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A Soldier's Capture and experiences in WWI

Gordon wrote a diary in the form of a long letter to his father. He wrote to his father about his experiences throughout the war. Gordon spent more time escaping from the enemy than he did fighting against them. His experiences as a prisoner of war were detailed and his life became a series of repetitions. The war began for Gordon on the 17th of September in the year 1916. He was attached to the 7th battalion of the 1st British Columbia Regiment. On this day he was given orders to take some men with him and move to the front line and take over for the 16th battalion. This was more than likely the last time he would meet with his commanding officer.

As Gordon and his men moved to the front he describes the scene before him like the words from *The Waste Land*. "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?" (E 19-20). Gordon's description of the terrain is, "The ground on this battlefield was most difficult. It had been shelled till there was no vestige of vegetation left. Villages had simply disappeared and you couldn't find even a brick" (G 5). Just as there was nothing left in the scene from *The Waste Land* there was nothing to be found at the Battle of the Somme either. The ground was too soft for trenches and the smells were difficult to bear. Bodies of men were buried close by. Gordon and his men made it to an abandoned German dugout where he found the men he was ordered to release from duty. The descriptions Gordon gives of the trenches were

nothing like the descriptions from the poem “Thunder’s Palace”. In the poem the trenches are, “Piles of bells whose faint sounds are the ruddy shells...small palace where everything becomes muffled small palace where everything is new and nothing is old...even when they lived in caves everything there was so precious and new” (TP 225). The British troops have taken over a German trench and the floors are lined with shells. In “Thunder’s Palace” the descriptions are glorified, but in reality there is no beauty to the trenches, only the smell and looks of death. There is no glory in the trenches only sadness. As much as the trenches were present to protect Gordon and his men they were more of a death trap. The men from the 16th battalion never made it out of the trench alive. Gordon’s position was hit directly burying men on top of other men. Gordon and his men had to dig their way out of the bodies on top of them.

Gordon sent one man back to camp for help or new orders. When Gordon’s man did not return the next day Gordon left the trench to find out what was wrong. On his way towards camp he spotted some Germans heading for him and his men, making the only decision he could he returned to the trench and ordered his men into position. The fighting within the trench became useless with all of the shells piling up on the ground. Gordon and his men could not keep their weapons steady and their weapons began to fail them. Eventually they had nothing left but hope that their own men would make it in time to save them from the surrounding Germans. Gordon had five men with him and three of those men were hit. He was also hit twice, once by a bullet in his foot and again by a bomb that damaged his right leg. Gordon and his men were overtaken however and transported behind the German lines.

Through Gordon’s treatment behind the German lines he found that the soldiers fighting were very kind to him, but the Germans that did not fight, the doctors and transport troops were rather nasty. His experience at first was in a German hospital tent “I was taken to a tent filled

with our wounded many in a choking condition. I lay here six days...Most of us couldn't move and as one was there to supply us with means of caring ourselves the smell was awful. It would have been bad enough with bad blood and festering wounds but reached the limit with the other additions" (Gordon 17-19). Similar to Vera Brittain's experiences "Soon after I arrived I saw one of them, who was holding a basin, faint right on top of the patient. 'Many of the patients can't bear to see their own wounds, and I don't wonder,' I recorded. Although the first dressing at which I assisted-a gangrenous leg wound, slimy and green and scarlet, with the bone laid bare-turned me sick and faint for a moment" (Brittain 211). Many of the wounded, on either side of the war, did not make it past the medical tents.

Gordon was transported many times, eventually reaching Cologne. He was transferred again and again throughout his captive with the Germans. The food was never good with the Germans and the wound on Gordon's foot continued to open again and again due to walking or standing.

In May of 1917 Gordon was well enough to plan his first attempt of escape. "Towards the end of May I saw I was as fit as I was ever likely to be in Germany and in that life... I made a escaping partnership with Walker and started getting ready to get out" (G 33). Gordon planned his escape for the 6th of July, but two attempts by other men were made ahead of him and the commander in charge was relieved of duty because of the escapes. A new commander was replaced and on his second day in office Gordon made his escape. Gordon drew a map of the camp to better show his father in detail. Gordon's plan was to escape with the bathing party and he along with his men had to appear unsuspecting. They managed to sneak away from the party and disappear. Gordon and his men walked during the night and lay around during the day. Gordon's foot started to swell and reopened during his trek. Their journey away from the

Germans was similar to a line from “Dulce et Decorum Est”. “[A]nd towards our distant rest began to trudge. Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots, [b]ut limped on, blood-shod” (Owen 4-6). Gordon was worse off than his men and decided to separate from Walker and the remainder of his escapees. Hoping they would have a better chance without him. Gordon was eventually caught for the second time. During his second capture he met up with Walker, but the Germans separated them.

Gordon was again transported a few times before making it to a new camp with no escape history. There were 300 British officers contained there. Gordon watched as others attempted to escape from the camp, but failed. He and several others came up with a plan to tunnel under the kitchen. The kitchen was checked daily for tunnels, but when something occurred they were locked in the cupboard. “[W]e would take turns at being locked into the cupboard and gradually sanded our way through the boards in the floor... This work was very trying. Had to be done silently” (G 63-4). Similar to Vera Brittain’s experiences Gordon was stuck in a routine. Every day he and his men would fight to survive and escape from the Germans. He lived the same day over and over again hoping to find his way home alive. “The darkness crumbles away. It is the same old druid Time as ever” (Rosenberg). As much as the darkness can refer to the trenches, in Gordon’s case it refers to the tunnels. Gordon and his men worked endlessly day after day digging their way out of the German prison camp. Eventually Gordon and the men that followed him escaped from the last German camp they hoped to ever see and made it to Laibock.

From Laibock Gordon and his men had to switch trains several times due to soldiers needing the passenger trains and engines. They made their way out of enemy territory and found relief with the Italians. Gordon finally had a chance to make his way back to his battalion. In

Italy Gordon boarded a Italian battleship and eventually made his way to Hanover, moving from one mode of transportation to another.

For Gordon, he never quite got the experience that some of the war poems talk about, but his war experience was still terrifying and unpredictable. He spent very little time in the trenches and just as long in the medical tents. Even though most of his war experiences were about escaping the enemy he still saw what the war had done to many others. He described the smells and the scenes he saw day in and day out. His goal was to survive and make it home. Gordon finally returns home in December of 1917 where he finishes his letter in Scotland. Here, he is finally eating well and is in safer company, with the Canadians. At the finale of his journal he tells his father he will try to get approval to come home if his father needs him to. His journal ends here with “your afec. Son Gordon” (Gordon 81). There is no surname ever mentioned for Gordon and the only information to go on was his battalion, but even though he says he returns home he never mentions rejoining his battalion. He does not say anything more than he has made it home. What happened to Gordon after the war? How did he handle being back home? Was he capable of returning to his somewhat normal everyday life or was he more in danger to follow the actions of the characters from *The Sun Also Rises*, drowning himself in alcohol and trying to forget everything that happened to him? These are questions that may never have been answered and if they have they may not be recorded. For Gordon’s sake, I hope he was able to find some meaning to his life especially because he managed to survive in a situation where too many men did not.

Work Cited

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