Work in Progress

Quakers in the the Carnage of the First World War : An Individual Story from the Friends' Ambulance Unit.

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Introduction.
The following account is based upon family history research and is submitted under the heading of "Work in Progress". At the end, the writer presents some of the thoughts and questions which it leaves in his mind. Some of these questions are no doubt already well documented and he would welcome advice on where to look. Perhaps readers who had relatives in the Friends Ambulance Unit 1914 to 1918 might be able to enlarge the picture from old letters, family reminiscences or other sources.

The story concerns two brothers, Laurence and Norman Gripper, who came from an old Essex Quaker family. They were intending to become electrical engineers, although Norman, the younger, was still at Bootham School in 1914. When war broke out they both registered as conscientious objectors, and were granted absolute exemption from combat service. However in February 1915 Laurence decided to join the Friends' Ambulance Unit in France. Initially he served as a medical orderly, then later qualified as an ambulance driver. Norman was determined to follow his example, and family tradition is that he falsified his age in order to be eligible. His mother was very much against his going, but finally consented on condition Laurence looked after him. He enlisted on 23d November 1915 and after training at Jordans Camp,

finally joined Lawrence's ambulance convoy SSA 14 on 7th August 1916.

The Friends' Ambulance Unit.
The FAU started with about 45 members in 1914, and had grown to a strength of 600 by the end of the war. Twenty six members were killed during this period and ninety six were awarded the Croix de Guerre. It was laid down at the outset that they were not to become involved in combat situations, so they were not allowed to run Casualty Clearing Stations right in the front line. Their role soon became established as taking the wounded back from the trenches to transit hospitals in the rear for "triage". (This procedure was introduced by the French. Doctors separated casualties into three categories: those who were going to die and so would only get morphine, those who might be saved by immediate surgery, and those who could probably survive the journey to a base hospital after just dressings, splints and drugs.)

The Friends' ambulance convoys, known as Sections Sanitaires Anglaises, worked with the French Army throughout most of the war. They were modelled on the French Army Sections Sanitaires, with which they were virtually interchangeable. Personnel wore military-style uniforms with distinguishing shoulder flashes, which was necessary to give them protection under the Geneva Convention in the event of capture by the Germans. SSA 14 had 22 Buick ambulance cars, plus a kitchen and a workshop truck. These would be regarded as primitive by modern standards - slow, noisy, and hard-sprung. A driver was permanently assigned to each vehicle, with an orderly or "sous-conducteur" to help. The total strength of a convoy was 56 men under a "Chef-adjoint" and a "Sous-adjoint". Administratively they were regarded as units of the French Army, and received the same rations, fuel supplies and so on. A French warrant officer was attached for liaison purposes. Their noncombatant status was honourably respected except for one recorded occasion when soldiers in a desperate situation commandeered an ambulance. The French government apologised for this later.

Just after the war two members, M. Miles and J.E.Tatham wrote a history of the FAU from 1914 to 1919. As well as giving a straightforward account of the Unit's operations, the authors describe some of the good memories such as the bivouacs and camp cooking, the sing-songs, the many comrades they knew amongst the French, and so on. But they also speak of the dark side, such as having to crawl slowly over rough ground in bottom gear, under fire, with men in agony in the back, and sometimes having to stop and get their tow rope out to drag dead horses out of the way.

The Situation in May 1918

In the Spring of 1918 the Germans launched a series of massive attacks on the northern sectors of the Western Front in France, in what was to be a final attempt to win before the new American armies were deployed against them. They drove the British and French back many miles until both sides were exhausted and stalemate returned. At the beginning of May the Allied Supreme Commander Marshal Foch called upon Field Marshal Haig to send some battle-worn British divisions south to a quiet sector of the line so that some fresh French troops could be released to guard a more dangerous sector. So three British Divisions took over the right hand end of a narrow ridge north west of Amiens along which runs the Chemin des Dames. They had suffered heavy casualties in the battles of March and April, and had just been made up to strength with very young conscripts, older men of poor physique, and wounded returned from hospital. By 1918 both sides, with the exception of the Americans, were "scraping the bottom of the barrel" for manpower.

The German Plan

Contrary to Allied belief, the Germans were in fact planning to attack across the Chemin des Dames. Thick woods behind their lines helped to hide some of their massive preparations, but it was obvious something was going on. Foch and Haig decided it was a feint to draw their forces south from a real danger area around Arras and Albert, and so did nothing about it.

Considerable detail of the battle has been learned from the official French history, and while it is not all strictly relevant to the account, enough may be described for the reader to imagine the terror and mayhem that such a battle would have let loose.

Instead of costly head-on attacks with masses of men as at the Somme or Verdun, General von Hutier on the German Staff had worked out new tactics for what was later to be known as the 2nd Battle of the Aisne. Specially trained and equipped "storm troops" armed with machine pistols and grenades would concentrate on weak spots in the defences and "flow" round strong points into the Allied rear, while slower more heavily armed units would "mop up" these now isolated centres of resistance with flame-throwers and artillery. The only counter to these tactics was defence in depth. Unfortunately General Duchene who commanded the Chemin des Dames Sector was of the old school and insisted on the front line being the main defence, against current General Staff policy.

The German artillery plan was also new. 850 batteries of guns along the 24 mile attack frontage were to drench a twelve mile depth behind the lines with a mixture of explosive and poison gas, with no ranging shots to give prior warning. (Both sides by 1918 were using large amounts of chemical weapons). Although the radius affected by a single gas shell was comparatively limited, their use in large numbers meant that soldiers would be constantly putting on and removing their masks, which in any case became contaminated and less use as time went on. The wearer of the standard British gas mask had to put a clip on his nose and breathe through a tube held in his mouth, which was both unpleasant and tiring. Civilians, farm stock and wildlife had, of course, no protection at all. The bombardment timetable included a number of random cease-fires just long enough for the defenders to think it safe to emerge from their shelters and begin repairing telephone wires, loading casualties on to stretchers and so forth, only to be caught in the open by renewed salvoes.

At this point in the story one may perhaps digress for a moment. The study of war will be repugnant to Friends, and some may wish to skip the next paragraphs. Yet those who seek peace need to understand the mentality of those who command in war. German staff officers such as their artillery expert Colonel Brueckmueller, like their opposite numbers in the Allied headquarters, knew perfectly well the dreadful effect of explosives, steel shards and poison gases on human bodies. Yet they were not monsters, but honourable and educated men with a strict code of behaviour. How could they plan to inflict such distress and suffering upon their fellow men?

The answer lies in the classic theory of war, as set out by Clausewitz, which was part of their upbringing. The aim of war according to this theory is, when all else has failed, to bend your opponent to your will by the use of force. This may be to gain territory or resources, or it may be to fend off a perceived threat to your own country by your opponent. The duty of the professional soldier, once his government decides upon a war, is to get it over as quickly and decisively as possible. To achieve this, one seeks to bring about and win a decisive battle, and to this end it is necessary to use all the force at one's disposal, however brutal. Pulling punches only prolongs the war, so that more suffering is caused in the long run. On the other hand, killing for killing's sake is not part of the professional soldier's creed, and once the enemy yields he is to be treated fairly and honourably.

This was how the nations of Europe visualized war in August 1914. Everyone thought the decisive battle would have taken place by Christmas, and then the armies could all shake hands and go home again. They were not mad: they just had no idea what it was going to be like. But by May 1918, after four years of appalling slaughter, the politicians still could not, or would not, make peace, and their generals still sought in vain for their clear-cut victory. So once again thousands of German, British and French young men, including the two Gripper brothers, were to be caught up in the worst violence that skill and experience could devise.

The Attack

On Sunday May 26th, SSA 14 was stationed at Lime, about 12 miles behind the front line in the area held by the French 157th Division. A nearby chateau was in use as a military hospital. Crews were having supper that evening when a call came to be ready to move in an hour and a half. Nothing happened, and most went to sleep in their ambulances. Then at 1 a.m. on the Monday morning the German "hurricane" bombardment began. Everyone put on their gas masks and tried to go on sleeping. At first light, 3.40 a.m., the storm troops began their assault, and in the early morning mist they carved right through the British front line, and the whole front began to break. Confused and desperate defenders strove to stem the German onrushes but were steadily beaten back. It began to look as though the Germans were going to achieve the break-through they had sought for so long.

A number of French soldiers suffering from flu had been billeted in nearby villages a few days earlier, and ambulances were hurriedly sent to fetch them back to the hospital. Some had to pass through the little town of Braine, which was under heavy fire. Here a shell hit Norman Gripper's ambulance. He was killed outright and his companion Hugo Jackson was mortally wounded, dying later without regaining consciousness. When they failed to return , a search party which included his elder brother Laurence went out and found them. Norman and Hugo were buried in the chateau grounds later the same day by a Presbyterian Chaplain, with military honours. This might seem strange for Quakers, but perhaps it was along with other British casualties, and perhaps it also shows the regard in which the soldiers held the FAU.

From French records of the battle, the funeral must have been a hurried affair in the evening, with German storm troopers only a mile or so away. SSA 14 was ordered to withdraw to Villeneuve sur Fere immediately afterwards. Several hundred casualties had to be left behind in the hospital, which was overrun by the Germans that same night. Although it would have been usual in such circumstances for some medical staff to have stayed with them and been taken prisoner as well, it takes little to imagine the wounded men's ordeal, lying in pain, unable to help themselves, breathing air tainted with poison gas , hearing the noise of battle outside, and wondering what was going to happen when the enemy burst in.

By May 30th the Germans had penetrated as far as the Marne, 56 miles from Paris, but then they ground to a halt. The battle has been described as the most disastrous on the Western Front for the British troops engaged. Norman and Hugo were but two of the 28,703 British casualties. (Roughly the entire population of , say, Durham or Newark on Trent)

War Graves

The two Quakers were reinterred after the war in the British military cemetery at Vailly sur Aisne. It contains the graves of 673 British soldiers, one Canadian, one Frenchman and a German. 306 of the bodies are unidentified. Surrounding it is a French cemetery with 1,542 graves. Norman is recorded as having the French Croix de Guerre - the family think posthumously. His age is given as twenty one but he was actually younger. His companion Hugo was twenty eight. According to family tradition, the casualty telegram to the Gripper parents did not say which brother had been killed, and they only found out when Laurence came home on compassionate leave. He continued to serve with the FAU, and was himself awarded the Croix de Guerre in June 1918. He survived the war, returned to being an electrical engineer, raised a family and eventually died of old age some seventy years after he had buried his younger brother in the midst of battle.

Thoughts

1. When war broke out in 1914, Quakers were faced with an unprecedented dilemma, and while some chose complete pacifism and suffered imprisonment for their beliefs, others saw their duty as alleviating suffering even if this meant working alongside the military, effectively part of their medical services albeit without bearing arms. Some were even buried like soldiers, and received medals. There are many letters in the 1914 volume of 'The Friend' from those advocating an ambulance unit at the Front, from others chiding the young men who went to join it and arguing for purely civilian relief work, and from others who were unhappy but felt the volunteers deserved understanding and support. (Unfortunately we also see in this correspondence some Friends accepting the propaganda of the time and its demonizing of the wicked "Hun") In *Quaker Faith and Practice* we can see something of the pacifist's dilemma in the case of Corder Catchpool (1995: 24.23) who actually left the FAU to make a stand against conscription, but would dearly liked to have returned if his conscience had allowed him.

2. How did the FAU come to be serving with the French Army - was it because the British would not accept them? They seem to have been highly regarded by the French, who honoured many of them with the Croix de Guerre. Do we have any memoires or other material on them from the French point of view? Were French Quakers involved? What did the Germans make of them, and were there any German Quakers doing similar work?

3. The experiences they underwent, like millions of others in the 1914-18 war, were appalling. Soldiers themselves could at least relieve their stress by actually fighting back, in the primitive and ugly heat of combat. The ambulance crews, deliberately denying themselves thoughts of revenge or even self-defence, had to wait passively upon the horrors they knew were happening, and then go and do their best to save mangled and dying men, knowing that many of those whom they rescued and took to hospital would eventually be sent back to the trenches again. (This was indeed one of the arguments made in 1914 against the formation of the FAU.) What were their thoughts during the four years of war ? Few who went through the horrors spoke about it afterwards, although the writer's late uncle, Laurence Gripper, did once in a quiet moment say that he never got over the smell of dead horses. Unfortunately the Gripper family have none of the letters the brothers wrote home. Perhaps others have kept such correspondence ?

Sources and Acknowledgements
Josef Keith, The Library of the Society of Friends (where all FAU members' records are now kept)
The Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Library Staff, Imperial War Museum
Deryk Moore, Friends Ambulance Unit, 1939-45
Le Lt-Colonel de Gislain de Bontin, Service Historique de l'Armee de Terre, 77
Family recollections

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