

FORCES BULLETIN No. 8.

Dear Forces,

It is our desire that you should know that in the very spirit of this season of the year, our thoughts go out to you—all of you, at home and abroad, wherever you may be serving.

However hopeful and optimistic we may all be about the future, the fact remains that we are all still under the stress and strain of a long war ; but in war as in peace, Christmas in its own benign way has that wonderful effect of making mellow our very natures, and clarifying our sense of true values concerning "what man hath made of man".

Nearly fourteen hundred male members of our staff are scattered in the various theatres of war, under varying climates and conditions. Nevertheless, however great the external changes may be, the spirit of Christmas is a very real thing for every one of us, and probably more so for many of you, for whom the struggle is so grim that, for the moment, life is reduced to a mere primitive existence full of hazards and uncertainties.

Even so, in spite of the abnormalities of war time, it is gratifying to be able to recall the activities of many a Christmas in the past, both at stores and in our own family circles. What plans and preparations! Every merchandise calendar in the whole system would be carefully scrutinised months in advance to get the greatest possible assistance from statistics, in building up a representative selling stock of each line for the Christmas trade. A gradual transformation of store lay-out would also take place, and ultimately the goods ordered would be delivered and displayed in such a way that to enter our stores must have been a pleasant form of entertainment for the public. In harmony with all these activities, the staff invariably rallied to the occasion and seemed to revel in giving of their best.

Those were the "good old days", but we have, however, every reason to hope that as we send you our greetings and good wishes for Christmas and the New Year, we shall for the most part be together again next year, to enjoy once more the amenities and blessings which peace will bring to us. Here's wishing you a Christmas of hope and a New Year of realisation—a year in which all your efforts will be crowned with a victory and a peace worthy of the sacrifices you have endured.

ESCAPES!!

Amongst the list of visitors to Head Office, you will see the names of Pte. H. A. Gardiner, Green Howards (Ipswich) and Guardsman M. Eddy (Falmouth). We were indeed pleased to welcome them and to find them looking so well after a period of captivity in Italy, and their subsequent escape to Switzerland. Their stories are interesting.

Pte. Gardiner was captured at Gazala on 1st June, 1942, when his section had fired their last round of ammunition. He passed through a number of P.O.W. cages in Libya before arriving at Brindisi and later Capua, where he received his first Red Cross parcel. He finally reached a camp near Genoa, where all P.O.W. were treated very well. Then followed seven months in a working camp, digging a canal, which was arduous in view of the poor quality of the food given to them. The Red Cross parcels kept them alive.

After fifteen months in captivity, the prisoners learnt one morning that an armistice had been declared, but the Italian guard would not release them yet. However, whilst two prisoners argued volubly with the sentries, Italian civilians brought ladders, and placed them over the barbed wire in another corner of the camp, enabling the prisoners to escape.

The Germans, however, soon arrived on the scene, and then a daring game of hide and seek began. The Germans made many a surprise search of Italian villages for escaped prisoners, and when one was found being harboured in a house, the occupier and his family were shot and the house razed to the ground. Further details of the actual escape cannot be revealed at the moment, but soon after, crossing into Switzerland, Pte. Gardiner and a pal were stopped by a Swiss officer, who spoke English fluently, having been educated at Ipswich (Pte. Gardiner's home town).

As evadees in Switzerland, they were billeted in good-class hotels and were allowed to work and walk about unguarded. Then at last came D-Day, and their hopes of gaining their liberty were raised as the Allied armies continued to advance towards the Franco-Swiss frontier, which they eventually did reach.

From letters received by us, the girls in the Personnel Department had noticed that Pte. Gardiner (Ipswich) and Guardsman M. Eddy (Falmouth) had escaped to Switzerland, and so our next letters to them brought them together and they also returned to England eventually by the same boat.

On arriving home on Tuesday, 26th October, Pte. Gardiner visited his old store at Ipswich. The store looked a bit different from what it used to be, and there were many new faces, but there were still a few there who remembered him. They organised a welcome-home party at the Feathers Hotel, Ipswich on 2nd November. There were seventy people present, including Mrs. Gardiner, Pte. Gardiner's mother, whilst Head Office was represented by Mrs. Patten, Divisional Superintendent. An appropriate gift of cigarettes and pocket money was made to Pte. Gardiner, and all had a jolly good time. A letter from Ipswich store states "We feel very proud, as we think that ours is the first store to welcome home one of our men in this way".

Guardsman Eddy told us that he had been captured at Long Stop Hill, Tunisia on Christmas Day, 1942, and for two days shared the German Christmas fare. Later he was transferred to Italy. Whilst there he was employed in lumbering, harvesting, and peat-digging. He was greatly amused when, for the first time, he saw an Italian labourer swallow a small frog alive; also how children prepared the dinner in the harvest field by chopping the heads and legs off larger frogs and dropping them into the stew-pot which was fixed on a tripod.

On the day on which the armistice was declared, the camp was invaded by two hundred Italian women, singing and dancing with joy. Guardsman Eddy got away two days later to Switzerland and spoke well of his treatment there.

He very appropriately met Pte. Gardiner on a pay parade on the very day that he had received a letter from us telling him to keep a look-out for him, and they celebrated the event.

Naturally, he is very glad to be home again enjoying six weeks' leave in his native Cornwall.

HOW'S THE BUSINESS ?

From your letters we know that you all are glad to get news of the business, so on this occasion we asked Mr. H. S. Lovett, Superintendent of the S.W. Division to let us have his impressions of one of our stores to-day, and this is what he sent us:—

"A man once entered a Police Station to report that his wife to whom he had been married many, many years was missing, and was asked to describe the lady.

I can sympathise with that chap because I am asked to give you an impression of one of our stores to-day. Perhaps a composite picture should be attempted in order to avoid charges of flattery, cynicism, or libel—the rest is up to the Editor. Having thus stacked the cards, here's the deal.

From the outside, stores appear much the same except that in some instances fire, "fragments", or restrictions on renovations have left their mark. However, though somewhat dingy, the famous "Green and Gold" still flaunts its welcome to all and sundry. The windows beneath retain their pre-war brilliance, the standard of display is generally good, sometimes better, and if elaborate show-cards are conspicuously absent, that is not wholly evil. Of course, there is a strict taboo on artificial lighting and none is used in the windows. Price tickets are not so numerous either, and where you once saw a price limit of 5/-, with occasionally 6/1d, prices now run up to 67/6d.

EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS.

From Guardsman M. Eddy (Falmouth).

It's real fine to be in England again : there's no place like it, and thank goodness, they speak English here. I nearly tied my tongue in a knot trying to speak German in Switzerland.

From Capt. J. R. Ricketts, Attd. Gurkha Rifles (Yarmouth).

If you decide to publish any excerpt from my letter, do please be careful. The editor of my old school mag. ventured to do so, from one of my letters and I heard that he was "drummed out" before a parade of outraged parents. (Evidently Bulletin No. 4 has not reached you yet. Ed.)

From Cd. Gnr. (T) J. G. Snape, R.N. (Chichester).

I don't know whether I am the oldest member of the staff serving, as I shall be 65 next April and still going strong. I was on the "Galatsa" the flagship of the Light Cruiser Squadron, the first ship to sight the Jerries at Jutland, and at various times had thirteen torpedoes fired at us and survived.

From Cpl. T. F. Culledge, R.A.F. (Coventry).

Work in our Orderly Room or should I say Orderly Tent seems to have come to a standstill. For the first time for months we can find more or less anything that the C.O. asks for, within 48 hours of the request. Normally we put him off as often as possible, and hope that he will finally forget what he asked for. In all, we have a filing system of some 2,000 files but the master file has been christened 'Christmas Dinner' in which goes anything we are not sure of. It is about two inches thick and very tattered, but if we lost it I think that we should have to disband the Squadron and start all over again. We once had a clerk who, if the file in which the letter should have been enclosed wasn't there, put it in the next one and was quite happy about it. And to think that we are still winning!

From F.Sgt. J. Isaacs, R.A.F., India (Cardiff).

Your reply in the Bulletin to "Beer Queries" was very diplomatic, but I guess we would even appreciate a drop of "Thames Special". (The Thames is now in full spate and the beer is worse than ever. Ed.)

From L.A.C. Allen, R.A.F., India (Woolwich).

We can always stretch out a hand for bananas, sweet limes and beautiful big red mangoes. On the tall palms there is also quite a variety, but we have to get a native to do the climbing. All they do is put a rope round the tree and themselves, another round their feet and up they go.

From Q.M.S. Dickson, Manchester Regt., B.L.A. (Preston).

Honestly I feel I could go to sleep just now, get up in the morning, catch the 7-35 a.m. from Manchester (Victoria) to Preston, open the store and carry on as usual.

From Lieut. N. J. Heyworth, R.A.S.C., C.M.F. (Birkenhead).

My unit at the time of the initial landing in Sicily was assigned the novel work of landing amphibious vehicles, followed by the crossing of the Messina Straits and the Sangro River Battle. After a while I was transferred to "Supplies" and have since been feeding the army with varied rations. Local purchasing of sheep, fruit and charcoal are part of my job ; so if you're contemplating opening a sheep dept.!!!

From Cpl. E. L. Benjamin, R.A.S.C., India (Kingsland).

To-day has been really quite an eventful day for me. Not only have your Bulletins arrived, but I am hopeful of having my signature in The Visitors' Book about the end of December.

In case you wonder what the crest on this note-paper may be, I had better tell you that it is not the old family emblem, but the sign of the Chindit Special Force. I found it in our office. Someone said they thought it belonged to the general, but I got out of the office before they thought too hard about it. (General Deficiency!!! Ed.)

From Capt. B. Spiero, R.A.P.C., India (Castleford).

Talking about Stores ; for your information here is my experience in India. You enter a shop and either of two things happen—(a) The shop-keeper has his bed in the middle of the shop and is sound asleep (doesn't need a store detective ?) or sat up in bed surrounded by friends and his family all talking at once, ignoring the customer ; or (b) You are rushed off your feet by numerous male assistants, who won't leave you until you buy something.