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With foreword by
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No. 102.

THURSDAY, APRIL 4, 1918.

ONE PENNY.

IN A MILITARY PRISON.

Foreword.

At the time of being called to military service the fourteen men who form the subject of this article were studying at the ———— Missionary Training College, ————. In addition to several moral and religious objections to all forms of warfare they advanced their observance of the Bible Sabbath, namely, from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, as an impediment to their participation in any military duties whatever. They were placed in the N.C. Company, which they agreed to on the condition that their scruples regarding the Sabbath should be respected. In less than a week they were drafted to France, and at the several places where they were stationed they were excused all duties during the 24 hours mentioned. After a period of 18 months their Company was removed to a new area, and they were told they would have to work on their Sabbath Day. This they refused to do, and were accordingly sentenced to six months' hard labour by a Field General Court Martial.

The following is their account of a stay of one month in the military prison in the base where they were located:—

Prison Experiences.

On the 23rd November, 1917, we entered the prison, and were taken in charge by one of the warders (a sergeant), whose duty it was to take our personal property from us, and to array us in prison garments. During these preliminaries we are subjected to much abuse and bullying from the sergeant in question, and from several of his fellow N.C.O.'s. In the most offensive and blasphemous language we were told that this particular prison was the worst place in France, that they were able to break men's hearts there, and further, that we should be glad to work seven days a week after a few days with them. We were then interviewed by the Governor, who told us that we should be compelled to work Saturdays, as they were authorised to employ physical means in order to secure their object. On leaving the Governor we were set to work on the parade ground with some other prisoners who were working there. This was at three o'clock on Friday afternoon, one hour before our observance of the Sabbath Day commenced. We had plainly stated that we could not consistently continue work beyond four o'clock. By that time five or six sergeants, each armed with stick and revolver, had collected near the working party. As soon as we ceased work, with one accord these men rushed at us and knocked us down in turn with their fists. As each man rose from the ground this treatment was repeated. We still refused to work, and the attack was renewed with sticks. In several instances we were kicked brutally whilst on the ground. Two of the sergeants became so infuriated that they now drew their revolvers, but were prevented from levelling them by the intervention of several of their fellow N.C.O.'s. In no case was the

slightest resistance offered by us. We were then rushed to the punishment cells, the sticks being freely used on the way, and several sergeants ran in amongst us deliberately tripping us, thus bringing us heavily to the ground on the square. On reaching the cells we were placed in irons—called "figures of eight" on account of their shape—which are made in various sizes to grip the wrists securely one above the other behind the back. In some cases the irons were too small, and caused the most excruciating pain on being screwed up. In this helpless condition we were again punched severely about the face and body, after which we were isolated, each man in a small cell about 7 feet by 4½ feet, having a concrete floor and iron walls. The extreme cold was very trying in this condition.

Up to this point we had been dealt with collectively, but now our experiences were more or less individual. It must be remembered that we were all treated with varying degrees of brutality, although only a few exceptional instances are mentioned here. One of our number was selected by a sergeant as the ringleader. We can attribute this to nothing but the fact that he was the tallest amongst us, for we all ceased work at the stroke of the clock, and the choice of a ringleader seemed a kind of afterthought, nothing being mentioned about it until our entry to the cells. Here is the account which the young man chosen as ringleader gives of his experience in the Punishment cell:—

Personal Statement by ———.

In the cell passage the sergeants agreed that I was the ringleader, probably because I was the tallest. The smallest pair of "figure eights" was brought and screwed down upon my wrists. So small was the pair that to get them on my flesh was ripped and cut in several places. The circulation was practically cut off, leaving my hands dead. I was then pushed into a cell, and pinned against the wall by one sergeant, whilst the others in a most passionate rage struck me continually about the head and in the stomach. Then one burly N.C.O. lifted me up bodily, and with his knee threw me backwards to the other side. The contact with the iron wall caused the irons to cut more, and sent acute pain to all my nerves. This kind of treatment continued until I dropped to the floor. I was picked up, but collapsed again, whereupon I was kicked several times in the middle of the back. Finally I became unconscious. I had made no opposition by force, or even uttered a word which could have given the slightest offence.

The next morning a staff sergeant and a sergeant visited me, and again violently knocked me about until I fell to the ground winded by a sharp punch. I felt pains and bruises everywhere; my eyes were blackened, and one was completely closed; my jaw seemed locked on one side, and my nerves were out of control. Towards 9 a.m.,

Continued on page 4.

(Continued from page 1).

a corporal opened the cell door and ordered me to work. To my reply "I cannot," he seized me and threw me against the wall. He repeated the order, and receiving the same reply, drew his revolver, placing the barrel to my forehead, threatening to shoot me if I again objected. He reminded me that "Dead men tell no tales." He meant that his word (stating that his action was necessary in self-defence) would not be disputed. Seeing that I remained quite calm, and did not reply, he put up the revolver and left me with a curse.

About 10 a.m. I was taken out of my cell, and two cement blocks weighing about 35lbs. each were roped round my neck, one hanging upon my chest, the other upon my back. With my wrists still in irons behind my back I was made to pace the passage at a quick march. At last, from exhaustion, I sank beneath the strain, and remained in a fit about an hour. When I came to, I was placed in the cell again till the afternoon, when the Governor visited me and gave permission for me to have my blankets. At 4 p.m., I was given six ounces of bread—the first food for twenty-four hours. At 3.40, my companions were sent back to their sections, but I was too ill to go, and remained the night and next day in the cell without further medical attention until 12 a.m. The food given for this day was two rations (6 ozs.) of bread. The next morning I was taken before the doctor, and a sergeant in a misleading way stated what had happened. In a casual way the doctor examined me, and gave me "Light Duty," stating that I had palpitation of the heart, and that the occurrence was unfortunate. With this I was promptly dismissed to my section.

Treatment of other Prisoners.

Apart from our own experiences we heard and saw many cases similar to a few we here mention. One poor fellow—an Australian fighting soldier—was continually the sport of the N.C.O.'s, who seemed to delight in venting their feelings upon this perhaps somewhat eccentric individual. When they were off duty at night they would come to the cells and torment him by poking him viciously in the ribs, by forcing his arms (which were in irons) into such positions as absolutely to torture him. His groans and shrieks were terrible to hear, and often they would gag him with a bar of soap wrapped in cloth in order that they might continue their sport without his cries being heard outside the prison.

One man—a little, shrivelled physical wreck—was tortured most frightfully because he would not admit himself to be a deserter. He was punished, kicked, and bullied very cruelly. On several occasions the sergeant-major came and interjected much questioning of a bullying nature, with vicious slashes from a steel-lined riding stock he always carried.

In one cell was an old man who was very simple-minded, and who, in addition, had a weak bladder. One bitterly cold day in December this old fellow was taken, on account of his uncleanness, and forced under a cold spray in the bath house. He was then scrubbed with a stiff yard brush until his flesh was raw in places; on returning to his cell he could not speak. The Governor made his daily inspection shortly after, and found the old man in such a terrible state that he was removed from the cells at once, and food had to be given him.

As to the general conditions under which the prisoners live much could be written that would never be believed, and much could not be described in words. We were huddled fourteen men in each tent. Owing to shocking sanitary conditions, and the fact that it is impossible to wash in the two minutes allowed in the wash-house twice daily, the vilest diseases are prevalent. We were sleeping next to men suffering from venereal disease. In the sections where the men sleep there is provided one open bucket

for the use of about sixty men, and latrine paper is almost impossible to obtain; the stench from these buckets is vile.

Each man has several rusty implements to clean in his section after 5 p.m., and for this he is supposed to use a piece of sacking and water. Frequently the water bucket is dry, and the men have to use the urine pail for this purpose. If they did not do this the task would be unfinished, and they would be severely punished next morning. Many of the cases of skin disease must be much aggravated by the blunt and dirty razors and brushes which have to be used by the men in turn.

The combined effect of those conditions is to make the men very quarrelsome even amongst themselves. Fighting, stealing each other's food, etc., being daily occurrences. After two years of this life they leave the prison vowing vengeance on their tormentors, declaring that they will never play the man again. In fact, they, in many cases, are turned out finished criminals, though they have been sent to prison for some trivial thing which might be more appropriately termed a misfortune than a crime. So desperate do men become under these conditions that they will gladly do anything to contract a disease that will necessitate their removal to hospital. Thus, one fellow actually took venereal germs and rubbed them into his eyes, of which eventually he lost the sight. Many men are covered with bad sores—the result of being unable to wash themselves properly. In wet weather the men's blankets are often wet through on account of the bad condition of the tents.

The ill-treatment which we received, and which is common throughout the prison, appeared to be administered, in the first instance, apart from the Governor's authority. He could not, however, have been totally ignorant of subsequent abuses. A chaplain from a neighbouring camp was passing the prison one day, and hearing shrieks from the cells he entered the prison and asked to see us (he knew we were in the prison). He was not permitted to see us, nor was he allowed inside the prison again, in spite of the fact that he held a service there once a week. Not once were we visited by the prison chaplain, nor were we allowed to have Bibles—our own were demanded from us on entering the prison.

We certainly think that the authorities at home cannot be cognisant of the terrible conditions existing in our military prisons in the Field. The men absolutely hate their own country, so embittered does the life make them. It is common to hear men say that they will never fight again for their country. So emaciated and reduced were we by our stay of one month in prison that it was difficult for us at first to recognise several of our comrades.

We should emphasise the fact that throughout our whole experience we remained quite passive. No resistance of any kind was offered at any time.

We have seen the treatment of prisoners from other prisons whilst the men were out in working parties, and know the conditions in each case to be much the same. Indeed, it is the subject of much scandal and bad feeling among the British troops in the bases where the prisons are located.

(Here follow the signatures of 12 men.)

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