



### ***To Ypres for a Haircut***

The War Diaries and Letters of Lieutenant A. G. Bates RA

Edited by M. G. Bates, Published by Wilton 65 (Winkfield, 2006)

#### **Review by Jonathan Bailey**

The flow of diaries and letters describing experiences of the First World War continues unabated; but it is unusual to find material such as ‘To Ypres for a Haircut’ offering a rare first-hand account of technical and tactical innovation, in this case what may have been the first indirect and predicted artillery missions fired by the Royal Artillery in the First World War.

The author of these diaries and letters, which cover the period August 1914-May 1915, was Austin Bates, a pre-war regular officer, commissioned in 1911, who was 23 years old at the outbreak of war. His education at Woolwich took place at the height of the debates about the merits or otherwise of indirect fire, with guns hidden from view of the enemy, versus close engagement with the guns exposed, but at least with a clear view of their target.

Following the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, during which indirect fire had become the normal and preferred tactic, most European armies adopted similar practices, or at least an indirect-fire capability. As war approached, however, the lessons of 1905 faded somewhat and all armies reverted once more to direct fire as the norm. In the case of the British Army, the bitter experiences of Le Cateau put paid to the practice; and indirect fire became the dominant factor in the next four years of fighting. In the process, the shape of the battlefield was transformed, along with tactics, staff practice, command and even war industry, with implications for the employment of women in the war effort. Austin Bates describes the apparently small, even ‘sub-tactical’ incidents which constituted this historic watershed in military affairs, inevitably unaware of their more profound consequences.

Bates writes of the absolute conviction amongst British troops that victory would be theirs and that the German infantry is “...*not for it*”. Over the course of the war, some of his buoyant spirits seem to have flagged for, as he wrote of the retreat from Mons in an afternote of 1919, “*The retreat ...seems now as it did then, an exciting adventure and on quite another plane to the dirty, loathly, servile murder job of 1917*”

Bates served as a Forward Observer in 31<sup>st</sup> Battery, of 37<sup>th</sup> Howitzer Brigade, in 4<sup>th</sup> Division; and he describes much detail about the necessary skills required of an observer: taking up a position, the effects of shrapnel, fall of shot, what it was like to be shelled and the effects of fire on smashed batteries, capturing something of the vagaries of fortune in war.

We learn of such events because Bates was a highly intelligent observer and participant in events which stirred his professional curiosity. His diaries have the unmistakable air of the



practical young officer who has a genuine interest in technology and gunnery, one who even wishes to convey that to his family and friends in correspondence. He must have been a fine example of a young officer, one who does not fit easily into the mould of 'fox-hunting halfwit' to which some might once have wished to consign the officers of Britain's splendid little army of 1914.

Bates describes the arrival of the first DIII field telephones on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1914, and the shelling of the bridge at La Ferté Sous Jouarre which the Germans were reported to be crossing. No observation was possible, and his battery fired by map and compass, not merely an indirect fire mission, but perhaps the first recorded predicted indirect fire mission of the war? Later that day, Bates controlled numerous indirect missions from his vantage point in a church tower. He describes the indirect artillery duels that were fought over the following days, casualties in his party and some of the technical problems. A flavour from his notes for 15<sup>th</sup> September 1914:

*"Owing to a mistake in the passing of orders, I could not see any of my first rounds...I scrambled down...to the battery and got the error put right. On my return I soon had a bracket with 1<sup>st</sup> charge at 4000-3900 yards map range only. After four rounds of Lyddite they pulled down the observation limber of the left battery and a few more stopped firing."*

He visited 88<sup>th</sup> Battery that day, arriving shortly after it had been shelled by German guns which had been directed by an airborne observer:

*"I found the battery formed up and counting casualties which amounted to 17 killed, 14 wounded and 33 horses killed. The battery had played up very well and there had not been the slightest sign of panic or confusion, merely the quiet and quick carrying out of orders."*

There is much more that one would wish to know of this young officer who went on to serve in early air defence units in Spring 1915, no doubt because of his technical bent, and who survived the war despite suffering serious wounds in 1918. It is intriguing to hear of his family relationship to the Fraser-Tytlers, who produced that other notable author and witness of the Royal Artillery's experiences of 1914-18.

It is too easy to be enthralled by such rare first-hand descriptions of significant events; but it is also clear that this is a record published by a family who are proud of what an earlier generation achieved. The editor of these papers is to be congratulated, not merely for ensuring that his father's exploits are preserved for another generation of his family to treasure, but also for making this rare material available to historians who seek, but seldom find, such nuggets in first-hand accounts.