

THE CANADIAN POLISH UNIT.

"THE STAR WHOSE LIGHT WE FOLLOW."

Alas! a monthly journal leaves much to be desired, and in these times of transition, one is here to-day and gone to-morrow. Thus with the Canadian Polish Unit. In our last issue we reported its safe arrival in France, and directions for service in Brittany—where it was attached to the Polish Camp at Coetquidan for Polish soldiers under the command of the French Army—which had established a permanent surgical French military hospital, in which French, Polish and French Colonial troops (Moroccans and Senegalese) and Belgians were treated; attached to this surgical centre were two medical hospitals run by Polish doctors and Polish and French nurses.

When it was realised that the Unit was comprised of highly-trained nurses, their skilled services were most gratefully utilised for the benefit of the sick. Within a week sanitary regulations were in force. The patients who were received in the Salle de Pensement, were carefully cleansed before admission to the wards, for which comfort gratitude was boundless. Those of us who have worked on active service realise the physical misery which is inevitable when means of cleanliness are unprocurable, and this is part of the danger to health on active service.

The wards were devoid of any comfort such as is necessary for the sick, and Sister Oakley Williams, acting Commandant with the rank of Captain in the French Army, used her authority with dispatch, and speedily rectified, as far as possible, ward conditions, so that cleanliness and comfort were speedily apparent, as in an English ward.

For this sanitary organisation the French authorities were enthusiastically grateful, as were the patients of all nationalities, their inevitable greeting in the morning being "Good morning, Sister, and thank you." It was naturally inspiring to the nursing staff to realise the appreciation of their sanitary knowledge and skilled attention, and every member of the Unit worked most enthusiastically in the cause it had at heart. The beautiful ambulances were in full use, their skilled drivers not only helping the wounded, but the refugees, whose plight was indeed pitiable.

Thus it will be realised the Unit was able to put into practical application the vision of its generous Canadian and British promoters, to bring succour to brave allies in their hour of need. Five weeks of intensive service and then alas! the barbarous and implacable enemy was at the gate. Woe the Poles! All around flight was in action; a trek across France to Bordeaux being attempted by many. Canadian soldiers passing through Coetquidan, advised immediate departure for England and English women running canteens, etc., gave orders in the same sense. But nurses on military duty do not act on their own initiative. Sister Oakley Williams, realising her responsibility, refused to leave her post of duty, or to permit the staff to do so, until she received orders from the Polish General to whom she was responsible for the nursing of the patients. Later she took car, drove seven miles and interviewed General Korycaski, the Commander of the camp, and placed the conditions before him informing him that without his command to leave the Unit would remain on duty. This he wished done until he gave the command. During Sister's return journey, an air raid was in active operation, but the four ambulance drivers awaiting her return were relieved to find they were to remain on duty till further orders.

For some days the Unit stood to its guns, when to the regret of these courageous girls, an order was received that it was to proceed to Bordeaux, five hundred kilo-

metres distant! the whole of the Polish Army having been evacuated.

Then came the sad retreat, sad at heart the Unit bid farewell to the patients whom they had served with such happiness, and they were left in charge of the French authorities who were responsible for them.

On the morning of June 18th, crammed with passengers, the ambulances started for Bordeaux, their destination five hundred kilometres away, which, of course, they never reached. At St. Nazaire advice was sought from the French dock authorities; here the ferry had to be crossed, and owing to congestion by hundreds of cars, the scene was amazing and movement almost impossible, and at 1.30 a.m. a violent air raid attacked the ferry but fortunately the bombs missed their objectives; the Unit waited its turn to cross from 5.30 p.m. to 10 a.m. on the following day.

Now Providence intervened, an English padre met at St. Nazaire took charge of the six Polish nurses, and all met on the opposite side of the ferry.

Along the road, through a lovely land, finely cultivated as all France is, hundreds of Polish soldiers were trudging with their possessions, on their way to Bordeaux, a destination happily for them they never reached, as the majority are now safely in England, longing to have another scrap with the enemy who have ravaged their country, enslaved its people and caused death to thousands.

A second raid as a send off from St. Nazaire, shook the café in which the nurses were seated, the bomb luckily falling into the water; the vibration was terrific. As the ambulances moved off once more six Polish doctors rushed up having walked all the way from Coetquidan, they were pushed into the cars and off went the Unit on what proved to be the last stage of their journey, because when they reached La Rochelle, they providentially met a French ambulance driver whose acquaintance had been made in Paris, in connection with refugee work. On her advice the party followed her to the docks where a boat just starting for England was within sight—a mile from the shore—a small boat soon conveyed the whole Unit to this yacht. When on board they were made heartily welcome by the Captain, officers and crew, a hearty meal prepared, followed by sea-water baths; after sleepless nights, little food and crashing bombs, it was indeed Elysium. These generous English officers giving up their berths to the nurses and adding the delight of soap and clean towels.

A veil must be drawn over sufferings in the Bay of Biscay, including the bombing of the ship by the enemy. Sea sickness, bombs and anti-aircraft was an unforgettable experience. The following night the yacht was chased by a submarine, which happily the nurses knew nothing about till next morning.

After three days and nights of unforgettable adventures Old England welcomed the Unit in a warm embrace. "Our padre," states Sister Oakley Williams, "was our very warm friend, he inspired our message of thanks to the Captain, officers and crew presented by Sister on behalf of the Canadian Polish Ambulance Unit for kindness, courtesy and hospitality, and 'God Save the King' was enthusiastically sung by all before parting." Indeed these glorious men who go down to sea in ships—are they not the chief of England's glory?—a power which no enemy on earth will ever break.

London reached after a restful journey, the Unit was met by Mr. Gregory Macdonald, the ever kind Secretary of the Polish Relief Fund, and all were warmly welcomed at the ever hospitable Headquarters of the R.B.N.A. in Queen's Gate. Here food, baths, "lovely" beds spelt peace after storm and distress. Alas! the lovely ambulances, with hundreds of others, were left "on the other side," and at the moment the good work is at an end.

Some day we may hope the Polish nurses will return

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