

OSTEND IN 1914

BY MAJOR-GENERAL SIR GEORGE ASTON, K.C.B

‘HAVE you got any uniform?’

I got up from my table in what used to be the First Sea Lord’s room at the Admiralty to meet no less a man than the Chief of the War Staff. It was between six and seven o’clock on a fine summer’s evening, August 25, 1914 — the day when the little Old Contemptibles were standing, hard pressed, at Le Cateau, the Belgian army from Malines was approaching Louvain, and the Hun had begun there the practices which will make the name of Prussian ‘militarism’ stink in the nostrils of all right-minded peoples in generations yet unborn.

In the comparative peace of an office it seemed much like any other evening. The sun was blazing into the room through the leaves of the trees of St. James’s Park, and the shadow of the Memorial to the Royal Marines who went the way of glory in China and South Africa lay strongly defined across the grass. The usual crowd in civilian attire was wending its way homewards from Whitehall by the footpaths and across the Mall. We all wore plain clothes in those days at the Admiralty, and, having been ordered up in a hurry from Portsmouth on the first day of naval mobilization, August 2, 1914, I had brought no uniform with me. I held the rank of Colonel at the time, but from 1908 to 1913 had served in the army as a Brigadier-General, which explains my answer.

‘I’m not sure, but I think I have some Brigadier-General’s uniform at my tailor’s, which I could get if he is still open.’

‘Then you’ll have to be promoted. You had better hurry up, as you are to take command of a force of Marines at once, and occupy Ostend at daybreak to-morrow morning. You must get down to Chatham to-night, and join H.M.S. — at Sheerness. The First Lord will tell you all the rest before you start.’

That was an interesting proposition, not without an element of excitement. The first point to settle was who was to come first, my tailor, or the First Lord. The tailor, obviously, because his establishment would close in a few minutes, and the First Lord would not be likely to be leaving the office for dinner before 8 p.m. To the tailor by taxi, just in time; a hasty mustering of kit, tight and uncomfortable, and blue instead of service dress, but better than going off to hold a General’s command on service against the German army in a gray flannel suit and a straw hat, which, as far as I can remember, was what I was wearing at the time. Then full speed to Eaton Place, where a kind friend was putting me up. A hasty simultaneous packing and explanation, a commission to the son of the house, a great personal chum, to get me an electric torch, and some handy form of soup essence, the two things most useful on my last campaign, as far as I could remember at the moment. A foolscap sized order-book with carbon paper for copies, picked up on my way, and back to the Admiralty by about 7.45 to see the First Lord.

I do not know whether all people are affected in the same way by soft and

noiseless carpets. There is something about them which with me always causes a sense of abasement towards their owners. The Admiralty building contains many corridors, but only one of them is covered with material to soften the footfall of those who approach the Presence. Across that awe-inspiring corridor I was escorted by a messenger. Even after eight years spent in the great Government offices, the messengers who protect the inmates from the public still inspire me with the reverence felt by Dean Hole in the presence of the butler to a Duke; but let that pass. The messenger showed me into the inner sanctuary on the first floor of the Admiralty, looking across the Horse Guards Parade to the Foreign Office. With the First Lord was the Chief of Staff and the Adjutant-General of Marines. I was given my orders, and asked my requirements. These were maps, two hundred bicycles, five hundred rounds of ammunition per rifle; as little personal kit for the men as possible, one or two staff officers, with the proper headquarter 'details,' without which it is impossible to handle a 'brigade,' as the force was called, in the field, and — 'Can I have those orders in writing, please?'

That went without saying, of course, and, followed by wishes for good luck, I went off to my room to square up my Admiralty work. The words of a lecture on tactics once delivered to young officers then occurred to me. It ended with the words, 'Don't forget the three most important points when you go on active service: (1) Think of your men before you think of yourself; (2) Eat, drink, and sleep whenever you get a chance; and (3) Grease your boots.' The first and third did not apply to the present situation, the second did. The Admiralty restaurant did their best in the time available, and while I was

dealing with a cold meal and a railway guide simultaneously the good friend arrived with his motor, an electric torch, the soup essence, his favorite knife (which I still have), and twenty pounds in gold — a detail I had forgotten to provide.

Before leaving the Admiralty I called for my orders, which were given me, with the latest information (8.30 P.M.) from people in London who had left Ostend that day in a hurry, because the German troops were said to be approaching the town. The Belgian garrison had been removed to Antwerp, leaving Ostend undefended except for about two hundred gendarmes, who 'engaged about three hundred German Uhlans, who came from Thielt.' These gendarmes having 'suffered about forty-five casualties, and having defended the honor of the town, intend to surrender when larger forces of Germans arrive.' That added considerably to the interest of the situation. I caught my train to Chatham, was met by an officer on the naval Commander-in-Chief's staff, had a charming interview with the Commander-in-Chief himself at Admiralty House, and soon was sleeping peacefully in the stern sheets of a picket boat racing down the Medway to Sheerness with the lights of Chatham fading away in the distance.

It must have been some time between 1 A.M. and 2 A.M. on the 26th when we arrived alongside the gangway of H.M.S. —. The Admiral had left a message that he would like a talk with me, and I gathered that one of the battalions — the R.M.L.I. from Chatham — was to go over in the same ship, and was not expected to arrive till morning. That put out of the question any idea of my carrying out my orders to occupy Ostend at daybreak. At all events, it is a well-known principle that 'from high-water mark to high-water mark' all responsibility for

the movement of oversea expeditionary forces rests with the navy, and the best course was obviously to turn in and get what might prove to be the last chance of a night's rest for some time. The Chatham battalion of R.M.L.I. arrived early in the morning — rather a wonderful record, if they got the orders at the same time as I got mine, because they brought tons of stores and equipment with them, and I had brought none. We got under way after breakfast, and spent the time studying the chart and the one map I had managed to purloin before leaving the Admiralty. The voyage was without incident, but somewhat enlivened by a suggestion that if we found Ostend in the possession of the German army I might land at some point near by, and so turn them out. With that army at the strength with which it was credited, that was a high compliment to our resourcefulness, but after conferring with the Admiral, and gathering that he had a pressing engagement elsewhere next day (since disclosed as the great sweep of the Heligoland Bight, in which he took part), we decided that the best course would be to defer wrestling with any new problems until he had cleared up the situation at Ostend.

We arrived there in the evening, and anchored some way out, in fact so far that the coast line could hardly be distinguished in the failing light, and there was little to be seen of the town but two smudges on the horizon, one obviously the big lighthouse, and the other subsequently proved to be a high water tower. By that time it was blowing freshly, and there was rather a nasty short sea. To put men in marching order into boats under such conditions was out of the question, but we received a report from the shore that Ostend had not been occupied by the enemy, and decided to defer the landing till 3.30 the next morning, August

27. So after all there was to be another night in a man-of-war's cabin, which I know from experience to be the best place in the world for sound sleep. As the flagship was anchored so far out, and it was important to be nearer the shore so as to be able to land quite early, get in touch with the Belgian authorities, and clear up the situation as soon as possible, I decided to move to a smaller war-vessel drawing less water and anchored close to the town. My 'headquarters' were, accordingly, shifted that night. If rather deficient in essentials, these headquarters had the advantage of being mobile, consisting, as they did, of myself, a small valise, a map, an order-book, an electric torch, a packet of soup extract, twenty pounds in gold, and a friend's pocket-knife. At the last moment I enlisted the services of a lieutenant-commander in the navy, an expert in gunnery and in aircraft, who rose to the occasion and accepted the post of Brigade-Major.

We managed to get about three hours' sleep on board, and we landed together at 3 A.M., having added to the headquarters equipment a small Union Jack, 'borrowed' from His Majesty's ship in which we had spent the night. Arriving on the quay, we found the Mayor and chief officials, who had heard that we should arrive earlier, and had spent an hour or so waiting for us in some discomfort in the draughty harbor station. As the first battalion was timed to land in a few minutes, there was not much time for formalities; in fact, for the next twenty hours or so, there was not much time for anything but organizing work, and the issue of orders. Information about the enemy was scanty, and had to be improved. There was not even time to run round in a car and look at the lie of the ground; all that could be done was to make some sort of a plan to hold the

approaches, divide the ground up into sections, and send the battalions, off as they arrived, which they began to do in about a quarter of an hour, bringing with them about three hundred tons of stores which had to be man-handled on the quay by our own men. There was no other labor available.

Here I will quote from a letter written from Ostend, three days afterwards, to a friend highly placed on the Admiralty War Staff.

All well and happy, but a real strenuous time. Seems about a month instead of about four days. Men behaving *splendidly*. Conditions trying, no transport, and seven miles of front intersected by big canals, meaning roundabout routes, and tons of ammunition, tools, and materials to handle. About two hundred tons of extra stuff not wanted. . . . Got ashore ahead of the men at 3.30 A.M., the first day leaving full instructions about stuff to be landed with Senior Naval Officer, but as there were three S.N.O.'s during the day, from four to nine miles range of me, and communications broke down, things were a bit interesting. Anyway, three battalions were got ashore somehow, and holding the position (guessed at on the map of course as there was no chance of getting round it) before dark, and then, just before dark, the aeroplanes turned up unexpectedly, just after being reported by telephone as Germans approaching! Civil population of twenty-five thousand. . . . (About this incident more anon). What with all that, and Belgian officers, municipality, civil guards, and telephones from the Belgian Ministry of War at Antwerp, and the Belgian General at Bruges, I had a joy day. All alone at first, no staff. But had C—— of the Air Department, and made him my Chief Staff Officer until the aircraft arrived. Forgot to add funeral of the five Belgians (not fifty) killed by Uhlans in the outskirts of the town forty-eight hours before we arrived, as another item of that first day, and since then this is my first spare moment; having found time for all except eating, sleeping, and washing. Wish I'd had time to report interesting situations as they developed but I have n't — they'd fill a book. . . . Must think of more comfort for the men if it's to be long. They are all healthy, happy, and good, but a bit on

the old side — I don't think any service could extemporize and come up smiling like ours, do you?

Looking at that old letter again, I think the words that strike me most are — 'a bit on the old side.' Large numbers were pensioners, men who had served their country in various parts of the world for twenty-one years or more, and had since spent many years in civil life. Grandfathers, many of them, and exceedingly prosperous in their civilian vocations, judging by their fullness of habit. I shall never forget the way they worked, or their keenness to keep up the reputation of the old corps in which they had spent the best years of their lives. Three 'battalions' of them landed that day. The army expression was used to describe the formations, for want of a better name, but in the army the word is used to describe a unit — roughly speaking, about a thousand strong — trained together year after year, first in platoons, then in companies, then as a whole battalion, by day and by night, until the whole organization responds instantaneously to the will of the commander. These men, splendid as they were individually, had not been trained on those lines. They were what was left over when the crews of the mobilized ships had been made up, collected together, and only assembled hastily in 'battalions.'

The three battalions landed on the first day were the Light Infantry from Chatham, the Artillery (acting as infantry) from Eastney, and the Light Infantry from Gosport. They mustered a few hundred over two thousand all told. The 'brigade' had not been 'mobilized,' as the word is understood in the army, which means that they had no transport of any kind, not even what is called first-line, on which ought to be carried ammunition, machine guns, intrenching tools, signaling equipment, and such-like essentials for

going into action. The shortage of officers amounted to about fifty per cent of the numbers allowed, the shortage of non-commissioned officers was also heavy, and there was a deficiency of specialists such as machine gunners, signalers, and so forth. For all that, the 'brigade' was capable of giving a good account of itself in a defensive position, and, with training, would soon have been capable of being manoeuvred for short distances in the field. All ranks rose to the occasion well, and extemporized somehow to meet deficiencies. So far no maps had turned up, so all that could be done was to get hold of as many town plans as we could, and mark on them the sections of the front for the defense of which the different commanders, as they arrived, would be made responsible. There was no further news of the enemy, but a German advance on the town still seemed to be expected, and the impression I gathered was that, from the point of view of the inhabitants, it would be preferable to declare Ostend an open town, like Brussels, unless sufficiently strong forces were landed to keep off all enemy forces likely to move on the coast.

Ostend was so well known as a pleasure resort before the war that it seems unnecessary to give any detailed description of the place. The houses extend a long way along the coast to the westward of the harbor entrance, and a short way to the eastward. A line measured round the outskirts, providing a field of fire clear of houses, measures between seven and eight miles. Beyond the houses, the high sand-dunes screen the country inland from view from seaward; so, without very careful preparations for indirect fire, no dependence could be placed upon the gunfire of friendly vessels to assist in the defense. Shallow water runs out a long way, so nothing bigger

than destroyers can anchor near the shore, and no target of value could be seen from their gun platforms in case of an attack.

Well, to make a long story short, the approaches to the town were soon occupied, machine guns and their crews dug in, and protected by barriers of barbed wire. The shops of Ostend provided a certain number of ramshackle old bicycles to add to our small supply of about twenty, and by their help patrols were sent out along the roads by which the enemy might approach. It was a strenuous morning. By 1 p.m. it was possible to report to the Admiralty that we were firmly established, and the information added about the enemy is still, I think, of considerable historic interest. It was to the effect that Bruges and Dixmude, respectively, were clear of hostile troops, and the enemy's main columns were using the Brussels-Renaix-Tournai road. 'Cavalry at Menin and Ypres on 26th. Large body at Lille.' The main columns referred to clearly belonged, in the light of later information, to the part of von Klück's army, of which the leading troops began to work round the British left flank via Tournai on the 23d, during the battle of Mons. This gives an indication of the strength of that army, and the line followed by the most northern column in the great turning movement through Belgium.

The afternoon of that first day was marked by an incident which might have had a tragic ending, the arrival of the advanced guard of a small force of aeroplanes belonging to the R.N.A.S. To explain the feelings of the population we must recall the date — August 27. On the 25th the Belgian army had advanced southwards from Malines to within four miles of Louvain, in their gallant attempt to draw down upon them some of the German troops which

would otherwise be used in the great army then being hurled towards Paris round the flank of the Franco-British army. Instead of meeting the Belgians in fair fight in the field, the Germans tried a method of warfare peculiarly their own. They tried to cow the spirit of the Belgian nation by deliberate and carefully organized cruelty and outrage. Streets of Louvain were set on fire by incendiaries, trained and equipped for such work before they left their own country. Men, women, and children escaping from the burning houses were shot down deliberately. Others were herded together and driven to the northward as a screen for the poltroon protectors of the important railway centre and depot on the lines of communication of the great army. Crowds of hostages, men, women, and little children, from neighboring towns and villages, were driven into Louvain after suffering indescribable indignities, cruelties, and privation. Some were driven into the Belgian lines at Malines, to make sure that the horrors should be recounted. Some were tightly packed into railway trucks, up to their ankles in old horse-dung, and kept standing there, starved and thirsty, for several days, and taken into Germany in their misery as a raree-show over which the German crowds — many women among them — rejoiced and gloated. By the 27th news of these deeds in Louvain, and even worse reports from other places that lay in the path of the German armies, had reached the people of Ostend, and refugees had begun to arrive.

Early in the evening, when most of the office work had been got through, I started in a borrowed car to visit the outposts and have a look at the country outside the town, in case we should have any fighting. I found the people in the streets much excited, verging on panic, and many crowded to me for

protection against some expected terror in the sky. At the same time came the sound of firing from the direction of the outposts. It turned out that a report had been spread that German air raiders were coming; but confidence was restored when some R.N.A.S. aeroplanes arrived to join my little force and scout the neighborhood for me. Luckily, only the leader had been shot at, and he was well ahead of the others; he seemed to take his welcome as to be expected, and all in the day's work.

Next morning another battalion landed, the R.M.L.I. from Plymouth, and we strengthened the defenses. A small naval airship also turned up. We had news at first hand during that day from British soldiers who had been cut off in the Mons fighting, had lain hidden, escaped attention, and filtered through the German lines to the coast, moving chiefly by night, and living on what was left of their haversack rations and what they could pick up by the way. They were from several regiments, and all imbued by the same idea, how to get back to them in time for the next battle. We got them off to Folkestone, and I hope they had their wish. They were a fine lot. The next day, August 29, was more eventful. We had news of the expected arrival by sea of some thousands of Belgian troops, who afterwards turned out to be the remains of the 4th Belgian Division, the one that was so nearly cut off in Namur, sailed to Havre, and was coming round by sea to join the main Belgian army near Antwerp. At the same time orders came to cover their disembarkation against all attacks, and this news added much to the interest of the situation; if the Germans knew about it, the cutting off of this division would be a tempting operation, should there be any forces to spare for such an undertaking. We also had some rather vague reports of a German

force, which appeared from the description to be a division at Audenarde, which is about forty miles from Ostend. Late that evening occurred a curious incident, in connection with intelligence reports, from which I learned a lesson for future guidance. I did not believe much in any prospect of attack, but had the Audenarde reports at the back of my mind, when a report was brought in that the telephone had been cut on the road from Audenarde to Ostend at a certain time. Soon afterwards, another report that it had been cut further to the northwards, the interval corresponding with the rate of march of an infantry column, then another similar incident, still nearer! We had a council of war. Debated upon the question of the civil population of twenty-five thousand. Also upon the necessity for covering the disembarkation of the Belgian troops. Also upon the fact that our line was over seven miles long, with only about three thousand men to hold it. The only satisfactory solution of the problem appeared to be to get the whole together, and march out at dawn to attack the head of the enemy's column outside the town. Then we thought we would have a final look at the intelligence reports, and noticed that, although the times were given, there were no dates. The next step was to test the truth of the news by calling up on the telephone all the places mentioned — 'Communications all correct now and no enemy in the neighborhood!' The reports were three or four days old, and happened to arrive on that day and in that order! I suppose the Uhlan patrol which had been in the neighborhood had done the cutting. They gave us quite an interesting half hour. Then another message, from the outposts this time, that about three hundred of the enemy were marching on the town by the road from Bruges.

A hint from headquarters in reply, that 'the object of having outposts is to give rest to those they are protecting,' and so to bed, after a fairly interesting day.

On the 30th, the Belgian 4th Division arrived by sea, and was railed up country. We had managed to hire about fifty bicycles by that time, and a few motor cars, and the R.N.A.S. folk had received a shipload of them, so we could send out for first-hand information from the country round. One car, with an officer and a small guard, got close to Menin, where there were still German troops at that time, and one ran through Thourout, receiving a wildly enthusiastic welcome from the people. Poor folk, I think that there was a prevalent idea, both in Ostend and in the district, that salvation from the invader, which did not come for four long years, had already arrived. At about ten o'clock that night I was able to report to the Admiralty that the country between the sea and the line Dunquerque — Lille — Tournai — Ghent was clear of the enemy. August 30 was our last day at Ostend.

The orders to embark 'at my earliest convenience' arrived at 4 A.M. on August 31, and at the same time a convincing hint from the Admiral that there were reasons why it was a case of the earlier the better. What with marching, digging, handling heavy stores, and going on outpost duty nearly every night, the men, old and young, had put in four pretty heavy days' work by that time, but nothing to what they got through in the next twelve hours. I did not know that men were capable of such an effort, but somehow or other all the heavy weight of ammunition and stores were brought in from the defense line. These, with tons of provisions and men's kits, were all brought by the one approach to a quay equipped with only one small crane, sorted out as well as possible so

that the right gores — about three hundred tons in all — should be embarked in the right ships, and the force was on board the fleet, anchored about five miles away from the harbor, soon after 5 P.M. The men, few of whom had had much chance of sleep since leaving England, at once volunteered to man some of the ship's guns at night, to give their chums at sea a stand-off; and they had a little shooting directly

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after we got under way; but that is another story.' The whole population of Ostend seemed to be on the jetties and along the sea front to cheer us, and we left our Belgian friends with much regret, little thinking that nearly four years of misery under the heavy hand of the Hun would be their lot before a force of Royal Marines landed again on the coast of Belgium — on the Mole at Zeebrugge.

DOES EDUCATION MEAN HAPPINESS?

It is a specious and a shallow saying of the conservative thinker that to make the many wise is but to multiply misery. To fill a man doomed to navvy's toil or the dullest routine with Platonic dreams and liberal aspirations is to mock his chains. Why bring beauty to the caged clerk and leave him to mourn her violation? Did not those very Greek philosophers, of whom our sentimental Democrats are apt to discourse so fondly and so ineptly, segregate the herd of artisans from the fair and fine? They knew well the truth which Pope rhymed later for our guidance, that short draughts from the Pierian spring are the most fatal intoxicants, that culture to be culture at all must be complete, and that the learned illiterate is the most hapless of beings.

Thus the argument runs and those who, in Lord Morley's striking phrase, hold 'a vested interest in darkness,' are only too eager to use this screen against the insurgent rays. Many and various are the answers made to the charge, and yet another is forthcoming in a little book of recent publication. Mr. Harold Begbie in his *Living Waters*

(Headley Bros.) has jotted down a series of interviews with workers of many types, a clerk, a doorkeeper, a collier, a Leeds Bolshevik, a Birmingham Ruskinian, all of whom describe for him the invasion of thought and learning into their souls. It is a plea for the energies of the Workers' Educational Association, a journalist's plea if you will; but the interest of the book lies in the revelations of the talkers rather than in the comments of the listener. And so far from supporting the conservative assertion that book-learning brings only misery to those in poverty, the general verdict justifies adult education on grounds that would satisfy the strictest utilitarian. For those men, at any rate, communion with the wisdom of the ages and the beauty of the world has not made their workaday lives intolerable. Rather has it so widened their gaze and increased their responsiveness that only by this communion can life be endured. Their ignorance was never bliss: their wisdom has never been folly. The Pierian spring has quenched a raging thirst and brought happiness