

Bexhill Observer, 9<sup>th</sup> October 1915

## **Back from the Dardanelles**

### **Bexhill Sailor's War Diary**

#### THRILLING DESCRIPTIONS OF FIGHTS ON LAND AND SEA

On Saturday, Able-Seaman Walter Gwynne, of the Royal Naval Division, who has been severely wounded in the Dardanelles fighting, arrived at his home, 83, Windsor-road, Bexhill, and is now recruiting strength after his injuries.

Seaman Gwynne, who before the War was employed in the Bexhill Post Office, is a son of Mr. W. Gwynne, also a Bexhill postal employee. Soon after the outbreak of war Gwynne joined the Royal Naval Division, and sailed from Bristol for the East at the end of February. He saw war on sea and land in many phases, and having quite commendable powers in descriptive writing, kept a diary in which he recorded his experiences. It is one of the most thrilling documents that have come into our hands, and we reproduce some extracts from it.

The journey to the East was propitious. In the following extract from his diary the writer gives an impression of how Malta struck a young man fresh from England:-

“Sunday, 7<sup>th</sup> March – On arrival at Malta I was struck by the beauty of the buildings, also the position of them. They were built on a hill. On the heights the inhabitants stood and cheered as we came in. The Maltese are a very dirty people; they will eat anything, but they are very good natured.”

#### MODERN WAR IN CLASSIC SEAS

Then he goes on to tell of his approach to the war area in the seas where many of the battles of the ancient world were fought.

“Friday, 12 March – Arrived at Lemnos, our base. The British Government had probably looked out the harbour here years ago – a most magnificent natural harbour. The dresses of the people are of a weird character – no two alike. Everything seems mediaeval. Oxen do the ploughing, and all the inhabitants have donkeys. There are a lot of ragged mountain sheep and also strange cows.

“March 19<sup>th</sup> – Left Lemnos at 7 p.m. for an unknown destination. Morning found us 17 miles up the Dardanelles, right among the bombarding fleet. We were told they weren't ready for us or something of that sort. Another rumour was that 100,000 Turks were waiting for us onshore. We are afraid of the landing – get that over and we shall be all right. On the return journey we were within range of the Turkish guns, but they did not fire.

#### THE NAVAL REVERSES

“Sunday, March 21<sup>st</sup> – As day progressed wind rose, and sea got rough. A company were ashore bathing and had a hard time to get back. Heard with regret about the sinking of the ‘Irresistible’, ‘Ocean’, and other ships in the Dardanelles. We were within a few miles of the ‘Irresistible’ when she sank. Were told we must not send the news home..... This loss occurred at the end of a grand victory. We had to return because of this reverse. There are only three places we can land at, and they are guarded by large Turkish armies.”

#### DEATH ON THE DEEP

A thrilling incident is then related:-

“Friday, April 16<sup>th</sup> – We left Lemnos at 6 a.m. this morning. At 9 a.m. we had to parade as we heard the Austrian fleet was out. We saw their boats on the horizon. But there was a nearer danger than this. A Turkish destroyer was out, and, coming up with the transport ‘Minnetow’, gave a thousand men five minutes to leave. The dirty dogs! As the boat was loaded with ammunition, the order was given ‘Every man for himself’. Of course, there was a rush and the boats were swamped. The destroyer fired three torpedoes at a range of 50 yards and all missed. But half the crew were in the water and on rafts and planks and anything they could lay hands on. On our approach the destroyer sheered off, as she thought we were armed. Then began a terrible rescue work. I never want to see anything like it again. The poor fellows were going under

all ways, but by prompt action we saved nearly 100. Six died and we buried them at sea in the afternoon. The fellows we rescued were blue with cold, and many were injured. We transhipped them later in the day. The Turkish destroyer was driven ashore and finally sunk by one of ours after a short chase. If we had been one hour earlier it would have been us and not the 'Minnetow'. Thank God we weren't."

#### "FULL CHARGED WITH ENGLAND'S THUNDER"

Then Gwynne goes on to tell of a sight which must live long in the memory – a big fleet of English battleships ????? flame and steel at the Turkish defences. Says he:-  
"April 27<sup>th</sup> – Yesterday we witnessed a bombardment. Today we saw a much more terrific one. We saw about 40 boats on the job, and they made the Turkish forts, villages, and trenches look small. The Queen Elizabeth was firing within 400 yards of us. When she has fired, one does not want to hear another noise for a few minutes. One can only liken it to a terrible thunderstorm. The forts did not reply much, but our boats had to use some lead on them. The Goliath was firing near us for several hours, and meanwhile our troops were landing. We saw a lot of Australian wounded sailing off."

#### WAR ON SHORE

Then the Howe Battalion landed, but naturally the diarist was much too busy to write much about it. He was soon in the thick of the fighting on shore. He describes some of it as follows:-  
"Sunday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>. – We fell in at 1 p.m. and were marched off, but we did not think we were going to fight so soon. The Turks, with strong reinforcements, had beaten back the French, and we had to back them up. As soon as we got within range, we lost several men by stray shots. After hanging about, wet through and nearly frozen, until daylight, we moved over to the left and got into the line next the French. There were plenty of snipers and bullets around. As soon as we got into position the shrapnel started flying from six concealed batteries. We stuck this shelling for three hours, and our Battalion was the last to retire. We had 50,000 Turks opposed to us, and no infantry would have stood it. We didn't lose many men considering."

#### WOUNDED

On June 4<sup>th</sup>, Seaman Gwynne was wounded in a hot action. With blood streaming from six wounds – one of them a terrible shrapnel gash in the back – he managed to reach the dressers. How he did it, he does not know himself, and at times marvels at it. After a time in hospital at Malta, he was transferred to the Royal Navy Hospital at Chatham, and from there went to a convalescent home at Worthing.  
"The Turks are fine fighters", he said to an 'Observer' representative, "and gentlemen compared to the Germans. They are generally stout, strong men, and very plucky. Still, I think we are likely to be through the Dardanelles any time now."

Bexhill Chronicle, 16<sup>th</sup> October 1915

(NB: Although this newspaper gives his initial as G this article is undoubtedly Walters'.)

### **BEXHILL SAILOR AT THE DARDANELLES**

#### **Some Thrilling Experiences**

The diary of A. B. Seaman, G. Gwynne, Royal Naval Division, of Windsor Road, Bexhill, kept through present operations daily, is an interesting little book. It is a breast-pocket edition of Messes. Walker and Co.'s Diaries (No. 22), and in its 180 odd pages – there are two days on a page – gives glimpses at what is being done. The diary opens on January 1<sup>st</sup>, and on the 2<sup>nd</sup> the writer says: "Went to Hastings; saw pantomime. All the family went. January 5<sup>th</sup>: Returned to Portland. January 6<sup>th</sup>: Touching departure from Portland. January 9<sup>th</sup>: Had battalion sham-fight with blank cartridges; played football. January 22<sup>nd</sup>: Fell in at 5 a.m. for dawn attack; violent snowstorm; horribly cold; played football – got a goal."

And so the diary goes on. Seaman Gwynne was evidently a footballer in request, for he played game after game. Then comes the entry: "Churchill came to-day (February 17<sup>th</sup>) and we were inspected in a pouring rain; we were soon wet through." And again – "February 21<sup>st</sup>: Went to Bexhill – glorious day ..... a more or less happy farewell. February 25<sup>th</sup>: Reviewed by the King, Churchill, Fisher and Lords of Admiralty; grand turnout, and fine crowds of people; beautiful sunshine, but very cold."

On February 27<sup>th</sup> the seaman got to bed, "after hard work packing up", on board the 'Royal George' liner, and he adds, "got to bed 2 a.m. – very tired." The next day he "left port; enthusiastic farewell", and later, a few days after, was told by Colonel – "we were going to the Dardanelles to fight the Turks." Later, on 7<sup>th</sup> March: "Sighted Malta; anchored in Quarantine Bay; couldn't make harbour – sea too rough; spirits high at landing."

The only adverse remark with regard to Malta is contained in the words, "Terribly hot." The writer adds they "left Malta for Lemnos amidst very enthusiastic scenes." Then on the 11<sup>th</sup> March comes the entry: "Greek islands sighted all day."

### THE HARBOUR AT LEMNOS

On arrival at Lemnos, which the writer describes as "our base," he says: "The British Government had probably looked out the harbour years ago. It is a most magnificent natural harbour. Fifty large boats were here when we arrived, and there was plenty of room for more. On landing the things that caught our eyes were the weird dresses of the people, and the strange medley – no two dresses were alike. The villages were very strange, stone houses cemented together; everything mediaeval; oxen doing the ploughing; all the inhabitants having donkeys; and there also being a lot of ragged mountain sheep, and also strange cows."

"We left Lemnos," says the writer of this story, "at 7 p.m. on my birthday (March 19<sup>th</sup>), for an unknown destination. Morning found us seventeen miles up the Dardanelles; at night among the bombarding fleet. There was a huge fleet here....."

As day progressed (Sunday, March 21<sup>st</sup>) the wind rose and the sea got rough. A company were ashore bathing, and had a hard job to get back; there were exciting times for a while. We heard with regret about the sinking of the ships in the Dardanelles. We were within a few miles of the 'Irresistible' when she sank, and were then told we must not send the news home, but the loss occurred at the end of a grand victory."

The next entry in the diary is made at Alexandria, on March 26<sup>th</sup>, and the writer says: "We found Alexandria a very nice place, especially the English and French quarters. Large crowds assembled to watch us march through the town. Port Said is not anything like the size of Alexandria. The worst of these towns is the lack of greenery of every description. 'Bert's' death spoilt our stay."

### EXCITING TIME; BAD TURKISH MARKSMANSHIP

Writing on 16<sup>th</sup> April, A.B. Gwynne adds: "We left Lemnos at 6 a.m. this morning; it was a fine day with cold wind. At 9 a.m. we had to parade, as we heard the Austrian fleet was out. We saw their boats on the horizon, but there was a nearer danger than this. A Turkish destroyer was out, and coming up with the transport 'Minotaur', gave a thousand men five minutes to leave. 'The dirty dogs.' As the boat was loaded with ammunition, orders were given to every man 'for himself'. The boats were swamped. The destroyer fired three torpedoes at a range of fifty yards, and all missed, but half the crew were in the water, on rafts and planks, and everything they could lay their hands on.

On our approach the destroyer sheered off, as they thought we were armed. Then began a terrific rescue work. I never want to see anything like it again. The poor fellows were going under all ways, but by prompt action we saved nearly 100. Six died, and we buried them that afternoon. The fellows rescued were blue with cold, and many were injured... The destroyer was driven ashore and sunk by one of 'ours' after a short chase. If we had been an hour earlier it would have been us. Thank God we were not."

The story of the strenuous fight on the Gallipoli peninsula is told by the diarist. "Forty boats were on the job. The 'Minotaur' was within 400 yards of the 'Queen Elizabeth', and not far from the 'Goliath'" A.B. Seaman Gwynne landed with his comrades, and was soon in action. Unfortunately, he was wounded very dangerously, but was rescued and sent to Malta, and thence to Chatham and Worthing. The final entry in the document before that is: "Lieutenant Campbell was shot dead on Sunday" (apparently the entry was made on or about May 2<sup>nd</sup>).