Clinical and Other Notes.

CHRISTMAS IN THE ARDENNES

BY

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Towards the middle of December, 1944, the Armoured Brigade in which I was an R.M.O. moved from Holland down to South-West Belgium, in order to re-equip with new tanks. It was wonderful luck, we thought, to get out of the line for Christmas and everyone was in great spirits at the thought of the weeks ahead to be spent among the hospitable Belgians.

Von Runstedt's offensive and the Ardennes Bulge seemed a long way off and of little concern to us at that moment. It came, therefore, as an unpleasant shock when, on the morning of December 20, we were told to be ready to move at 14.00 hours as an operational reserve for the Ardennes Sector.

After a long march, mostly in fog and darkness, we reached the outskirts of Brussels at midnight. Here we spent the night in an empty school. At the C.O.'s conference late that night we got our second unpleasant shock. He told us that the situation in the Ardennes was confused, but that it was thought that nine Panzer Divisions had broken through and were heading for the Meuse. Our task was to prevent the Germans crossing the river between Namur and Givet. This involved covering a 70 mile stretch, and it seemed a big assignment for one brigade for, as far as we knew, there were no other British troops supporting us.

The next day we moved down to the threatened area as fast as our tanks would allow us on their tracks. We met streams of civilians, burdened with their possessions, travelling in the opposite direction—presumably to escape what they imagined to be the return of the Huns. The atmosphere was certainly rather tense in the towns we passed through, but the people seemed cheered to see British tanks arriving on the scene. Our confidence was not raised by the sight of L. of C. troops digging slit trenches by the roadside, only 15 miles from Brussels.

We eventually reached the Meuse at Namur at 18.00 hours. My unit, the 3rd Royal Tank Regt., had the task of defending the bridge at Dinant and we travelled down the river, reaching the town at 20.00 hours. The Germans had not yet arrived though they were reported to be only 12 miles away. Two squadrons were soon in defensive positions on the far side of the river, while R.H.Q. remained on the near side.
We stayed there for the next two days, during which the situation became slightly less obscure. The "Bulge" was still slowly enlarging, though the Americans were fighting back and were beginning to get the situation under control. The spearhead of the German advance appeared to be aimed at Dinant. Our Recce patrol had soon contacted it, losing one light tank in the process, and the two forward squadrons had moved cautiously forward to meet the enemy on the second day.

I got my first casualties on the night of the 23rd, when four misguided German officers in a Jeep drove into Dinant and got a hot reception at our roadblock. The two survivors arrived at my R.A.P. in a sorry state.

The next day we were kept busy with a steady flow of wounded, mostly Americans, who often arrived back in very shot-up vehicles.

Christmas Day dawned fine and clear and it turned out to be the turning point of the battle. The weather was bitterly cold and the Meuse Valley looked very beautiful in its mantle of snow from the fall of the previous night. It was certainly a White Christmas, though we felt scarcely in a festive mood.

The course of the battle was easy to follow over our "19 set" and it soon became apparent that the Boche was getting more than he had bargained for. Tanks of the 2nd Panzer Division had advanced right up to our forward positions where they were speedily engaged by our own tanks. Before lunchtime we had knocked out seven for the loss of none of our own and the enemy withdrew, obviously impressed and surprised by the opposition.

I moved my R.A.P. 3 miles across the river during the afternoon, and set up at the Château de Sorrinnes where R.H.Q. were now established.

A force of American armoured cars had meanwhile arrived on the scene and were hotly engaging the enemy a short distance ahead of us supported by Lightnings of the U.S.A.A.F. A scene of carnage and death was apparent in the blazing farms and villages in the vicinity and we were kept very busy collecting wounded. Our own losses had been remarkably light considering everything and those we evacuated were largely American and German.

Tired, but feeling decidedly more confident, we celebrated Christmas night at the old Château with a bottle of Dutch gin, hoping that the Boche would not have recovered sufficiently to counter-attack that night. As it turned out we were lucky.

Boxing Day was again a cloudless day and the Air Forces certainly made the most of the weather. Hundreds of aircraft passed over and from the roof of the Château we watched rocket-firing Typhoons diving to attack the battered Panzer forces. Column after column of black smoke arose, denoting the destruction of more of Runstedt's tanks.

After that day it was obvious that the "go" had been knocked out of the Ardennes offensive and the Bulge was slowly squeezed back.

We were withdrawn South into reserve into the Rochefort-Beuraing area where we stayed for the next three weeks, billeted in tiny villages amidst the wintery-looking forest.

Some of the time we spent hunting the boar which dwelt in the surrounding country—a novel sport to most of us and I fear our weapons were deplorably
unorthodox, ranging from hand grenades and Sten guns to rifles and revolvers. The largest boar was, incidentally, slain by a Rifle Brigade officer with his revolver.

However, it was by no means a period of rest as far as I was concerned. When the “flap” had started, many of the civilians, including all the doctors in the area, had evacuated themselves to the West. Consequently I soon found myself with an ever-increasing civilian practice.

The snow was now between 1 and 2 feet deep with the temperature between 20° and 30° below freezing point most of the time, so that evacuation of serious cases to civilian hospitals was made practically impossible in our district. The drugs I carried round with me were scarcely adequate to deal with some of the cases, but I managed to supplement them by a little scrounging in the district.

One night I was called to see a young girl of 18 with pneumonia. She was extremely dyspnoeic and cyanosed and evidently very ill. I started her on M & B 693 but her condition had worsened when I went to see her the next morning. Oxygen was needed and it was then that I remembered that the unit fitters carried some with them for use in welding. They gladly co-operated and we heaved the immense cylinder up to the girl’s room. I had meanwhile obtained a BLB mask and we soon had it functioning satisfactorily. She used it frequently during the next few days with marked relief and when we later left the area she was well on the way to recovery.

Two midwifery cases also cropped up, both fortunately uncomplicated. One we were summoned to at the usual midnight hour, and the Padre and I set out for the village 5 miles away in a half-track. It was blowing a blizzard and I had difficulty keeping the heavy machine on the icy road. On arrival we found a considerable assembly gathered at the bedside consisting of the husband, five children, and a singularly helpless “help” from next door. I was at least relieved she was a multipara. The assembly having been dispersed, I examined the mother. Things seemed to be progressing satisfactorily and I did not anticipate a long wait. My hopes were confirmed an hour later when a small boy arrived without mishap, the Padre enthusiastically rushing round with bowls of hot water.

When I visited the good woman the next day, I was horrified to find her up and scrubbing the front-door steps! Never having stayed in bed after her previous confinements, my protests did little to make her change her customs.

Other cases of unusual interest to an R.M.O. included a woman in diabetic coma and an old man who had cerebral haemorrhage. Treatment of these was not so successful, though the diabetic was alive when we left the area.

It was with mixed feelings that I heard we were to leave the Ardennes on January 16th. It had been an interlude full of excitement and interest and, though we felt cheated of our Christmas, we made up for it with the customary celebrations a month later.