



The South African Military History Society

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Krygshistoriese Vereniging

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NEWSLETTER - SEPTEMBER 2017

The curtain raiser speaker for August was **George Shaw**, who spoke on *A South African Foot Soldier's experience in German South West Africa and German East Africa during WW I* - the soldier in question being his father.

George's presentation was one of the most impressive uses of the full Power Point software seen by the Society, which for obvious reasons cannot be replicated in a newsletter - so here is his summary:

The outbreak of war in August 1914 witnessed a massive flood of volunteerism and call-up on both sides of the conflict across the whole of Europe and throughout the British Empire. In far off and remote South Africa feelings were no less passionate as young men rushed with herd-like instinct to sign up and do their bit for King and Country. Amongst their ranks was George's 22-year old father. He had no idea what he was letting himself in for other than a nebulous incentive to give the Germans a bloody nose and to have some "fun" along the way. It was going to be a jolly old war, wasn't it? All over by Christmas with no time to lose. Little did he know!

The East London based Kaffrarian Rifles, re-designated the 5th Infantry [now the Buffalo Volunteer Rifles] were immediately mobilized and were ready to ship out within one month of war being declared.

As events transpired my father never saw a solitary German soldier in uniform, even at a distance, nor did he fire a single shot in anger. He and his comrades were instead put to work in GSWA as virtual common labourers building blockhouses, shovelling sand and repairing the railway line from Luderitz to Aus that was being constantly blown up by the retreating Germans. As a result of what can only be described as poor strategic planning his regiment was sent home after eight months having served little if any purpose other than by their mere presence in the territory. A cartoon of a bayonet dripping blood - for what they expected - and a shovel - for what they experienced - aptly summed up their experience in GSWA.

Undaunted and undeterred he signed up again in early 1916 for service in GEA, this time as a mounted infantryman. He had hardly arrived in Kilindini however when he was struck down by malaria and was very fortunate to survive. He was unceremoniously shunted around various field hospitals before his discharge in Cape Town six months later with his strength sapped and his health broken. Another perfect illustration of someone who volunteered his services for all the right reasons but whose lofty expectations were overtaken by events which saw him pole-axed by a disease, the treatment of which was rudimentary at the time and from which many thousands succumbed.

There is a general perception of nobility in returning soldiers having willingly placed themselves in mortal danger when fighting for a cause of the highest calling. Men who have seen first-hand the very worst that war has to offer and who often bore the scars of their involvement.

Lost amongst this well-deserved adulation is hidden the futility of some individual servicemen whose endeavours, through no fault of their own, were meaningless in every sense of the word. Their efforts went largely unnoticed and left them without any practical sense of accomplishment or recognition. This in microcosm was one such story.

Our main lecture speaker was **Kathie Satchwell** who carried on her WWI subjects with a talk on *Margaret Smith Dewar - Nurse in South Africa, France, Brighton, Macedonia*.

Margaret had been born in Scotland in 1873, her father being a civil engineer on the collieries she had enjoyed a privileged education and she had trained as a nurse in Scotland. When her family relocated to the mining houses of Germiston she did too and nursed in Germiston. Her family remained there after the war, with descendants living in Cape Town these days.

On declaration of war she went to England and applied to join the Queen Alexandra Military Nursing Service. But the British army had qualms about men having to salute WOMEN - the nursing sisters! - so they were slow to organise, and she was Scottish, so she joined the Scottish Womans Hospital. This was a fairly suffragist organization, staffed by women doctors and nurses, which was running hospitals in France. She was at Royaumont, north of Paris, which was well known, being close to front line and in an ancient manor. Kathie showed photographs of the buildings in service with the wide cloisters full of beds of patients recovering from gas gangrene in the fresh air. She also showed what it looks like today in its restored glory.

Margaret nursed there for a while then went back to England, joined the Queen Alexandra Military Nursing Service and was posted to Brighton. During this time some of her patients - men as opposed to officers - wrote in an autograph album. This album is in the possession of Margaret's descendants. Sadly, only the ink inscriptions were still legible while those in indelible pencil had faded too much. Kathie's presentation included many of the entries of poems and drawings by these patient soldiers. This was shortly after the Irish Rebellion and some of the patients came from that conflict.

A group of British nurses from Brighton, including Margaret, volunteered to nurse Serbian soldiers in Salonika with the British Medical Corps. They went out to Salonika on the *Olympic*. [This, a sister ship of the *Titanic*, was sunk by a mine on her return voyage to Britain - the wreck having been located in the 1970s by Jacques Cousteau.]

As shown by Kathie's photos the hospital - in the mountains of northern Greece - was an assembly of bell tents, in neat rows, near a railway siding and with very large clear red crosses on white backgrounds to indicate its being a hospital.

There was a French airfield nearby and a German airfield 30 miles north. From the latter came German Gotha 'planes and six bombs were dropped onto the hospital. Margaret went into the ward and threw herself on a patient - he survived and she was fatally wounded by the last bomb. An independent enquiry was appointed into the bombing - in part to encourage the USA's entry into WWI by drumming up public indignation.

Finally Kathie read from a condolences letter from a nursing colleague to her mother.

Joan Marsh
Acting Scribe

WWI web-site of interest

Australian, Duncan Price, invites members to visit **www.awillowinthewind.com**
It contains a virtual tour of the march of 2 Regt 1 SAIB, on the Somme, including the battlefields of Bernafay & Delville Woods. It is his hope that SA folk who have never visited the Somme, may be better able to visualise the Somme battleground thereby. Included is a complete listing of B Coy 2nd Regt, in a format not published before. His e-mail is price60@bigpond.net.au

Military History Journal

Staff changes at the Ditsong National Museum of Military History have delayed the production of the Journal. Members will be advised of future developments.

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FORTHCOMING LECTURES

Johannesburg:

Thursday 14th September

CR: Hamish Paterson: **Women in War in the Twentieth Century**

ML: Pierre Lundberg: **The Reconnaissance of and Attack on Namibe Harbour - 4/5 June 1986 by 4 Reconnaissance Regiment**

KZN in Durban:

Thursday 14th September

DDH: Roy Bowman **The Dam Busters revisited**

ML: Capt.(SAN) Charles Ross(Ret) **Lt. Col. Jack Sherwood Kelly VC, CMG, DSO**

Cape Town:

Details from Chairman Johan at warbooks@mweb.co.za or 021-939-7923

SAMHSEC:

Saturday 9th September 2017 in Grahamstown

The meeting will take place in the First City Drill Hall in Hill Street starting at 14h00.

CR: Elizabeth Millnon **Reminiscences of a WAAF during the Second World War**

ML: Prof M van Wyk Smith **Drummer Hodge**

CR= curtain raiser; ML= main lecture; DDH = Darrell D Hall Memorial Lecture;