

Transcript of the Diary of Second Lieutenant John MacDonald Cassells

I was called up under the Derby Scheme for military service which Scheme came into operation sometime in 1916. I presented myself to a local doctor who was called Dr Heron (not our family doctor) and much to my chagrin after examining me he told me I did not come up to the standard of physical fitness or something to that effect. However I bided my time and on Victoria Day or some other day which was a National Holiday I went by train to Edinburgh and finding my way to the recruiting office in Cockburn Street, Leith. I was examined by a doctor who was unknown to me and passed.

Then came the choice of a Regiment. There were posters of all the Highland (kilted) regiments on the walls and the one that attracted me most was the Seaforth Highlanders. So I chose it, took the oath and the King's shilling and was ordered (not requested) to report in one week's time at Glencorse Barracks, Edinburgh. I think it was Glencorse.

When I announced my decision to join up when I got back to Markinch it was received in a gloomy atmosphere. Mother especially was very upset. Her youngest son who was not considered to be very robust and, of course, there had already been casualties in the Black Watch (Royal Highlanders) recruited from the Fife area.

Next day I also dropped the miniature bomb shell in the office of J J Johnston. I was the only apprentice, as William Kirkwood my senior fellow apprentice had enlisted sometime previously. After I was told by the present Mr Lumsden whose father was the Cashier in that office at that time that I was the best apprentice they ever had.

It wasn't because I was brainy, seemingly I was very efficient at my work and I had to be because the office closed at 5.30 pm and if I didn't get the train for Markinch at 5 or 8 minutes past 5 I had to wait for a slower and didn't get home until 20 minutes to 9 pm. I rarely missed the 5 o'clock train as I was allowed to leave early.

Being rather independent, I disliked the idea of relying on a clerk (who was not articled and was a bore) doing my work. The typists knew I had to catch that early train so they co-operated and I got all the envelopes and the various enclosures (if any) stamped and entered in the postage book. The letters had to be copied but there again I became adept at copying them in the letter book (necessity being the mother of invention) using the old system of damp cloth sheets and a letter press. At that time I don't think they used carbon sheets for duplication. So I could stick the letter book in the press and with one squeeze out came a perfect copy in the book, shove the letters in their respective envelopes and run like the devil to the GPO which was on my way to the Station arriving there quite out of breath but I made it.

Looking back a low apprenticeship was a form of slavery. £10 a year for working wills, deeds, delivering letters to save postage. For my army service I was allowed half of the time for the duration of an apprenticeship of five years so in effect I served six and one half years. But for my soldiering the Law Society excused me from sitting the Second General Knowledge Examination and Book Keeping so you see, Kenneth, I wasn't terribly well educated.

Still I passed the Final Exam - Scots Law, Conveyancing, and Evidence and Procedure without any trouble. My fellow apprentice I referred to survived the war but died a year or two ago.

Let me resume the military matters after that long winded digression. From Glencorse I and 5 others got railway warrants and were told to report at Fort George near Inverness – the Fort being the Seaforth Highlanders Depot. There we were given uniforms and some of the garments were not new as I could quite well see (and we resented it and felt outraged) but we were in the army now only a number - mine was 13294 Private. Well we then proceeded to Dunfermline and by the end of August I was in France. Landed at Boulogne in heavy rain, marched to St Martins Camp and told to choose any tent we cared to and abandoned for that night. I never took my clothes off.

Next day we entrained for Etaples where the training ground was called the Bull Ring. We lived under canvas and it wasn't long before we began to scratch and an old soldier who was passing our tent – I think it was about 10 or 12 to a tent - informed us we were lousy, the blankets we were issued with being infested and the sandy soil being also in that condition. However I soon got used to these amiable little companions – they crawled around and bred more. Later on the army improvised sort of baths, rather just jets of hot water, and we handed in our lousy shirts and received one in exchange but although the shirts had been steam washed they never destroyed the eggs, so in no time we had a family all alive and kicking.

Our blankets were handed in when the Battalion moved and we never got the same ones back so it was no wonder we were always lousy. Of course we kept ourselves clean bodily. Another soldier pal (David Logan a miner from Maryport in Cumberland, I think, and when the weather was suitable used to get an empty large tin from the cooks - strip off and have a good wash behind a hedge or building – this was when we were out of the line.

After a few weeks training at Etaples a number of us were drafted to the 8th Battalion Seaforths. The Battalion was in dugouts at a place called Coutre Maison on the Somme and we arrived at Albert late at night and then marched from the depot in Albert to the village or what had once been a village. I was lucky in being put along with a few more into deep dugout but the 4 in the file behind me were not so fortunate - their dugout was not very deep and it was rumoured it was blown in with no survivors. Several heavy shells exploded over our dugout but the impact only loosened some soil. I can recall quite clearly going into that dugout and seeing the inmates lying or sitting around the place lit by candle light.

Next morning I was on sentry duty at the mouth of the dugout which had a blanket over the mouth in case of gas attacks and an empty still case to act as a gas alert. When on duty I first saw a German soldier. The Gordons and the Black Watch had attacked and captured the village of Martenhuis and the wounded were passed down the sunken roadway, some walking and one Gordon officer with a bad back wound on a stretcher carried by 4 German soldiers. I became quite sick at the sight of these wounded men (not actively) so I reproved myself for my faint heartedness, I suppose, and it never recurred. That night we relieved the troops in the front line and held it for 24 hours when the Battalion was relieved.

I will never forget that spell in the village of Martenhuis. It was a shambles and it rained and the front line was ankle deep in mud. There was a soldier who was wounded and he kept groaning or moaning. I took various spells on the step and Jerry was sending over light shells called Whiz-Bangs - for they just whizzed over the parapet making one duck and I did a lot of ducking that night.

I don't think any food reached us and at daybreak I and two others were ordered to occupy an advanced strong point which hadn't been properly dug. We had to move or else crawl to get to our objective resulting in getting filthy and I don't think I ever got all the dust out.

Well we were relieved that night by the West Yorks (so I was told it was the West Yorks) and getting out of that village was somewhat of a nightmare. We were all exhausted having had no sleep or food and I got to the stage where I could walk no further and sat down at the roadside. I must have fallen asleep as I was awakened by our Sergeant who had I think sat down and stumbled over me. He knew where we were going and told me it was quite near. So ended my first spell of trench warfare.

There were other incidents and near misses but that first encounter will always stay with me. I contracted a hernia in my right groin but the MO (Medical Officer) said it was nothing to worry about and gave me a No 9 pill which I didn't swallow. Then I was sent with others on a working party and as the hernia began to bother me I went sick at a Casualty Clearing Station. It was a NZ or Australian Doctor and he told me it would not improve and sent me to hospital. I was operated on in a General Hospital in Rouen but it was not a very successful operation as long after it had to be done over again in Arbroath.

When I returned to the Battalion it was at Arras. I took a while to get used to the heavy load we carried on the march as the operation and the short speed in a convalescent camp softened me up a bit. I was of light build and not very muscular so when we had to march with full pack it was quite a task. Rifle and bayonet, pack, greatcoat. A tool with a wooden handle for a digging in - I never used it or saw it used - haversack, water bottle, knife, fork and spoon, 120 rounds of .303 ammo, gas mask (old type) and box respirator, boot brush, steel hat etc. A fair weight to hump around with any private possessions as well.

I was always glad to hear the Band play "the Campbells are comin". It was the marching in barracks tune so we knew we had reached our destination. A Captain on the march was mounted - Lieutenants and Second Lieutenants walked but they only carried a haversack and their revolvers. As infantry men we were just beasts of burden. After an interval I applied for a commission but I took part in the 3rd Battle of Ypres - 31st July 1917. It began at 20 to 4 am just as day was breaking and I hadn't proceeded very far when a light shell dropped right amongst some of us and I discovered I had been hit by a piece of shrapnel in the left upper arm. It wasn't very bad and I spoke to the Sergeant called Clark, an Englishman and a good soldier, but he told me to get to Hell out of it as it would need attention. So I went back to a Dressing Station - got a shot in the chest - it was worse than the wound - and was put on a train and fell asleep. I cannot recall where the Hospital was but the wound was trifling really. My arm was x-rayed and there was no metal in it which I knew.

Poor Clark - he was killed - he had a chip on his shoulder that day. It was his turn for leave and there was some fiddle about priority. He told me and was very bitter about it. By the way I was then a Lance Corporal when I was passed as fit to leave that hospital the Doctor made a joke which was in very poor taste so far as I was concerned. He said next time you will be a Sergeant or words to that effect.

From hospital I was transferred to a convalescent camp in Trouville-sur-Mer - somewhere next to Deauville, a real watering place with lots of civilians holidaying there. I met and got friendly with a Sergeant of New Zealand Regiment and I think he knew Willie Cassells' family but I'm not terribly clear about this. He told me I had won my spurs. I never looked my age and didn't need to shave every day. But I enjoyed the stay in that camp. The food was more plentiful too. Looking back over that period I wonder how we managed to win a war run by a lot of nonentities.

I can tell you a true story. After we came out of the village of Martinhuis it was our company's turn to supply the Battalion Headquarters Guard. We were a sorry looking lot and a Sergeant who had to arrange for the guard, a sergeant and 4 or 6 men. He thought I and another private who looked half respectable in our dress would be suitable but I protested I had never done a Guard and was unacquainted with the procedure. He thrust this aside and said the Sergeant in charge will tell us what to do, well I was on Sentry go- must have been 6 am to 8 am in my greatcoat with belt and rifle with bayonet fixed, when I observed an officer resplendent in polished knee boots, tartan breeches and cane coming my way. I stood to attention and what I omitted to do was call the Sergeant of the Guard so that the guard would turn out for the officer to inspect it. It was our CO (Commanding Officer) whom I had never seen. I don't recall what he asked me - how long I had been in the army or in France - and he then walked off. But next day I heard someone remark that a special parade had been ordered as the result of some ***** - I won't repeat the words used - hadn't called out the Guard when the Colonel came to inspect it. The Sergeant did not disclose who was the culprit but can you imagine the mentality of a high ranking officer calling a special parade for such a trifling mistake.

My papers came along for my commission so I had to find my way home and report to a place called Milnathort near Kinross prior to going to Gales in Ayrshire to an OTC. There I went through all the Basic Training. Squad drill PT exercises, guard mounting etc. There are photos of the cadets at Arbroath. I asked to be given a commission in the Seaforths and it was granted and I was ordered to report at Cromarty on the Moray Firth the Headquarters Depot of the Seaforths. I was then after an interval sent on indefinite leave but I was no sooner home when I received a telegram to go to Southampton to proceed abroad to do garrison duty at Varna on the Black Sea in Bulgaria.

I had toothache in one of my lower jaw - a back tooth and it developed into a gumboil. I had no time to go to Kirkcaldy to a dentist so Dr Wight came along and made a bad mess of the extraction. He left the root. So I went off with a sore gum to Southampton to Cherbourg. From Cherbourg by rail across France to Italy and Taranto. From Taranto to a small port in Greece by boat (the SS *Rose*, Glasgow). This little port was quite near Delphi [Corfu island] so with other officers we visited the Oracle. I should explain that there were other officers going East to Salonika.

From there we were motored over a mountain road to a railway station and then proceeded by train to Salonika. There our orders were cancelled and we were (6 of us) all Seaforths ordered to join the 2nd Battalion The Queens Own Cameron Highlanders, a regular Battalion, it being short of officers.

The Battalion was part of the 27th Division and the Royal Scots were ordered to go to Constantinople for duty there and the Camerons were ordered to go Tbilisi, Georgia, in the Caucasus. We arrived in Salonika on 11th November to learn the war was over.

So I was now a peacetime soldier and wanting to get back home. We sailed from Salonika on a liner I think it was called *Ormoude* but I cannot be certain. It was a first class vessel and the food was out of this world after Army fare. Arrived at Batum and disembarked. The barracks we were allotted had been occupied by the Turks and they stank.

It was a trip never to be forgotten. We sailed through the Dardanelles, then the Sea of Marmosa, then the Bosphorous into the Black Sea. We saw the *Clyde* with the large openings like windows or doorways to allow the troops to land and there were 2 German Cruisers lying aground on the shore - someone said they were the *Goeben* and the *Breslau* (my spelling may not be correct). It was a beautiful day with a sort of haze on the land and no one would have thought so many lives were squandered there, it looked so peaceful. From Batum we proceeded by train to Tbilisi, Georgia, where we were lodged or stationed in barracks.

It was now first after New Year and it was cold indoors as we had no fuel for heating and as I recall there were no fireplaces just tall stoves in the rooms so at night we wore our greatcoats in the mess to be more comfortable. I was the first officer to be demobilised being a Law Student. It so happened that about 120 NCOs and men were going home to the Depot. They were time-serving regulars. So I was told I would be in charge of them until I reached Salonika. They were paraded in 3 sections and the Major who was in command (the Colonel being absent on some mission) and all the other officers were all present to say farewell. I remember I was a bit upset having to take charge as I was a humble Second Lieutenant and I didn't really belong, being a Seaforth. One of my officer friends told me I was having a great honour bestowed on me in respect that I was to be preceded to the railway station by the Pipe Band of the Battalion - an honour which was enjoyed only by the Commanding Officer of a Regiment. Well I shook hand with all my fellow officers and asked permission from the Major to move off. I then gave the necessary order and I was to have another task.

I have just remembered that when we arrived in Tbilisi and formed up to march through the town to the barracks, the band struck up a marching tune and played all the way. The music brought out the crowds and I heard a loud voice speak in English 'Welcome the Shotlanders'. The music simply electrified the crowd. With my going there wasn't much of a commotion. When we arrived in Batum I was billeted in a Hotel taken over by the Army and the NCOs and men were billeted some distance away in a building. The next day I heard that a party of German soldiers were to be escorted to Constantinople and a Royal Scot officer going home said to me you are sure to get the job as you have the troops.

Sure enough that evening I got orders to parade at the quayside so I had to go into town and see the Regimental Sergeant Major who was one of the party going home. He had had a few drinks and annoyed that the war was over and I wanted no trouble. In the morning I met the CO who was a Captain in the Seaforth's and he gave me a list of all the personnel. To my intense regret I mislaid or lost the list. But it was styled "a diplomatic mission to the Caucasus". It listed all their names (other than the NCOs). There was a General Von Kress at the top of the list. There were civilians with their titles of office. A Princess Reuss and other ladies and children and not least of all a Count Von Schulenberg in mufti with a very handsome lady friend as I noticed afterwards.

There was one bitter pill. The German U Boats had been sinking our merchant ships and the crew of the liner *Besthead* at the quay had said they would take the women and children but not the males. The latter including me and my troops were to go on a trader lying alongside the quay. It was called the *Hauslet* I think and during the voyage the Purser told me it was a German prize. It was coaling the *Emden* when the British cruiser appeared and sank the *Emden*. I have only the Purser's word or version and I never attempted to find chapter and verse.

The trader must have been out of ballast. After all my running around getting rations etc for our 4 day journey I was really hungry and just as I was about to finish my lunch the boat which had left Batum began to roll and dive and I knew I was going to part with my lunch so I made for my cabin and there I was really sick. I then became aware I was not alone a voice said something to the effect, "Man, you are bad" and not being in the best of moods I asked the person who the hell was he. He said his name was Lake (Captain) and he had malaria was in the upper berth and had come up from Judea. He said he was in charge of the operation but as the troops were mine and he wasn't OK I could do what I liked and take over.

I had taken off my kilt earlier in the day and wore slacks so I got out of my slacks and got into the bunk. I fell asleep and when I woke I was still gripping the wires beneath the mattress for the ship rolled so much it was difficult not to be shaken out of the bunk. The other fellows had a metal trunk and until I fell asleep it slid from one side of the cabin to the other side. I am not exaggerating. I had also drawn the rum ration for the troops (2 jars) and one had cracked and leaked and my slacks were partly soaked with rum as they had fallen off. I was disgusted with my self being sick and not looking after my troops for when I went below I found half of them were sea sick and when I had a sort of parade to dispose of the rum in easy stages many declined to have it. I was giddy for days after.

I then encountered another difficulty. The cook on the *Hauslet* refused to cook for the Jerries so I arranged that half a dozen German soldiers could cook and attend to their crowd as I think looking back the Germans were only getting army rations and were not being fed by the ship as passengers. So the German soldiers participated in the rum issue. On such an occasion an officer has to be present to supervise as it is a parade. I also noticed that the German soldiers and the Camerons were quite friendly when we had boat station parade. I discovered the German Sergeant Major spoke English and had been a Baker in Aberdeen before the war. He showed us no resentment. Looking back I should have spoken to the General and given him his rank but I was perhaps intolerant and I was young.

I did have a slight clash with a civilian who spoke perfect English. He stopped me on deck and remarked that I had given the German soldiers rum - he called it Roine. So I agreed with him. Then he asked that the officers would like their swords. Unknown to me they had been disarmed but by whom or when I never found out or attempted to or where they were on the ship. So in my ignorance I said what do they want their swords for. The war is war. He was annoyed I could see and his reply was, "It is part of their dress, such treatment it is inconceivable". So I also became ruffled and told him if the boot had been on the other foot things would have been no different or words to that effect.

The batman who I had taken on or who had offered to act as such for me had pinched a rifle - sporting rifle - and he was worried about getting it disposed of. So I took it as he was sure to be in trouble for and managed to hide it in my baggage although I wasn't too happy. Later I got a certificate for it under the guise of a war trophy.

At Constantinople the General (with his Iron Cross - he was grey haired) and his retinue disembarked and that was that.

When the second world war began I noticed a small paragraph in the newspaper of a report that a Count von Schulenberg had been appointed to the post of Ambassador or some other title to Moscow. The Count I saw at the quayside at Batum had an English orderly near him and he was speaking to his lady friend who was at a port hole in the liner and weeping. So just to be bloody minded I asked if he was going on the trader and he answered rather haughtily, "No, I have my orderly". I should have said escort but I refrained. He was a younger man and may have been the same one. At Salonika I handed over my troops to the authorities there and made the long journey back and was demobbed at Kinross, Fife in March 1919.

Here endeth my saga of the 1914-18 war.