

THE PRISONERS SECTION OF THE BRITISH RED CROSS.

A HUMAN AND SYMPATHETIC REPORT.

By MRS. POPE HENNESSY.

It was only at the beginning of April, 1915, that the Prisoners Section of the Red Cross and Order of St. John came into existence. Up till that time the Enquiry Department for Wounded and Missing had solely concerned itself with the collection of information about our men on this side of the lines, and had left all enquiries about prisoners to the War Office. As the information to be extracted from the War Office was but scanty, and as many anxious relatives craved for further particulars, for something a little more human and sympathetic than the bare official announcement, "Prisoner of War," it was thought advisable to specialize in this branch of enquiry.

In April direct communication was opened up between the British and German Red Cross, and direct enquiries, typed in German, were sent to Commandants of Prison Camps, and Doctors in charge of hospitals. Courteous replies have invariably been received, and a great deal of information has consequently been collected.

For the first six months of the war the compilation of Prisoners' Lists in Germany was far from accurate or complete. Sometimes we found that men were said to be untraceable as prisoners of war who have since turned up in camps. Sometimes men have come through on lists first as dead and buried, secondly as wounded patients in some hospitals, and then as un-wounded prisoners in a camp. Often we get private news of men whose names have never come through on any list at all. It is evident now that revision has taken place, and that prisoners, taken after the first six months of war have been classified, and indexed, for it is now comparatively easy to get a correct answer to our enquiries. In criticising German methods, and comparing them with our own we must never lose sight of the fact that the enemy has from 1½ to 2 million prisoners to cope with.

The work of our Department consists very largely of correspondence and personal interviews. About 300 letters of enquiry a week are received by us about prisoners, enquiries as to health, location, reasons for silence, what kind of food and clothes to send out and so on. In consequence of these enquiries, a large number of letters are written to camps and hospitals in Germany as well as to prisoners.

It may possibly interest you to hear of one or two results of these enquiries.

One day an officer's wife came in to see me with a letter written at her husband's dictation by an orderly in a German Hospital who said that he was wounded in the arm, was going on well, and would soon be sent to a Prison Camp in G. On the outside of the letter was written in very small characters the word: "verstorben." We were

asked to try to find out the reason of this. I wrote at once to the Doctor in charge of the hospital and received the following answer:—

"In answer to your enquiries I beg to inform you that Captain Z died on the 1st May, 1915, at 12.50 p.m. from general blood poisoning occasioned by injuries, caused by a bomb, to the right upper arm, lower jaw and right cheek. An attempt was made to save the patient's life by the amputation of his right arm. The captain was buried at the local cemetery with military honours. His grave is being marked by a permanent cross with his name on it, and it is entered on the town death register of Roulers, No. 424 in the plan of the cemetery. We have also marked a stone behind the cross with this number so that the grave may be identifiable at any time."

In another case the mother of an officer came to us in great distress stating that her son was in hospital in G. and she believed that his right arm had been shattered. Could we find out anything?

We wrote to the Doctor and received the following reply:—

"This officer was badly wounded in both arms on April 27th. He was brought to this hospital (Roulers) for enemy wounded and it was found necessary to amputate his left arm. On May 14th he was transferred to a Red Cross Hospital here. His right arm was shattered and suppuration was taking place. Every effort to save this arm failed, and therefore it was imperative that the right arm too should be amputated. After the operation his temperature fell at once to normal, and he began to improve visibly. He is now going on very well, and is gradually becoming accustomed to write with his teeth and with his toes. He is now allowed out of bed for part of every day. His address is:—Kriegs Lazarett, Roulers."

At one of the camps a member of the German Red Cross sends us long answers to enquiries for prisoners.

One day some unhappy parents told us that they had heard news that their son had died at a camp in Germany, but that they could get no particulars or confirmation of the news. We wrote to the Red Cross Officer there, and he replied in English words which are an absolutely literal rendering of German sentences:—

"Sirs,—As a member of the red cross will you kindly inform the parents of the soldier X that he is died here in the hospital, he was very hard wounded in the belly and it was nothing to make through the doctors of the hospital.

"Will you say if you please that he is died in my arms and he had received what we had but he is died as a soldiers. He has nothing said at last and he was very content that I was on his bed.

"Seventy-nine of his camarades has given him a garland very fine, and ten of his camarades has been to the cemetery he has had a burial as a Germain soldier and on his side on the cemetery are the tombs of two Germain soldiers. The pastor has had a speech over the word of the bible; to be true to receive the crown of eternity.

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