad refrain. Yet they sowed and reaped and planted with a hope as eternal as each returning spring. To-day, with fearful backward glances as they flee to the south, a new generation and survivors of the last are enduring the same agony of mind and body as their people did in 1914 and again in 1918.

An N.Z. Record?

Seven sons in uniform constitute the unique record of a Wellington family, that of Mr. and Mrs. A. O. Staden. This is probably a New Zealand record also. The eldest son, Edward, is with the 1st Echelon, Ivan and Aubrey are with the 2nd Echelon, Colin and Stanley are with the 3rd, Hector has enlisted, and George, the youngest of the family, is serving with the Permanent Artillery on the home front. Mr. and Mrs. Staden have eleven children—seven sons and four daughters; one of the latter works in Base Records. Mr. Staden comes of a family of five brothers. Three of them served in the Great War.

Yesterday—and To-day

Here in New Zealand we cannot realise the scenes which are being enacted in France to-day. However acute our imagination may be, we cannot picture in our minds that an area of lovely, peaceful countryside stretching, for example, from Wellington to Auckland and beyond, is the scene of refugees in flight. Until a few weeks ago the people now in the war zone went about their daily work, tending their farms, working in factories, shops, performing all those thousand and one details which go to make up the life and activities of a community. War was the thought uppermost in their minds—but only in the distance. To-day they are overwhelmed. Farms will be neglected; factories silent or in ruins; shops will be rifled by the advancing enemy; all food supplies will be confiscated; the work of centuries will have been undone in a day. All that was cherished and treasured in many thousands of homes—the personal, intimate things, however humble, which go to the making of a home—have been left behind or destroyed.

The Flight in 1918

Those of us who fought on the Western Front did not witness the horrors in Belgium and France in the early days of 1914, but we saw something of the plight of the refugees in 1918, when the Germans broke through and swept towards Amiens. In that town, men of the New Zealand Division assisted with the evacuation of 90,000 civilians who poured in from the surrounding countryside in their efforts to escape by train. All along the roads as the New Zealanders neared the new battle front, thousands of people streamed to safety, carrying what few personal belongings they were able to snatch up in their flight. Most of them were on foot, tired and exhausted; many pushed tiny handcarts, piled with belongings. Others were in farm carts, plodding steadily along. Cattle strayed everywhere across the fields. And through that confusion the soldiers went resolutely in the opposite direction, toward the noise of the guns.

Caught in the Maelstrom

This time the German advance has been more swift—so swift, I imagine, that many thousands of the refugees have been caught in the maelstrom of the armies. Across the old battlefields of the Somme, twice hallowed ground to every New Zealander who fought there, the enemy tanks and motorised units have swept like a plague. In the years since the last war all that country, a pitted desert when we left it, has been planted and made to bloom again; whole villages and towns have been re-built. This time the guns will not have destroyed it to the same extent, for there has been no stationary warfare to reduce everything in the vicinity to rubble and broken fragments. That may come; at the time of writing, no one may assume the role of prophet. But whatever happens, or has happened, this is certain—towns will be pillaged and



THIS MAP, showing the principal railways and the oil wells of Rumania, also indicates the delicate position that country holds to-day, though its independence has been guaranteed by Britain. Germany exercises pressure on the north; Russia is pressing a claim for Bessarabia; Hungary wants Transylvania; and Bulgaria wants Dobruja and its important port on the Black Sea. The dividing line in Poland is indicated. Russia is allowing the Germans to concentrate troops in the Przemysl-Lwow-Kolomea areas, and permitting them to control the railways between those towns.

wrecked, homes will be burned and destroyed, the fertile land laid waste.

There is also this to remember when thinking of the Allied armies as they fall back: It is much more difficult for them to re-organise when their bases are in enemy hands. Behind the defensive line which we had constructed in Northern France, immense quantities of food and materials were held in "dumps." From these "dumps," or bases, guns and ammunition, food and clothing and war materials go forward as they are required by the soldiers in the line. In this war there will be huge petrol "dumps," the life-blood of the mechanised forces. No doubt these will be destroyed, along with other supplies, as they are abandoned. Most of them will be set on fire, adding confusion to the scenes of war, increasing the fear of the refugees in flight.

Fear Travels Quickly

There is this to remember, also: Only well-trained and seasoned troops can properly withstand the disorganisation which is inevitable when armies fall back, fighting a rearguard action. Control of units is made more and more difficult as they lose touch. Roads and railways, so vital as a means of communication, become congested by refugees and marching troops, and fear travels more quickly in such circumstances. It is well to remember the heroism of the Retreat from Mons in the early days of the last war and the courage which saved the day.

And now that story is being repeated in the full beauty of spring. I try to imagine the Somme again—its patterned fields already sown; its orchards alight with blossom; its gardens and woods heavy with the scent of growth and filled with the gentle humming of bees and the music of bird-song. Many of those tiny villages and hamlets where we rested and refreshed ourselves after long spells in the trenches will now house the enemy. The gaping wounds in the village churches have only been closed in recent years; now they will open again, gazing at the sky, mute witness of all the horror which has swept across Northern France twice since 1914.

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