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Caring for the Wounded

Private Ambrose

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Private S P Ambrose (37394) was wounded at Arras in March 1917 serving with the 5th Battalion. His account of his wounding and his subsequent treatment by the system is probably fairly typical and is reproduced below. A 'Blighty' was a wound which required repatriation to England. For many this also meant a permanent end to their Army career and survival with honour and dignity. It was a situation greatly to be prized.

Catching a Blighty

Ambrose had been in the Arras area since Oct 21st 1916. It had been regarded as a 'safe' area where both the Germans and the British sent their troops to recover from fighting elsewhere. A major activity was planned for April 9th 1917 as part of the Nivelle Plan, but Private Ambrose and the 5th were engaged in minor engagements when on March 18th he got his 'Blighty' when retiring back to his lines through the barbed wire. He recalled:-

Just as I was going through I felt a puff of air which almost took my breath away and a funny sensation all over me. My legs seemed nearly useless. Anyway in a second or so I was myself again except one leg still felt useless. I had about 10 or 12 yards to go to get into our front line. I made for it; one ankle turning over as I went, but no pain. One eye was stopped up with what appeared dirt. I got in the front line and had a look at myself and found my leg was covered with blood from below the knee. I got along to a dug-out where the stretcher bearers were. They cut my trousers and puttees off and found I was hit below the knee and they did my eye up and they were all pleased as they said '*Its a Blighty one*'

I stayed in the dug-out an hour till the Germans stopped shelling and felt happy, but began to find it painful. At last I started for the dressing station. I had to get along as best I could as the stretchers were being used for worse cases. A pal carried me some of the way and I managed the rest. Everyone we passed said I was lucky - I thought the same thing.

When we arrived in Arras a car was waiting to take us to the Dressing Station, which was a convent in Arras. I went there, was bandaged up again and had some refreshment, labelled and then sent in Red Cross cars to Avesnes le Compte Casualty Clearing Station. This was huts. There was one Sister there. We stayed one night, going next day to Frevent by car. I remained there two days in huts. It seemed to be nice to be away from the noise of the line. Arras was getting too noisy day and night as this was only a few days before the big offensive.

Leaving Frevent in Red Cross cars we were taken to the station to the train. I might say I went as a stretcher case from Arras but the roads were very bad, nearly bumping us off the stretchers. Arriving in the train we were served out with cigarettes and matches and then we had dinner. A carriage holds about thirty stretchers. There is a passage down the centre and three rows of stretchers above each other on each side.

We left Frevent arriving at Le Treport after dark. We had a most comfortable ride as it was a train given by the Great Eastern Railway. We had a good tea on our journey. At the station we heard noises we knew to be English girls which was a pleasant change from the jabber of mademoiselles. They were motor drivers. Going from the station was a slow ride as it was all up hill. [TX00610A]

Hospital in France

Ambrose was to spend the rest of March 1917 and most of April in No 3 General Hospital at Le Treport in France, with a spell in no 14 Isolation Hospital. His account gives a good idea of how the Base hospitals coped with the very large number of men who were flowing through the system.:

At the Hospital we were taken in the hall where an inspection of our labels took place to see what our wounds were, being sent to different wards accordingly. There were some wounded Germans along with us who seemed quite pleased with themselves. They were sent to a ward by themselves. After having a bath we went to bed. Of course I stayed in bed for some time. Our daily routine was : Orderlies or nurses woke us at 5.30 for a wash, went to sleep again till they came to make our beds and they had breakfast, porridge, bread, butter and tea. Then we amused ourselves till the MO came and said what treatment we were to have. I was ordered for X-ray to see if there was any shrapnel in my leg. Next was dinner; meat and vegetables and soft puddings. Tea at 5.00 and supper at 7.00. In the afternoon I went for X-ray, having to lay on a table while they took 4 X-ray photos.

The hospital we were in was a large German hotel in peace time. It held 2000 wounded and was on top of the cliffs where we had a good view of the sea. This was also the hotel where Crippen and Miss Le Neve stayed before they went to America. The Doctor came round every morning and great excitement was caused when the nurses came in and said he would be marking them for Blighty. He came in several times before I was marked. All were very disappointed when they were not marked, but

one morning he came in and said he had to mark everyone out: some for Blighty and some convalescent. My turn was for Blighty. The nurses were all very nice, mostly Scotch.

The day before we were going to Blighty I did not feel very well, but I kept quiet for fear they would say I was not well enough to go. But that was no good as one of the nurses saw lots of spots on my face and she called the MO in and he said I had German measles and ordered me to No 14 General Hospital in isolation camp, so I went there in the afternoon, having to stay three weeks. The isolation tents were large double marquees about twelve in each. We had a good time while being there. Next to us was a large hut for nurses and lady motor drivers who had measles. They used to visit us and bring us cigarettes and chocolates.

I was there just over a fortnight and was then sent to the surgical ward at no 14 General. By this time my leg was nearly well. I had begun to walk about and I could see a little with my eye. One day a Captain came in and marked me for convalescence so I wondered if I should get to Blighty at all till after going back to the trenches. All the patients who could walk had to attend a dressing hut to save the work of nurses in the wards. I attended the hut for dressing. One nurse was very rough, she was nicknamed 'shrapnel Kate' and another who was very careful was called 'gentle Lizzie'.

In the hut we had to see the MO every other morning. When I saw him and told him I could not see he marked my paper for England so it then had to be passed by the Captain who happened to be the one who had marked me for convalescence, but he passed me this time and then we had to see the Colonel in the evening who soon signed the paper. We still attended for some days as it was often a week or more before we could get away to England. Some men who had been marked a fortnight were not gone then. During my time there several convoys of wounded came in as there were big things happening up the line. One came in at five one morning, another at six, a third at nine. Many stretchers a lot of walking cases. They were all covered in mud, clothes torn, tired, arms in slings and heads bandaged, but most of them happy. No one can realise what a convoy from the line is like who have not seen one. When they get to England they have clean clothes, are clean themselves and have had better food and comfortable beds which soon improves everyone.

Several English people were there who had come over to see a son or sweetheart who was dangerously wounded. They were all very nice to us. These hospitals are very large huts stretched all over the ground round the no 3 General. Hundreds of them, each holding 40 beds and in the centre was a large place built of tin outside and wood inside. It was six large huts each pointing in a different direction, one end of each hut being joined making a six point star. This was where they operated from morning to night. Stretchers coming from all parts of the hospital and where shrapnel was taken out of legs or arms amputated.

Sergeants came into the wards and called out the names of men to go to England. It was usually Weds or Sat. One Weds he came and warned some to go but not me, then on Sunday morning he came again and warned some to go that night, but it didn't seem as though my turn would be then. We were disappointed thinking we should have to wait till Weds or the next Sunday, but in the evening he came and told us all was to go that could walk from the cars, as those which went at night were all stretchers. So we had to get our khaki that evening and have all ready before we went to bed as he did not know what time we were going. [TX00610B]

Journey to Blighty

The account continues describing the journey back to England and gives a glimpse of the enormous logistic operation which was busy transporting men and materials across the Channel.

In the morning they woke us at 3.00 and told us to be at the dressing hut by 4.00. We were there by time leaving at 5 o'clock in cars for the station. We left Treport about 8.00 arriving Boulogne about two in the afternoon. In the station were two Red Cross trains just finished taking off wounded and three behind us. Three Red Cross boats were waiting for us. They were all side by side. We had to walk over two into the third one and then wait for the other two to be filled. It was lovely and warm. We were on the deck, down below being stretcher cases. Our boat was the 'Princess Elizabeth', a Belgian boat. We left at 5.45 with an escort of three destroyers, one submarine and two seaplanes. There was also a transport with men going on leave and the other two Red Cross boats.

The sea was calm as a duck pond, hardly a ripple on. We watched the sun go down over England, all in the best of spirits. We all had to put life belts on. A few minutes after sunset we could see the cliffs of Dover in the distance. All gave a cheer and I think that was the end of a perfect day for us.

We arrived at Dover at 9 o'clock, it was nearly dark. We passed several battleships in the harbour who turned their guard out and played the salute with bugles as we passed. We arrived in Blighty April 30th 1917.

We left Dover by Red Cross train at 10 o'clock but did not know where we were going to. Later we found out we were going to Norwich. We arrived at 4 in the morning and were driven by VAD motors to Thorpe War Hospital, 4 miles out of Norwich. We had tea, bread, butter and eggs as soon as we arrived. [TX00610C]

Hospital in England

Life in hospital in England was not as comfortable as in France. The civilians were not always as sympathetic and had little understanding of the horrors the men had been through. Food was not as good or as plentiful as in France but there were other advantages. Ambrose's account continues with descriptions of his time at Hospitals at Thorpe, Epsom and Kingston. Of particular interest are his accounts of visits and excursions which were a feature of the convalescent programmes for the wounded:-

We got up and had a bath and went back to bed till the MO came and saw us. They were civilian doctors. He told me that I

could get up, so I did as I had had enough of staying in bed in France. We had to be up early at Norwich. They used to come and wake us at 5.30 which was 4.30 Greenwich time. We had breakfast at 6.00, dinner at 12.00, teas at 4.30, supper at 7.00 and had to be in bed by 8.00. The sun used to shine on us, it was too hot to sleep. We had a night nurse who everyone disliked through her saying the German wounded were as good as we were. She afterwards got called Mrs Hindenburg.

The grounds around the hospital were very nice and we used to sleep in the afternoons on the lawns. The third day I was there the Major came and inspected us and ordered me for X-ray again so I had to go down next day and had another four plates taken of my eye and I was to see the eye specialist on Sunday. I went on Sunday and after testing sight he examined it with instruments and told me there was a piece of steel in the vital part and sight would go completely in a short time and the best thing to do was to have my eye taken out to save the sight of the other.

So the next time the Major came round he saw the report and said I could have the operation next day (May 16th) at 5 o'clock. Had ether applied which gives you a peculiar sensation and noises in the head and all objects seem to go away from you until you cannot see them. I remembered no more till I woke up in the ward at 8.30 and saw all the nurses round the bed.

I had no pain at all and told the nurses they had not taken it out and began to pull the bandage off to see. Then I went to sleep till morning and looking in my locker found a nice parcel from home which had come the night before. I had to stay in bed the next day, but got up the second day and was soon able to get out in the grounds again.

We spent a good deal of our time doing fancy work; baskets and mats for the Red Cross. We went for pleasant walks along a river several times going in the boats with the nurses. I went to Norwich twice but did not enjoy it much as it was too far to walk, from 2 to 7.

The food was very bad and we had no sugar in our tea and puddings. Our bread was 4 oz per man for breakfast and tea and a small piece for supper. The Head Sister was always quarrelling with the nurses or the patients. Some of the time I helped the nurses by getting the dressing ready and cleaning the instruments. After a fortnight the Major came and inspected us and said I was fit to go to an Eye Hospital, marking my sheet for Epsom.

Leaving Norwich on June 6th at 9 o'clock, I arrived at Epsom at 4 O'clock at the County of London War Hospital. This place held 5000 patients and staff. There were nearly 500 eye cases. We were given a good dinner when we arrived and tea came almost on top of it. I saw eye specialists next day who told me I should have to wait a time. There was a large recreation room or theatre which held 2000 and a lovely tea room where patients took their friends. We had to go to the theatre three times a week for cigarettes or tobacco. There were several good concerts while I was there. We had the best of food and nice gardens to spend our time in. I went into Epsom several times to the pictures but my time was short as I went to Kingston Infirmary on June 14th.

Kingston Infirmary was part civilian and part military with about 70 soldiers. We had a fine time while we were there. We were allowed out from 9.00 am to 8.00 pm whereas at the other two hospitals we could go out only from 2.00 to 7.00 pm. The food was good and no army doctors and the people of Kingston some of the best. We visited the town first and the pictures where we can go in free and the riverside walks and seats passed many an hour away. We spent many hours in Richmond Park which was only 200 yards from the hospital. We were sitting in the park, I and two others, when we were beckoned by three young ladies to come across. They were having tea and they asked us to have a cup but as they had only brought food for themselves that day they asked us to come to the same place next day if we cared to and they would bring enough for all. So we met them there next day and had a good tea. They were munition girls from Sopwith's Aeroplane Factory.

On Weds June 22nd it was Kingston War Market, being a procession at 2.00 and 5.00 o'clock, the dresses making a fine display. In the Market Square ladies sold things for the Red Cross.

On June 23rd my wife and sister came to see me and stayed at a cottage above the Infirmary. I had been recommended to go there and get them rooms by another patient and was successful. The lady was most homely and pleasant to us and also another wounded soldier, treating us both like her own boys. We spent many an hour there which we very much appreciated as it was nice to know you had somewhere to go for a change from hospital as we were getting a bit fed up with it.

On Sunday we went to Hampton Court about two miles from Kingston Hill, spending the afternoon in the Court and grounds and having tea in Bushey Park which was opposite Hampton. The children enjoyed it but were a bit frightened of the deer as numbers came round us and took food out of our hands. Finishing the day by walking through the park and taking a tram from the gates to Kingston Hill.

My wife went home on Tuesday June 26th. I went to Twickenham with her which was about four miles. Sixteen of the wounded all enjoyed a river trip to Chertsey, starting from Kingston Bridge at 2 pm and arriving at Chertsey Lock about 4.30. As soon as we turned back we had a good tea and plenty of fruit in the cabin. We had a good supply of cigarettes on the way, getting home about 7.30.

On the 7th the eye specialists came and brought us artificial eyes to wear. To get used to them we had small ones first. Surbiton Golf Club gave us a good outing, driving from the hospital and back in a motor car. We had a football match, tea and prizes afterwards. A good deal of our time was spent making baskets, mats or photographing. During a few days my pal had his mother staying at Kingston at the place my wife stayed. I spent a good deal of time with them and our friends, having another visit to Hampton Court and going in the maze. We had tea in the garden of an hotel just outside.

On the 18th we went to London by motorbuses having a pleasant ride through Roehampton and Putney. From Putney to Euston Station to see my friend's mother off, being accompanied by a lady friend from Rose Cottage (where we were all welcome) We walked back through London, going to Selfridges to see their roof garden. From the top of the building we had a good view of London. After having tea we got on the bus for home (or hospital) being in about 9 pm.

Joe, me and a friend went to Kew Gardens one Friday, a most unlucky day in this case as Kew Gardens are free, except Tuesdays and Fridays. Of course we went Friday and had to pay 6d each. We spent an enjoyable afternoon going through some of the hot houses and grounds. We had tea in Richmond Park with our friends.

I am sure we had a good time at Kingston. My pal Joe left a day or two before I did and in his hurry to get off in the morning he took my eye by mistake, his being brown and mine blue. Luckily he had to go to Epsom first and the eye specialist was going to Kingston so he brought it back again.

My last day I spent the afternoon at the Police Sports at Surbiton. It was a glorious day. I returned in the evening by tram and on going to the ward I found I had to go to Epsom in the morning so I went out again to wish my friends good-bye, getting in again by climbing the wall (not the first time I had done it) at 12 o'clock. I left Kingston at 8 o'clock and on arriving at Epsom found out that I had to go on ten days leave, receiving £1 from the hospital. I arrived home in the evening, leave starting from the next day, July 28th. I spent five days at Aldermaston and five at Kidmore, having a very wet time. For eight days it poured with rain. [TX00610D]

With the Third Battalion

Ambrose's return to army life after his leave was typical of many of the wounded. At first men were always returned to the battalion they had been in when they were injured, by early 1915 they were being sent to any battalion in their regiment and by 1916 were being re-deployed wherever the need was greatest. Thus Ambrose returned first to the 3rd Reserve Battalion and then to the Royal Defence Corps for Home duties. He was lucky in that he did not have to return to the fighting. His account continues:-

I went from leave to Portsmouth Victoria Barracks on the 7th of August and was attached to the 3rd Battalion Royal Berks. I did a few parades with the hardening squad, which was men back from hospital. I was transferred to the 629th Employment Coy on Aug 10th having new no 282644. The next day I had to move to Cambridge Barracks and was attached to the Royal Defence Corps.

I did nothing for the first few days, except help in the Dining Hall. to give out meals. Afterwards I was given a job as cyclist orderly at the RDC Orderly Room. Three weeks after I went home for a months Agricultural Furlough and was then granted 3 days leave till Oct 20th 1917.

On my return I was employed at the Baths, to keep the fires and clean the baths etc. We were in the married quarters at the Barracks having four in a room, afterwards moving to the large rooms again.

My fourth Christmas was spent at Portsmouth. We had a fairly good time considering the scarcity of food outside, having steak pie, cabbage, potatoes and parsnips, Christmas pudding with 3d pieces in, apples and nuts and beer or minerals. I went on leave for the New Year, spending a good time and having good weather. Our pay was increased from Sept 29th but we did not get any of it till the week before Xmas, having a good sum to pay us for the back weeks, afterwards getting 10/6 a week. [TX00611]