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A Day in the Trenches in WWI

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Although the centenary year of the ending of WWI has now closed the Trust is pleased to reproduce ***A Day in the Trenches*** recorded by **Clement Theodore Chevallier (1893-1969) #5781** on the web family tree, kindly provided by his grandson **Hugh Chevallier #9062.**

C T Chevallier was a scholar at Worcester College, Oxford and as a Captain in the Ox & Bucks Light Infantry was mentioned in despatches, gazetted on 15th June 1916. Inter alia, his piece illustrates the importance of a sense of humour to survival.

A DAY IN THE TRENCHES

C. T. CHEVALLIER

In attempting to describe a day's life in the trenches it may be as well to begin the day with nature and not with the clock. There is no midnight in the trenches, because there is no night. There is only Day – and one portion of Day is by the accident of darkness and invisibility a peculiarly convenient season for work.

In the dog-days we are blessed with a comparatively short period of darkness (and therefore of high-pressure work) as about two o'clock dawn is ushered in not only by increasing light, but by continued salvoes of German rifles. At this period of the Day, our friends the enemy,

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wishing to convince themselves, if no one else, of their superiority in producing rifle ammunition in Germany and in firing it in Flanders, and also, it may be, instil courage into their simple hearts, and fear into ours, by the childlike device of noise, do give vent to a tremendous rattle. In neither object are they successful. The newborn courage wastes its sweetness on our parapets, and so far from being inspired with fear, we are heartened for another day's watch by the knowledge that the enemy's local supply of rifle ammunition has [2] been slightly diminished without any result.

Meanwhile, however, we have stood to arms, as is the custom for an hour after dawn in case the enemy should have taken advantage of the darkness to creep out and wait outside our lines with a view to attacking as soon as he could see what he was about. This relic of ancient warfare as we learnt it from Mr Oliver's lips four years ago in Certificate A class still survives in our modern era. Devised when hostile forces bivouacked several miles apart, it is still a wise precaution for all the flashlights that illuminate the gulf fixed between us and them.

At three a.m., an end to 'stand to'. It is now light, and men may therefore sleep – unless one is a sentry, the unlucky one in each section whose hour of duty has come round, or the doubly unlucky officer whose rest is postponed for two hours that he may walk to and fro the whole length of the company. Then may be heard strange noises issuing from dug-outs, as of men snoring (as indeed they are).

Meanwhile, the artillery play a little, not on each other's [3] firing lines, but on each other's batteries; not very seriously, but very zealously, each side wishing to show his enemy that he is a particularly early riser and very shrewd in observing even before it is fully light. After this demonstration, the artillery retires, not to sleep, for gunners it is (falsely) rumoured sleep between sheets every night, but to breakfast; a German breakfast lasts three hours, apparently, and we have caught the habit.

Now it is the turn of the aircraft. The best time for observing is undoubtedly six p.m. in the summer when the enemy is in the east in the late afternoon as the sun lights up the country opposite the sunset without blaring the aviators' eyes. Conversely, the German lines being east of ours, the early morning is the best time from the Germans' point of view. Also, our own aircraft having taken advantage of the darkness to journey in, and the very early dawn to bombard, it may be, the railway station at Ghent, the munitions' depot at Bruges, or his Highness of Bavaria's headquarters near Lille, are returning about the same time. In either case, the heavens abound in aircraft between four and six, each one surrounded by the little white puffs of the [4] exploding shrapnel that the anti-aircraft guns send up with a noise of a chronic cough. It is very seldom that a

direct hit is recorded; sometimes, though rarely, an airman has to turn his course, or even go back home, but as a rule he continues on his way, rejoicing in spite of the little puffs of smoke and (if he is English) the thud thud thud of the German machine guns. To the credit of these last rests, it is said, the bringing down of a French aeroplane early in the war, an achievement which was surely a blessing to us in disguise for after this freak of fortune the German machine guns have never ceased to waste a prodigious number of cartridges in this fruitless task. While talking of machine guns described from the Dardanelles by Sir Ian Hamilton (with small compliment to that gallant knight Sir Hiram Maxim) as the invention of the devil, it is comforting to realise that the English machine gun says ratatatat while the German only answers thud thud thud. It may be that possibly this slower rate of fire makes the German copy quicker to manufacture. Otherwise one is led to suppose that it is only in present numbers that the enemy have the advantage over us in machine guns – a fact which bodes well for the future.

But to return to our trench. At five o'clock, the officer on watch, having spent two hours walking up and down cursing the luck that made his tour of duty begin immediately after 'stand to' instead of including it, retires to his rest. At this season all is quiet, [5] and men go by devious routes, flitting through communication trenches in quest of victuals and water from mysterious hidden stores. In errant bands they go about, full of oaths to boot at their lost slumbers. But our officer recks not of these things: they are for Company-Quartermaster Sergeants all-watchful among men. At these times too rise officers' servants, who alone sleep at night. The particular officer who has just come off watch is provided by his particular henchman with strength of twenty stout oxen, extracted and condensed into essence under the name of ?Bovremcoxois? in the wilds of Patagonia or Chicago; and to assimilate this and to sleep he retires to his lordly dugout.

Meanwhile the men either through obstinacy or by reason of the rays of the sun unable to sleep during the time set apart for that purpose are already beginning to ?drum? up, which being interpreted (though why I know not) means to kindle fire and fry bacon or brew tea thereon. Hapless the man who in a trench too near the enemy allows the column of his smoke to ascend too high! For he is assailed with a rifle grenade, directed at his smoke. This apart, he has a very pleasant breakfast, bacon, bread and butter, jam.

As for our officer, he breaks his fast at nine o'clock or later in proportion as each one's more or less exalted social position has accustomed him to have it more or less late at home. The morning or what is left of it is to be spent according to the amount of work done and of consequent fatigue incurred the evening before.

[6] It may be that men have only to clean their rifles: it may be they have to build a new footrest for their firing points, lay the foundation of a new traverse, begin to fill up part of the parados that a trench mortar blew away while all but the sentries slept, or any other such lowdown work as is invisible to the enemy. Such tasks are set in the morning and it rests with the NCOs and men to complete it before it is dark.

About ten o'clock in the morning Cannonade arrives. No, this is not a newspaper. Today's paper will not come until tomorrow evening. Usually the guns begin by playing on the trenches until the attentions of the enemy become so insistent that they must be checked when the struggle degenerates into an artillery duel. Watching, eating, sleeping, digging – so the day goes on. The sentries keep watch through a periscope for an hour at a time, officers on duty in the company, NCO in the platoon walks up, his beak sees that this dug out is being properly dug, that the footrest is not being built too high, that the sentry is keeping a keen watch and that the figure appearing occasionally above the German parapet is only a dummy, noting the whistle of a distant train beyond La Bassée or the appearance of a heap of earth that may be either a sap head or a mole heap, and with a view to a nocturnal visit counting the number of trees it is along the road so carefully and regularly provided with trees by the third Napoleon. These little tasks fill up the day.

[7] Not that the officer on watch, the NCO on duty or the sentry at his post are the only people at work. When they come off these tasks that go by roster, they help in the general digging. From platoon to platoon the captain goes suggesting improvements and adaptations to make the trench more serviceable; or he sits in his office and receives instructions from the battalion headquarters as to the work of the next night. Or he accompanies the colonel or brigadier round his daily inspection pointing out the need of a machine gun here or a trench mortar there. Meanwhile the sergeant major is his right-hand man, issuing sandbags, storing boxes of spare ammunition, superintending the signallers and doing a thousand and one odd jobs. With him too is the quartermaster sergeant, controlling the domestic economy of the place, the water party, the ration fatigue, the issue of the very latest type of respirator which is always said to be as useful as the one before it was useless. The dividing line between his duties and those of the sergeant major is clear. The quartermaster is a domestic economist, the sergeant major a tactician. Thus the sergeant major before an action superintends the steeping of respirators in a certain fluid: both the respirators and the fluid have been secured by the quartermaster.

The functions of both these specialists are combined in a lesser degree by the sergeant as far as his own platoon is concerned. He is the right-hand man of the platoon commander, and at times it must be confessed makes that officer appear superfluous. [8] As a rule, however, the

platoon sergeant is an interpreter who translates into military language and puts into practical effect the grandiose schemes of the subaltern who from his upbringing is a thinker and a theorist and can only learn the practice from seeing the thing done. It is when there is no subaltern and the sergeant has to do the thinking that the advantage of a subaltern is realised.

So each one carries on his allotted task – sleep has no place in the timetable except in the early morning: it is assumed that everyone who is not watching is working unless he be cooking or feeding.

Three o'clock in the afternoon brings the War Special. Once more not a newspaper (after your previous mistake) and you suppose not a train. You are wrong, this time. It is a train, or at least so the rumour of the ages has it. Quite like a continental special, it runs not every day, but every other, or thereabouts. At any rate it comes somewhere up the line, to a different spot presumably every time, for our gunners never hit it, and shells you from a distance. There are those called Jack Johnsons, though the more erudite authorities differentiate between Johnsons proper, Black Marias and coalboxes. After a score of shells have blown in a dugout and wounded two men, the armoured train retires, and two thousand pounds have been spent.

On other days, when the train is not in evidence, the field guns shell more heavily of an afternoon. Their bag if they are active may be a man killed and four wounded – never more. For one thing the trajectory is so low that unless the shells are pitched exactly, they go right over – often they bury themselves without exploding, and when they do explode and do damage, the bite is far less than the [9] bark. For instance one of these shells destroyed a dugout in the doorway of which a man sat smoking. His pipe was broken into nineteen pieces, but he was not hurt.

After tea the aircraft come out again, this being the English airman's hour of daily reconnaissance. The night's work is drawn up, barbed wire stakes and tools fetched up. The sentries, one in nine by day, are tripled in the evening. When it is dark, the regular work of the day begins. Diggers can throw up earth from the bottom of the trench without drawing a shower of rifle grenades and trench mortars, whose deliberate though erratic course traced in light in the darkness makes them fairly easy to avoid if the sentry is alert. Has the regiment that day come into the trenches in relief of a notoriously untidy battalion? Now is the time to walk along the back of the parapets and pick up his refuse of fly-breeding jam pots and meat tins, for flies are prolific of disease as well as baneful pests in themselves. Has the enemy begun a fresh sap (at spot A x f 3 II b.45) on the map as the artillery observer thought? Now is the time for the scouts to find out. Is there reason to believe that the third willow from the left of the roofless barn holds the sniper that

shot Private Hobbs at dusk? Now is the time to send out a patrol and round him up. Does the brigadier consider the front between Cannon Street and Queen Victoria Street (two of our saps) particularly liable to attack? Now is the time to increase the wire entanglements. Is a new sap to be dug by Number Two platoon? Now is the time.

All these works go on together. In theory, men get an hour's sleep in three; in practice they are lucky [10] if they get any rest by night at all. No matches, no cigarette lights are allowed to give away the secret that men are at work. But there is no delay caused by not being able to see one's work. There is not a minute but when the Germans kindly provide the necessary light. Indeed their flares are very useful, and would do credit to any maker of fireworks, and one has plenty of time to lie down before they increase their brilliance. The Kaiser also kindly provides searchlights, and one is forcibly reminded of the Crystal Palace en fête. Sometimes he shows us a target, a working party of Germans putting up a fence themselves; or he catches us: in either case the work is carried on until a burst of shells a few minutes later compels the party to fall back to its own trench in haste.

So the night goes on until dawn and the prospect of a rest; and at last each man falls asleep with the knowledge that Lloyd George has had another twenty-four hours in which to produce shells.

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