

THE DIARIES



JAN – FEB 1915

FROM DEADLOCK IN THE TRENCHES TO AMERICA

On Christmas Day at midnight the truce ended, and the tiresome vigil in trenches knee deep in icy water was resumed, with hundreds of victims of frostbite daily, and hospitals busy with amputations. The New Year started with the newspaper chatter of a great Allied offensive, which made those who knew reality smile. While the Allies had checked Germany's amazing preparation with a defined boundary, their successes had been chiefly defensive, at an appalling cost. With enough ammunition an enemy, numerically vastly inferior, can maintain a fortified line. The British had agreed to land an expeditionary force of 150,000 men. In six months their losses were almost double that number, and they were maintaining an army of 350,000 on a line short, if estimated by miles, but difficult and costly when we considered the exposed position in Flanders, and the operations which virtually entailed the siege of Lille. Many were scoffing at the delay in equipping Kitchener's new army. The first million rifles ordered from the United States were promised for delivery in nine months to a year. Tools necessary to make parts for machine guns could not be supplied before the summer. For some months nearly three million of the finest men in the British Isles were drilling with old rifles and sticks while government plants, working night and day, were just able to meet the wastage of weapons at the front and supply sufficient for effective target practice for the new army. Japanese rifles bridged one gap, but it needed a year to create factories to turn out an ample supply, and two years for adequate artillery and shells.



1st Jan 1915: Our departure for Birkenhead has been delayed for two days because of bad weather. Today, though, the mercury has settled a little and we left Portsmouth at dawn. Within an hour, we were gripped in the teeth of a tremendous storm

1st Jan 1915: Through distorted radio chatter, we hear that less than thirty miles away, H.M.S. "Formidable" has been sunk by a German submarine in the English Channel.

3rd Jan 1915: News that Joffre's II Corps has re-taken most of the lost ground in the Champagne region but the Germans have made four

massive counter-attacks against the Fourth Army and disorganised the French offensive. The French used artillery-fire to keep pressure on the Germans but another counter-attack drove them back to a salient west of Perthes. Once again hundreds are dying in this to-and-fro madness.

5th Jan 1915: After docking at Birkenhead, I crossed the Mersey and made my way to Castle Street where I was pleased to find that the office of shipping agents, Elder, Dempster & Co. was still at the address that I had visited to arrange my first journey as a war correspondent, with Sir Francis Scott's expedition to Kumassi. Nothing was sailing to New York but I was able to book a passage to Philadelphia.

6th Jan 1915: With a day and a half to wait for my ship, I spent much of the time reflecting on my sorry journey from the trenches, bringing pictures to my mind of the young men dying today at Artois and Champagne

7th Jan 1915: Now aboard SS Haverford for Philadelphia - but my trials and challenges are nothing compared with those of the men at the front

8th Jan 1915: Shocked at the recent cessation of hostilities over Christmas, the German Army issues a general order prohibiting any further fraternisation

9th Jan 1915: News today that the Germans have forced a huge split in the French lines near Soissons and that Paris is once again threatened

12th Jan 1915: Four months ago I was with the French, taking Hill 132 at Soissons: now they flee the Germans: countless deaths with no gain.

12th Jan 1915: Amid reports of further slaughter at the front and gas attacks on the people of Paris, I am just two days from peace in America

13th Jan 1915: News that the British War Council has resolved that the Admiralty should prepare for a naval expedition in February against the Dardanelles

14th Jan 1915: Another German attack begins to the north of Soissons, on the route to Paris but the attack was made by only a small numbers of troops and the French defenders repulsed the attack

15th Jan 1915: Philadelphia: no bullets, no screaming, no killing, no fear - how do I convince myself that I should I be here?

15th Jan 1915: It is winter in the mountains - my favourite season of the year - and I will join Mary and Edwin there soon; now though, I must make my way to New York to see Roosevelt

16th Jan 1915: Arrived in New York to find that Roosevelt is on a three-day trip to Harvard; no matter, Beveridge has a briefing for me

16th Jan 1915: Despite the election crash of his Progressive Party, Roosevelt still thunders against President Wilson's stance of "Watchful Waiting" and is now opening direct communication with Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey

17th Jan 1915: Beveridge arranges an office for me and I begin to gather and organise my notes as information for a letter that Roosevelt is preparing to send to Sir Edward Grey. One of the critical issues that Roosevelt must raise is the Allies refusal to discuss anything with American war correspondents

19th Jan 1915: Roosevelt returns from his trip to Harvard today and I am both shocked and concerned. I have worked with "Teddy" for 14 years now but I have never seen him so haggard or tired; I fear he will never be re-elected

19th Jan 1915: News of an airship raid with two Zeppelins dropping bombs on Great Yarmouth, Sheringham, King's Lynn and the surrounding villages. Four people were killed and sixteen injured.

20th Jan 1915: Arguing for war and angry at Wilson's inaction, Roosevelt wants me back in Europe to feed him information on Germany's plans

21st Jan 1915: In composing his letter to Sir Edward Grey, Roosevelt adds a concluding sentence that crystallises the US position: "President Wilson is looking to his future and is certainly not desirous of war with anybody"

23rd Jan 1915: After some days with Roosevelt, neither of us believe that this war can be won unless America joins the allies, so I am with him and I will go back to Europe under cover

24th Jan 1915: Beveridge tells me that my passage to Southampton is booked on the SS Minneapolis leaving on 2nd February. Just a week to see my family

26th Jan 1915: Arrived at our mountain cabin with a mixed bag of emotions and expectations. Edwin is excited but Mary seems diffident, then sad, then angry when I tell her I must leave on Saturday

27th Jan 1915: I talk of the thousands of men, not much older than Edwin, dying in the trenches but, although she understands, Mary is still angry. She is right, of course

28th Jan 1915: Telegram from Beveridge reporting that British Government have confirmed that there will be a naval attack on the Dardanelles in February

29th Jan 1915: Making preparations to leave again for New York - I have to meet Beveridge on 1st February before sailing for Southampton on 2nd

30th Jan 1915: My mood becomes as black as Mary's as I realise that, within weeks, I will be back to the blood and slaughter of the trenches

1st Feb 1915: Roosevelt is away but I meet with Beveridge and he confirms that my cover as a buyer for Lamsons will stand for now but I will be operating with another colleague, J*****n, who will be making the actual purchases.

2nd Feb 1915: Bitter numbing cold keeps us huddled in our cabin as the S.S. "New York" is guided away from her berth towards Sandy Hook Bay, and on to her voyage. Within an hour of leaving, we are told that the scheduled seven days is likely to be nearer nine.

3rd Feb 1915: J*****n and I agree to follow the same pattern of communications that me and his predecessor used, namely: operating separately but as close to each other as possible, avoiding acknowledgement of each other,

4th Feb 1915: Shocking news breaks that Kaiser Wilhelm has announced Germany's intention to sink any and all ships sailing under the flags of Britain, Russia or France found within British waters.

5th Feb 1915: Reports that Germany has warned neutral countries that neither crews nor passengers would be safe while traveling within the designated war zone around the British Isles. If neutral ships choose to enter British waters after February 18th, when the policy comes into effect, they would be doing so at their own risk.

11th Feb 1915: As we approach Southampton water, the impact of Germany's declaration of a war zone around our coast becomes abundantly clear. We dock in a frenzy; I count 40 ships at anchor, more manoeuvring to their berths, more racing at full steam out to the Solent. With this much traffic around, it should be simple enough to secure passage.

11th Feb 1915: Ships laden with men and munitions speed back and forth to the coast of France ahead of Germany's threatened submarine attacks.

12th Feb 1915: Adding to the chaos and confusion, five battalions of Territorial Reserves arrive at Southampton today en route to the battlefields of Europe. Knowing that many will soon die miserably, it is sad to see the excitement in the faces of the young soldiers leaving for war

13th Feb 1915: Much cheering echoed around the docks as news breaks that the biggest air raid of the war occurred yesterday, when 34 planes from the British Naval Wing attacked the German occupied coastal towns of Blankenberghe, Ostend and Zeebrugge in Belgium.

13th Feb 1915: Reports that yesterday's air attacks targeted the railway stations in Ostend and Blankenberghe as well as railway lines across the coast that were being used by the occupying military forces from Germany. The town of Zeebrugge, which was being used by the Germans as a base of operations for their deadly submarine warfare, and from which they planned a blockade of the Belgian coast, was also a major target of the attack. The raid was a great success, causing massive damage to German forces and assets. Despite coming under

heavy ground fire from German anti-aircraft guns, not a single Allied plane was shot down and no Allied lives were lost

14th Feb 1915: After receiving orders for service in Flanders, 3rd Battalion the Monmouthshire Regiment sails from Southampton on the S.S. "Chyabassa". We are aboard with them

15th Feb 1915: I read that President Wilson has sent a note of protest calling for strict accountability on Germany for the safety of neutral ships

16th Feb 1915: We dock at Dunkirk and I manage to locate and access a communications unit. My first signal to Beveridge confirms the submarine blockade. Roosevelt will use this to challenge Wilson's apathetic response

17th Feb 1915: Dunkirk is in chaos and it takes us a full 24 hours to prepare for our 35 kilometre march to Cassel. We leave at 3.00 pm in driving rain and sleet and, within an hour, we make camp for the night as it is too dark to go any further. I am tempted to continue alone but decide that it is safer to stay

18th Feb 1915: Reports from the front indicate that repeated French attacks on the German trenches in Champagne have won only 500 yards of ground at a cost of 50,000 men, while Germany has re-taken British trenches near St. Eloi, with another 24,000 casualties. The stalemate continues and all action along the entire front has ground to a halt, but Gen French and his staff appear to have no alternative strategies

19th Feb 1915: The General Staff appear to favour a process of slow attrition, each step prepared by artillery fire followed up with a measured advance, but with artillery blinded by snow and freezing fog, and soldiers trapped in knee-deep mud and decisive attacks have become impossible

20th Feb 1915: Frustrated by stagnation on the Western Front, the War Cabinet has approved the opening of another theatre in the Mediterranean. Promising a breakthrough on a new front, Churchill's plan for a naval attack on the Dardanelles channel was launched yesterday

21st Feb 1915: Reports that C-in-C Sir John French is working with General Haig to plan an attack with Le Bassee and Aubers Ridge as the

targets. Meanwhile there are sporadic attacks and minor battles along 20 miles of trenches in the Ypres salient today; and another 9450 men die in the mud

22nd Feb 1915: The 3rd Battalion Monmouthshire Regiment moved from Cassel to billets at Steenvorde, about 14 miles west of Ypres. They had their first experience of marching on the Pave, a road surface of uneven stone, which in wet weather became treacherous to the heavily loaded infantryman.

23rd Feb 1915: The deadlocked lull in the fighting allows me to move freely behind the lines and I head for St Eloi, where reports suggest that an attack on Ypres is imminent. Trudging north in the snow, I pass a medical team digging frozen bodies from the trenches; my offer of help is politely refused. I find nothing significant and decide to return to Steenvorde

24th Feb 1915: It is early evening when I reach Steenvorde where my arrival causes some concern to the RMP unit stationed there and I am arrested. I am told that my identity as an import buyer has to be confirmed by US authorities; meanwhile I am held as a suspected deserter

24th Feb 1915: The rumour in the Steenvorde compound is that Churchill's attack on the Dardanelles has been suspended because of bad weather

25th Feb 1915: High activity at Steenvorde as a major allied force assembles, with 350 artillery pieces, for imminent move south to La Bassee

25th Feb 1915: French aircraft overhead bombing German troop concentrations in Champagne area in preparation for Haig's new offensive strategy

26th Feb 1915: Still awaiting confirmation from US; locked in a compound at Steenvorde with suspected deserters; all with their story to tell. A crying 19 year old sobs as he re-lives his nightmares of the constant rain, the sliding earth, the trench walls collapsing; and his friends buried alive

27th Feb 1915: My “identity” is now confirmed and as I leave Steenvoorde I join up again with the Monmouth’s now marching to Ypres via St Jans Capelle and Baillieu. Orders were issued assigning the 3rd Monmouth's to the 28th Infantry Division, which was commanded at this time by Major General Bulfin who I knew briefly in South Africa.

27th Feb 1915: Following reports that Germany employed the dreaded “liquid fire” against the French at Verdun yesterday, we move closer to the Ypres salient with a heightened level of fear; the heavy guns pound intermittently and the smell of cordite hangs heavily in the air

28th Feb 1915: The casualty count for the first six months of this human tragedy is approaching two million; for nought but a few miles of mud

