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SOME MEMORIES OF SNIPING AND OBSERVATION.

BY MAJOR H. HESKETH-PRICHARD, D.S.O., M.C.

I. Sniping.

In the beginning, the Germans had an excellent sniping organisation —so much so that in early 1915 one of our battalions in trench warfare lost eighteen casualtics to enemy snipers in a single day. On the same front—that is, on the front of the same army, in early 1917, sixteen of our battalions had nine casualties from sniping, in three months. This was the life-saving side of sniping. On the aggressive side the swing of the pendulum was equally decisive. Whereas it was we, who, in 1915, were forced to put up notices 'Take Care,' 'Dangerous,' 'German Sniper,' later there was not such a notice along our whole front; while, on the other hand, many a prisoner and deserter volunteered statements as to the havoc caused by our snipers in the enemy ranks. Thus a German divisional general was shot, and again and again deserters volunteered the information that in their company—perhaps only 120 strong—ten had fallen to our snipers in a single tour of duty. When the pendulum did swing, truly it swung full limit.

But these changes did not come of themselves, and there are few sides of the War which can hold more of interest than lies in the details of the struggle that took place for the mastery.

But to return to the beginning of things.

It was not the British, but the Germans, who began sniping. In fact, at the beginning of the War, the general consensus of our military opinion was against sniping as apt to provoke reprisals; but on this subject, as on so many others, the Hun had other views: for it has ever been a Hun military maxim to send a bullet to the brain that thinks, and in 1914 and 1915 the British forces were beset with a plague of German snipers who, with food and ammunition, lay up in trenches, in cemeteries, and in haystacks, finding easy marks.

At this time the skill of the German sniper became a byword, and in the early days of trench warfare brave German riflemen used to lie out between the lines, sending their bullets through

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the head of an officer or man who dared to look over the parapet. These Germans, who were often forest-guards and sometimes battle-police, did their business with a skill and a gallantry which must be very freely acknowledged. From the ruined house, or the field of decaying roots, sometimes resting their rifles on the bodies of the dead, they sent forth a plague of head-wounds into the British lines. Their marks were small, but when they hit they usually killed their man; and the hardiest soldier turned sick when he saw the effect of the pointed German bullet; for at close range the bullet was apt to keyhole, and the little hole in the forehead where it entered often became a huge tear the size of a fist at the other side of the stricken man's head.

That occasional snipers on the Hun side did reverse their bullets, thus making them into dum-dums, is incontrovertible; but it must also be remembered that the pointed German bullet takes some little time to settle down into its course, and this is why it is liable to keyhole when it strikes a bone within the first 200 yards or so of its flight.

That the German was ready for a sniping campaign is clear enough, for in the end of 1914 there were already 20,000 telescopic-sights in the German Army, *and the snipers had been trained to use them.* On our side the shooting of the original B.E.F. was in point of rapidity and fire-control far superior to any in the world; but even had our Army been organised for sniping, these telescopic-sights must have turned the scale; as a man who can hit a head in the half-lights as well with the open sights as with the telescopic does not live.

To make any accurate estimate of how many victims the Hun snipers claimed at this period is naturally impossible; but the blow they struck for their side was a heavy one, and many of the finest of our soldiers met their deaths at their hands.

So the plague grew until the British were forced to adopt those counter-measures which were finally certain to come.

In the struggle which followed, there was perhaps something more human and more personal than in the work of the gunner or the infantryman. British sniper or Colonial sniper was pitted against the Bavarian or the Prussian, and all along the front duels were fought between men who usually saw no more of their antagonist than a cap-badge, or a forehead, but who became personalities to each other with names and individualities. But of this, which may be termed pure trench warfare and No-Man's Land sniping.

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a new side of sniping was developed. Our men worked in pairs: No. 1 used the telescope and found the 'targets,' while No. 2 used the rifle and did the shooting. The result was that there grew up a complete system of front-line observation, and the battalion intelligence reports were largely based on the log-books of the snipers' observers. With this, the observation or intelligence side of sniping, we will deal at greater length next month.

Only the man who actually was a sniper in the trenches in 1915 can know how hard the German was to overcome. At the end of 1914 there were, as I have said, 20,000 telescope-sights in the German Army, and the Duke of Ratibor did good work for the Fatherland when he collected all the sporting-rifles in Germany (there were thousands of them) and sent them also to the Western Front, which was already well equipped with the regular military issue. Armed with these, the German snipers were able to make wonderfully fine shooting. Against them we, lacking as we did telescopic-sights almost *in toto*, had to pit only the blunt open sights of the Service rifle, except here and there where the deer-stalkers of Scotland—who possessed such weapons—lent their Mannlichers and Mausers. But for these there was no great supply of ammunition; and after this ran out (I can call to mind ninety cartridges for one rifle and the sixty for another of two of my own), these rifles had to be returned to their cases, owing to sheer lack of ammunition. In the middle of 1915, an issue of telescopic-sights began to be 'available,' and were slowly served out in the ratio of four per battalion. At this time many officers and men in the B.E.F. seemed to consider that a sniper was a private soldier, who carried as his badge of office one of these telescopic-sighted rifles. Very often the 'sniper' in question knew little of his rifle and less of his work. It was not until instruction and training was raised to a fine art that we began to forge ahead in the grim battle.

On one occasion an officer had gone down on duty to a certain stretch of trench, and there found a puzzled-looking private with a beautiful new rifle fitted with an Evans telescopic-sight.

'You've got a nice sight,' said the officer.

'Yessir!'

The officer examined the elevating-drum.

'Look here,' said he, 'you've got the sight set for a hundred yards! The Hun trenches are 400 yards away!'

The private looked puzzled.

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'Look here,' said the officer again, 'have you ever shot with that rifle?'

'No, sir!'

'Do you understand it?'

'No, sir!'

'How did you get it?'

'It was issued to me as trench stores, sir!'

'Who by?'

'The Q.M.S., sir!'

Certainly many a German owed his life in those early days to the fact that so many of the telescopic-sighted rifles in the B.E.F. were incorrectly sighted to the hold of the man using them. On the German side, the telescopic-sighted Mausers were not, as in the British Army, issued to a private direct, but to an N.C.O., who was held responsible for the correct sighting and proper care of the rifle, which was, however, actually used by a private. Continued questioning of prisoners and deserters gave us a good deal of information concerning the German sniping organisation, which was quite different from ours; but the time has not come to go into details on this subject. One point cropped up, in examination of prisoners, over and over again, and this was the ease with which the German snipers were able to distinguish our officers, 'because,' as one said naïvely, 'their legs are thinner than the legs of the men.' There are hundreds and hundreds of our officers lying dead in France and Flanders whose death was solely due to the cut of their riding-breeches. It is of no use to wear a Tommy's tunic and webbing-belt if the tell-tale riding-trousers are not also replaced by more commonplace garments.

At one time in the German Army there was a system of roving snipers—that is, a sniper was given a certain stretch of trench to patrol, usually about half a mile, and it was the duty of the sentries along his beat to find and point out 'targets' for him. Opposite a good sniping-section, a German sniper, unless a man of extraordinary skill, rarely—I think—can have obtained good results in this fashion, at least not after our sniping was organised.

On the British side certain snipers and units kept a very careful record of their successes; but, interesting as such statistics were, their accuracy can only have been very partial.

A conversation with a pair of British snipers new to their work has been known to run as follows:

'Morning, you two!'

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'Good morning, sir!'
'Anything doing?'
'Smyth got a 'Un this morning, sir!'
'Good! How do you know?'
''E giv' a cry, threw up his hands and fell back!'

Now, this may have been correct; but, as a matter of fact, a man shot in ordinary trench warfare very, very rarely either throws up his hands or falls back. He nearly always falls forward, and slips down. For this the old Greek rendering is the best, 'And his knees were loosened.' We soon found that a very skilled man with the telescope could tell pretty accurately whether a man fired at had been hit or had merely ducked; and this was the case even when only the head of the 'target' was visible. But to be certain of his accuracy it was almost necessary that the observer should have had a long experience of his work, coupled with a real aptitude for it. The idea of how to spot whether a German was hit or not was suggested by big-game shooting experiences. An animal that is fired at and missed stands tense for a moment before it bounds away; but when an animal is struck by a bullet, there is no pause—it bounds away at once on the impact. Thus, a stag shot through the heart commences its death-rush at once, to fall dead within fifty yards; whereas a stag missed gives that tell-tale start. In dealing with trench-warfare sniping, a very skilled observer soon learned to distinguish a hit or a miss; but there were many observers who never reached the necessary degree of skill.

A reason once advanced for claiming a hit was that the Germans had been shouting for stretcher-bearers; but a question as to what was the German word for stretcher-bearer brought confusion upon the young sniper, whose talents were promptly used elsewhere.

But, taken long by broad, the accuracy of the information given by snipers was really wonderful. On one occasion the snipers of a certain division reported that two Germans had been seen with the number '79' upon the covers of their helmets. This information went from battalion, through brigade, division, and corps, to Army, who rather pooh-poohed the snipers' accuracy, as the 79th had last been heard of on the Russian front. Within a day or two, however, the Germans opposite the battalion to which these snipers belonged sent a patrol out of their trenches one misty morning. The patrol fell in with our scouts, who killed two and carried back the regulation identifications. These proved the snipers to be correct.

It was in the same division that in one tour of duty snipers

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reported the cap-bands of the Germans opposite as (1) brown, (2) yellow, (3) white. This again raised doubts as to their accuracy; but it was not long before a prisoner was taken who acknowledged that the men of his unit had covered their state badges with strips of tape wound round their caps. Prior to putting on the tape, he said, some of his comrades had dipped it in their coffee. It is only fair to say that the sniping-officer of the division in question, Lieut. Gray, M.C.,[1] 5th Scottish Rifles, the King's Prizewinner, had no superior in France at his work, and the exceeding skill of the officers and men under him may fairly be laid at his door.

There was always in the trenches a very simple way of testing the accuracy of a sniper's observation. The various German states, duchies, or kingdoms, all wear two badges on their caps—one above the other: the higher being the Imperial badge, the lower the badge of the state. Thus, the Prussian badge is black and white, the Bavarian light blue and white, the Saxon green and white. These badges, or to be more correct, cockades, are not larger than a shilling; and a series of experiments carried out at our School by the staff, and some of the best Scottish ghillies, proved that the colours were indistinguishable with the Ross telescope at distances over 150 yards. So if ever a sniper (who of course knew what troops he was faced by) reported the colours of cockades when more than 150 yards from the enemy it was at once clear that his imagination was too strong to admit of his useful employment with an observer's telescope.

Another great duty of snipers, especially in local attacks and small bombardments, was blinding the enemy. Thus, if the Germans bombarded any portion of our front their artillery observers almost always did their work from a flank, where from some point of vantage they spotted and corrected the shell-bursts of their gunners. On such occasions our snipers, opposite both flanks of the bombarded area, shot the German observers and broke their periscopes, and often succeeded in rendering them blind. When the Germans retaliated and shot our periscopes, we had a large number of dummies made, and the enemy suffered casualties in exposing himself when trying to break these. In fact, it is not too much to say that in certain ways we became able, fairly early in the proceedings, to place the position of any sniper who troubled us; and, once his post was placed, there were many methods by which the man in it could be rendered harmless.

One great advantage which the Germans enjoyed was bestowed

[1] Afterwards Major Gray.

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on them by the outline of their entrenchments. The German trenches had no definite and flat parapet like ours, but, instead, a parapet of uneven form. Mounds of earth, pieces of corrugated iron, tins, sandbags, wire, and even looted mattresses, thrown here and there, all helped to give an irregularity of outline, which was of the greatest value to the German sniper. Over their jagged *graben*-edge a man might put his head and never be observed, whereas many of our units took—in the early days of the War—an actual pride in having an absolutely flat, even parapet, which gave the Germans every opportunity of spotting the smallest movement. It is not too much to say that along many of our parapets a mouse could not move without being at once observed by the most moderate observer.

It was curious, too, how some few C.O.'s stuck to these flat parapets even in the face of casualties and the dictates of common sense. A trial which we instituted at XI Corps and First Army Sniping Schools proved that in spotting and shooting at a dummy head, exposed for four seconds over a flat parapet, the number of hits was 200 per cent. higher than when the same exposure was made over an imitation German parapet. But flat parapets only disappeared under stringent orders from the High Command.

The psychology of the different races as snipers was always interesting. The English were sound, but very apt to take foolish and useless risks, showing their heads unnecessarily and out of a kind of unthinking optimism; the Welsh, very good indeed; while the Canadians, Anzacs, and the Scottish regiments were splendid, many units showing an aggressiveness which had great effect on the *morale* of the enemy. The Americans were also fine shots, and thoroughly enjoyed their work. We had many of them at the School, sometimes taking classes of Americans for sniping and intelligence, &c. Of the Germans, as a whole, one would say, with certain brilliant exceptions, that they were sound, but unenterprising and uninspired; and that as far as the various tribes were concerned the Bavarians were better than the Prussians; while in some units the Saxons were by no means to be taken lightly. As a rule, however, the Jaeger battalions were all good. But they were, all of them, at their best when they were winning. Once we organised, never was a victory more complete than was that of the British over the German sniper.

One point that was noticeable was the good focussing powers of the German snipers, who shot very well before dawn and dark. In

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the very crack Jaeger Regiments—such regiments as were recruited from the Rominten or Hubertusstock districts, where the great preserves of the Kaiser lie, and in which were a large percentage of Forest Guards—this was very noticeable. But for long-distance work and the higher art of observation, the Germans had nothing to touch the Lovat's Scouts. This is natural enough when one comes to consider the dark forests in which the German Forest Guards live, and in which they keep on the alert for the slightest movement of deer or boar. Compare these sombre shades to the open Scottish hills. It was the telescope against the field-glass, and the telescope won every time. The telescopic-sights of course made accurate shooting in the half-lights very much easier; and indeed for some valuable minutes after it had become too dark to use open sights, the telescopic-sights still gave a clear definition, and at night were invaluable. On both sides, thousands of lives were saved by the wind, since it was not easy to judge its strength in the trenches; and, as the targets aimed at were usually only half a head, the very smallest error of judgment resulted in a miss. And once a bullet has whizzed by one's ear, within a few inches, a second exposure of the head was rarely made in the same place. Trench sniping was, in fact, defined—by Colonel Langford Lloyd—as 'the art of hitting a very small object straight off, without the advantage of a sighting-shot.'

But the duty of the sniper changed as the War went on. At first his job was to dominate the German snipers, destroy their *morale*, and make life secure to his own comrades. At the same time there was his intelligence work, with which I shall deal next month. Later, as the warfare became more open, he proved his value over and over again in attack. When a trench was taken, it was his duty to get out in front, and—lying in a shell-hole—to keep the enemy heads down while his companions consolidated the newly-won position. When an advance was held up by a machine-gun, it was the sniper's business to put it out of action, if he could; and the list of V.C.'s and D.C.M.'s, as well as a thousand deeds of nameless men, prove how often he was successful. In the last advance of the Canadian Corps, their very skilled sniping officer, Major Armstrong, tells me that a single sniper put out of action a battery of 5·9 guns, shooting down one after another the German officer and men—a great piece of work, and one thoroughly worthy of General Currie's splendid corps.

But the machine-gun was the sniper's special target. Once,

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of course, a machine-gun was spotted or moved in the open, a single sniper was quite capable of putting it out of action. In fact, the sniper's duties were legion. He had to be a really high-class shot, a good and accurate observer, a good judge of distance, wind, and light. At the Schools, he was taught crawling, stalking, the art of cover, the reading and making of maps, the use of the rangefinder, the compass, marching on bearings, very rough sketching, the making of posts and strong-points. But this is not the place to descant upon his training. Suffice it that in the more open warfare many a sniper killed his fifty Germans in a day, and that whether as rifleman or scout he bore a part more perilous than the rank and file of his comrades. If you who read this know a man who served his year or two in the sniping-section of his battalion, you know one whom it is well that you should honour.

At a certain point in our lines, not very far from Auchonvilliers, a German sniper had done fell work. It is hard to say how many British lives he had taken, but the tally was not small. He lurked somewhere in the maze of heaps of earth, rusty wire, and sandbags, which there formed the German line. There were twenty or thirty loopholes from which he might be firing; the problem was from which of all these did his shots come. On our side there was no loophole at all covering the area in which he lurked, and any attempt to spot his post had, perforce, to be done over the top of the parapet. At length, however, the Hun was located in the vicinity of two enormous steel plates, set near the top of his parapet.

As I have said, there was no loophole upon our side; so orders were given that one should be put in during the night right opposite these two big plates. The next morning it was hardly light when the German sniper shot into our new loophole, which was at once closed. The trap was now ready, and the officer, whose duty it was to deal with the matter, went a hundred yards down the trench to the right flank, while an assistant opened the loophole and protruded the end of a black stick which he happened to have in his hand. At the same moment the officer to the flank shot at the right hand of the two big plates, once, and then again. The German at the second shot betrayed himself. Thinking, as he did, that the shots were fired from the loophole opposite him, he fired at it, and the gas from his rifle gave away his position. The two big plates were dummies, and he was firing almost from ground-level, and from an emplacement cleverly concealed by a pent-house of broken wire. His cap had fallen off; he had a bald head.

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Once found, and unaware of the fact, a sniper is soon dealt with. One could relate very many such instances, but they are rather grisly. Sooner or later, nearly every troublesome German sniper met his fate. After a spell of duty with a brigade of the 37th Division, I received a wire from the Brigadier: 'Only one Hun sniper left opposite us. Can you lend us your elephant-gun?'

When the German snipers fired from behind bullet-proof steel plates, we knocked these to pieces with privately-owned elephant-guns. Later, such guns became a Government issue. They were very successful, and obviously upset the enemy.

Another position that was much used by the German snipers is supposed to have been trees. This was the theme of many pictures in the illustrated papers; but, as a matter of fact, a high tree makes a very poor sniping-post. The pollard willows are much better, and were extensively used. The German sense of humour is much tickled by seeing, or thinking he sees, a Britisher fall dead out of a tree; and when our sniping became very good and the enemy grew shy of giving a target, a dummy in a tree, worked by a rope, often caused Fritz and Hans to show themselves unwisely. When the sniping was of high class on both sides, all kinds of ruses were employed to get the other side to give a target by various battalions. Some day, I may describe more fully these ruses; but one had to be very careful lest a *Minenwerfer* should take its part in the duel.

It would be interesting to know how many races were represented among the snipers and observers—English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, Americans, Italians, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese. On one occasion, I had to sign a movement order for a man of Red Indian blood. The name I wrote on the order was Private North-West. He had come from those great silences to fight, and bore their name. He killed over fifty Germans. Another Red Indian private who was most successful, wore gold-rimmed glasses. There were no better snipers than these men; for, after all, sniping is only the translation of the true hunter spirit into warfare.

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