

Tape 511

Mr E Cooper

IT IS MAY 1978 AND THIS IS MR LIDDLE OF SUNDERLAND POLYTECHNIC TALKING TO MR E COOPER AT HIS HOME MILL COTTAGE, ARKENGARTHDALÉ NEAR REETH IN NORTH YORKSHIRE WITH REGARD TO HIS EXPERIENCE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR WHICH WAS IN SERVING WITH A FRIENDS AMBULANCE UNIT BOTH ON A TRAIN AND IN A MOTORISED CONVOY ATTACHED TO A FRENCH DIVISION.

Mr Cooper would you tell me first please when and where you were born?

I was born in York.

In what year?

On May 12 1894.

What was your Father?

My Father was a clerk in the local gas company but he had a hobby which turned him into a very good historian. He wrote 2 or 3 books on York. On the wars and on the castles and I think he looked upon his job just as a means,

Subsistence to allow him to do what he wanted to do?

That is right, yes, and to enable us go to school. To a boarding school.

Now to which school did you go?

I went to Ackworth.

So that would tell one straight away that you were a Quaker family?

Well, my parents became Quakers during The Boer War. They thought it was a monstrous affair and they became pacifists.

Were you before the First World War strongly influenced in this towards not merely Quaker beliefs but also the extension of this into a concern about militarism and imperialism?

Well, we used to gather to what was called The York Settlement in St Mary's and there was one man there, Wilfrid Crossland who became a very good friend of ours and he brought us out. We were young men who had left Quaker schools and we were more or less at loose ends and he organised camps during the weekends and he was the warden of this settlement and he arranged various lectures on all kinds of topics and there was a strong socialist influence. I don't think we recognised it at the time although later on with the experiences of war we became rather confirmed in our political ideas and we have been voting socialist ever since but I have never elected a Member of Parliament.



You mean you have been in a constituency where he was on a losing horse?

That is right.

Well, you won't want me to join swords with you on that. So let us come to the fact that I certainly remember having seen The Friend from the period I think around 1908, 1909 or 1910 where there is grave concern about the countries militarism and the possibility, I suppose this would be associated with Lord Roberts of the introduction of conscription?

Yes. We had one or 2 friends who had been in the Territorial Army and they were rather disgusted with it and they came out and that is one of my early impressions of what was taking place. There was a tremendous demand for young men to join the Territorial Army.

What work were you doing when war broke out?

Well, when I left Ackworth in 1909 I got a job in the surveying department of the Yorkshire Insurance Company at its head office in York and I was with them until the war came and when the war started the directors thought well, we will go on paying them their full salary. It will all be over by Christmas but it wasn't over by Christmas and then they decided to make up their war payments up to the salary that they were earning at the time they left to join up.

Are you speaking of men who volunteered to join the colours?

Yes. There was no conscription then.

I know but what about you yourself?

Well, the same applied, they were very nice about me. They treated me in the same way but as our unit was a voluntary one. I received my salary in the ordinary way without any deduction.

Yes, that is interesting but you are leaping on a bit beyond where we are but Mr Cooper one thing that you have not spoken of is this atmosphere of euphoric excitement and a sense of adventure and commitment to a cause greater than one's self which was undoubtedly the spirit of the time in Britain in August 1914 and you yourself responded to it but tell me about this?

Well, we used to see the soldiers marching all sunburnt and singing and so many of them had joined up. I couldn't say exactly how many from my office but the majority of young men had already volunteered and we were rather at loose ends. Our friends were joining and I don't think one had any strong political views at that time. I mean I don't think we bore any hatred towards the Hun.

No, of course not but I am aware of the Quaker teaching and I appreciate that for you as a Quaker your loyalty to your God was of course, something on a much higher plane than any question of patriotism but a man is a man and I just wondered whether you had



any inner stirrings of conscience that perhaps you were uneasy about not appearing to play your part?

Not at that time. We were very keen on doing something in France and it seemed a way out.

Yes. A proper compromise?

Yes.

Yes, I understand. Now in fact you went to join the RAMC and in fact you did enlist did you?

No, we didn't enlist because the enlistment office was closed.

But Rowntree heard about you?

Well, he heard that we had gone to Leeds and he sent my friend's brother to meet us at the station and he took us to Rowntree House and Arnold Rowntree said, if you like we can put your name down for an early entrance into the first training camp at Jordans and we waited a few more weeks and we did get the invitation to go and join the unit and go through the training necessary. Take examinations in first aid and so on.

Perhaps this might be the right place for you to tell me something about the standing of Rowntree in York and in Quaker circles at this time? Tell me something about that?

Well, he was still a Member of Parliament at that time. York returned 4 Members and very often it was 2 conservatives and 2 Liberals but later on I think there were some electoral reforms and they were reduced to 2 but he was, I think he was chairman of Rowntree & Company at that time. He was a very fine personality.

And you would know him to some extent personally because of the Friends meeting?

Oh yes. Yes, we knew him very well. In fact, we used to go to his house for garden parties occasionally. Oh yes, he took a great interest in the young men.

Yes. Well, you would go down to Jordans for your training. What do you remember of this?

Well, I don't remember much beyond the fact that I caught the flu and spent 3 weeks in bed whilst the other men were doing Infantry drill in the field above the Jordans hostel and they had to sleep on the bare floor of the Mayflower barn. I think I recovered sufficiently to join in some of their activities.

It didn't delay your departure to France?

No, it didn't delay my departure.

And did you go out as a complete unit in January 1915?

We went out as a group to build a typhoid hospital at a village



near Dunkirk. Apparently there was an epidemic of typhoid amongst the French troops around Ypres and the idea was to build this enormous hospital. I don't know where the timber came from but we helped to put it together and then we became orderlies and looked after these typhoid cases but I didn't stay very long there. I was sent out from there to another hospital at Hazebrouck and then to a further hospital at Poperinghe where I stayed until the autumn of 1915.

Now you said you were sent but surely not alone?

Well, there was an existing group there. I was adding to their number.

I am interested to know whether you had any form of pay for the normal requirements for leave times, for beef steak and chips and things like that and a little wine in the estaminets?

I can't remember getting anything. I think there was something, some pocket money but I was able to draw on my salary which was being paid.

Yes, of course.

But I think there was some scheme for receiving,

Did the Quakers, whether they were in small units or whether they were on the train which we are coming to soon. Did they have their own chain of command or not?

Yes. There was Noel Baker, was the chief, the head of the unit and he had his assistants and they ranked as officers although they didn't have the usual Army badges. They had the Red Cross badges which denoted a degree of command.

Now which was the unit to which you were assigned and of which Noel Baker was the chief?

Well, he was the head of the whole thing in France and later on, very shortly he formed the Italian unit.

Yes, I knew that.

Yes. So we lost him and a man called Maxwell took over his job.

But there would then be the breakdown into smaller units servicing certain trains or motorised units?

Yes. Well, from the earlier times there was probably only one unit but as the days went on they formed units doing with particular jobs. You would have one unit dealing with the evacuation of Ypres for instance and there was another one which,

But was that an independent group or was it merely a section of the whole?

It was a section of the whole, yes.



What work were you doing in the Hazebrouck hospital?

I was an orderly.

Have you any clear recall of the nature of the work that you did?

Well, it was more or less that of a male nurse. We used to go round with the doctor in the mornings and we did all the dirty work. The changing of sheets and clearing up the mess that was made.

Did you find that you could as, I mean it is not everybody who takes to this sort of work. Did you find that you could manage it?

Yes. It wasn't very agreeable sometimes and I was very glad that I was sent on to the ambulance train.

But here the strain might have been different in that you would be seeing grievous wounds some of which you would have to assist in the redressing of and was your stomach strong enough for this?

Yes, but on the train they were transitory weren't they? I mean they weren't there for long and a lot of them would have only their first field dressings especially during a push like the Somme battle.

But there would be men in great pain and there would indeed be men who would die on the train?

Yes. Well, if there was the likelihood of someone dying we should stop at the nearest town such as Amiens and he would be taken off and sent to a hospital but sometimes they did die on the train.

Do you recall your work on the train as uniformly happy or with an awareness of the weakness of human nature were there times when the close proximity of your work and play, the same people, the same time with the same particular quirks and fancies did arouse mutual antagonisms and strain?

No. They were a most extraordinary collection of men. We used to say that half the train were chapel and half were casino and I tried to be as neutral as possible.

Was there any disagreement or even if it was properly expressed between those who were politically orientated in addition to their religious beliefs and those who were not committed in anyway to a political standpoint?

No, not as far as I remember.

No extreme socialists?

Oh there were, yes. There were extreme socialists and they were teased but it was all in good part really.



Now you were on ambulance train 16?

Yes.

And I wonder whether you can recall today though there is of course, the original documentation of your papers which would sustain and support this, are there any particular periods when the work was so demanding and hectic in association with perhaps the big push on the Somme in July 1916 or one of the other offensives?

Well, there were times when we were very tired and for instance during a big push some of the journeys would last as long as 36 hours. So you can imagine what its like having a train load of wounded people. Being fed and attended to. Most of them would not be able to get out of their bunks for long hours and the stifling heat of the summer would make a train absolutely unbearable at times but and then when we unloaded at a base we had to clean the train up. Now that is the most disagreeable job. Scrubbing the floors, polishing the brasses in the typical Army way in order that they are all sweet and clean for the next trip. Now very often before a next trip we should have a day or 2 in garage and sometimes it was in lovely country and we enjoyed getting off the train for a few hours.

Football, swimming?

Football, swimming and then there was the most amusing occasion when I took a book. Went into a field and fell asleep and when I woke up I found that the train had disappeared and there I was with plimsolls. No belt, no cap alone as it were in the north of France which was under the control of the British Army but I went to a nearby depot of Engineers and explained the position and one of them gave me a cap which didn't fit very well but it was something and they didn't know where the train had gone. They should have known but I had a vague idea where it should have gone and the only thing to do was to go to this particular point where lines diverge in various directions where I could find out from the railway transport officer if they had seen ambulance train 16.

So, I went to a watering place on the railway side. You know those things with long pipes like elephant trunks and a French goods train came along to fill up with water and they said they were going to Paris. They were coming from Dunkirk and going all the way to Paris. This was at Calais where we were garaged and I was allowed to jump into the van and I gave him cigarettes and we got quite friendly and then when we got to this junction Etaples the train slowed down because there were so many lines and probably the signals were working against them. So I was able to jump off and I found myself at midnight at Etaples station and I went into the railway transport office and he said, well, your train has gone to so and so. St Pol but I can't do anything for you tonight. So you better lie down in that shed over there and he gave me a blanket and I tried to sleep. Not very successfully.



Then in the morning he gave me a movement order to go to St Pol hoping that the train might be there. I got on to the train not having had any breakfast but fortunately there was a soldier, a Tommy in the compartment and he shared with me his tin of bully beef and biscuits and when we got to St Pol I went to the transport office and I said, have you seen ambulance train 16 at all. Oh, they haven't been here for 6 months. I felt rather crestfallen at that. Then I made other enquiries and found somebody who said, yes, of course, they went right through up the line to another place. I forget the name now and I was able to get another movement order on an ordinary train to this particular spot and found the train standing in the station in this.

Were you disciplined for this?

No. The French guard he said, I suppose you will be court martialled.

Now actual overall responsibility for the train would be born by the RAMC I suppose?

Oh yes, we were working under the, now what were his initials AD something.

MS?

Something like that. He was Colonel Galley.

Yes. Assistant director of medical services?

Yes. Colonel Galley was the head of the ambulance train services and ultimately I suppose our trains were under his control but we had a Sergeant in charge and also an officer, a Captain and part of the train was given well, only one coach was given up to the Captain and 2 nurses. The Captain had an assistant too.

Was there ever an occasion when or an issue when the possibility of your train being used in reverse as a troop train going up towards the front?

Never.

Because of course, this would have been a breaking of the conventions?

Of the Red Cross convention. An incident of that kind did occur when we were on the motor convoy.

Tell me about that then because I want to come to the motor convoy work?

Well, this was during the retreat.

March 1918?

No. We were on the southern front. The Chemin des Dames front and we were with the French Army and there was a British Division



which had been sent down for a rest. It had been fighting up in the north and this was in May 1918 and we had come away from a resting period just as the Germans attacked on the Chemin des Dames and there was complete chaos and the Armies were in retreat and we had to keep up with them as much as we could and do as much work as we could. We had had some very narrow escapes as you probably read in that diary but when we got over the Marne the retreat seemed to ease off. Whether they were held up or whether they exhausted themselves or not, probably had and there was one critical point. A bridgehead which had to be protected and we were told one night to be at a certain place to collect some sick French soldiers and when we arrived we found they had machine guns and we gathered that this was a very urgent.

And you were the only available transport?

Probably and we had orders to take them to this bridgehead which we did.

You did?

Yes, but we protested afterwards and we got the sack from that particular French Division which we didn't mind. We didn't like it very much.

Which Division was that?

I forget now but we were transferred afterwards to a very crack Alpine R Division. The men used to wear black berets and were very fit.

Where were they operating from?

We were in the south.

Did you prefer the work with a motorised convoy or not?

Oh yes.

Why?

Well, first of all we were away from the discipline of the British Army and secondly it was an interesting life. We were all on the move the whole time.

And the attraction of being with a smaller group?

Yes. Well, there were about 40 of us and about 20 cars.

Oh, not so small. You wouldn't have any more than that on a train?

Yes. Well, on a train, now then I forget how many. That book would tell you.

Yes. So you found that the variety of the work,

Plenty of variety and you felt you were doing something. You were



getting to grips with things. You were told any time of day or night that you must go to a certain point on the map. A certain aid post.

The whole unit or just,

No. Say just one car.

Yes. Did you drive?

I drove in the end. Yes, I learnt to drive but there had to be 2 men on an ambulance.

Because they would help to load it?

Yes.

How many cases would you take?

You would take 4 stretcher cases or 5. Perhaps one in the middle and 2 on either side.

Or?

Take 8 walking cases.

Yes. Were you ever subjected to any form of taunting either by French or British at your non combatant status?

No, I don't think so. Sometimes one was told how lucky you were or something of that sort.

I wondered whether in playing football against one of the other, the soldiers you ever might have been cat called by the watching soldiers?

No. We got on very well. We used to play French Divisions at football. In fact, we finished up with a match against Strasbourg Town. We lost but it was all very exciting.

Something you said earlier on implied if I am right that you did have later on some conscience about not having done your stint as a soldier. Was I right or not?

I think so, yes. I think one did have that but when we weighed it up especially in the latter half when we were really in danger very often it didn't seem that we were shirking at all.

Are there any particular days of work or any particular recollections that you have today which remain ineffacable because of either the drama or the pathos of the work that you were doing on that occasion?

You mean something that,

One man desperately wounded. I mean after all I have seen your, I am hoping its going to be preserved in the archives but I have seen one document which shows that your coolness and courage



under fire in rescuing 10 wounded men was officially recognised by the French. Now tell me about that incident?

Well, we were sent our car. The 2 of us went off. We were sent to a village of Courcelles I think it was.

On the Somme?

No. This was on the Vesle and the Germans were on one side and we were on the other and obviously they must have seen this vehicle coming down the deserted street. All the buildings in ruins. They must have seen this thing going down for some purpose or other and they started shelling. I stayed with the car while my co driver, well, he was actually, it was his responsibility. I was his assistant really. He went off to find the aid post which was in a cellar in the village and whilst he was away a shell came down a few feet from our ambulance. It brought a wall down fortunately which protected us in a way and we weren't hit but the ambulance had bits taken out of the roof. Then he came along with his 10 men. We packed them up and they were still shelling the place. Sometimes a shell would be dropped on the road in front of us and we should charge through and we eventually took them to a casualty clearing station. Now that is all I remember. I don't know how it was that we were picked out the 2 of us for a decoration. I don't think we felt we deserved it. It was part of our normal job.

But there had been somebody there to see you doing your normal job?

Well, the men who were in the ambulance must have said something.

What decoration did you get?

Just the Croix de Guerre which is a very common, it was the lowest level decoration one could get.

When you came home when it was all over were you able to take up your job again with The Yorkshire Insurance Company?

Yes.

With no hint nor sign of the different nature of your war service?

No, not a bit.

Well, Mr Cooper it has been interesting talking to you and I am very grateful indeed for your interest in and support of my work. Thank you very much indeed.

May I just tell you one thing which stands out in my memory. It was on the ambulance train. The train was full up. Every bunk was taken and there were stretchers lying on the floor and it was very difficult for an orderly to work without treading on somebody and I was walking down the ward in the darkness and I came across a young soldier. Probably a farm labourer. Certainly



from the country. He had been very badly wounded in the head