



Reminiscences of the War



GAMBLING AND CAMP LIFE GENERALLY

By ALLAH

To neglect to mention gambling and gaming in camps and on transports en route would be leaving out the soldiers' most popular form of relaxation, and his most constant actively. Two-up, crown and anchor, and house were the diggers' favourites. Chess and draughts, boxing contests and pillow fighting on a suspended horizontal bar were indulged in to a certain extent, while poker and card games generally were gambled in, though this form of diversion was not very popular. The authorities were not supposed to countenance gambling, and raids were made on different schools at different times. Gambling could not be stopped or controlled, as there was practically nothing else for the soldier to do after parades and duties and the games went on for the duration of the war without any serious interference of the authorities.

On the first transport which I left Aussie there was a chap called Smithy who deserted at Colombo. Smithy was the king head on board, and controlled the two-up, crown and anchor, and house schools. Two-up everyone is familiar with, and was generally known in France as the national game of Australia; some very large schools were held in French villages and at the bases. At Blangy Tronville on a vacant piece of ground in front of the chateau, there was a school to which diggers in hundreds used to come from Brebi, Lamotte and even further away. Of course the school was not the Sabbath variety and almost every day there were brawls caused by some head ringing in a double header, or twisting a bet.

In England two-up schools were found in almost every camp centre. These were generally run by outsiders. At Codford Camp and its vicinity there were dozens of loose-end soldiers who had deserted camp and who were either sheltered by villagers or who laid perdu in the woods, thickets, and other places. Most of these wasters deserted camp after arrival in England and lived by preying on their fellows. It was taking a forward area risk, leaving camp alone after dark. It was quite a common occurrence for diggers to stagger into camp and report that they had been sandbagged and robbed. Even women were not safe from these blackguards. A New Zealand nurse walking from one camp to another at Hurdcott was knocked down and robbed on one occasion. The brute that committed the outrage was eventually captured and received ten years penal servitude. He was on the boat that reached Capetown the day I arrived there. He escaped from the boat and had not been recaptured up to the time I left.

One gang operating on the road between Hurdcott and Wilton (famous for carpets) used decoys. They had at least one woman with them. This woman used to meet diggers and entice them into dark lanes or corners where they were robbed. These loose-enders being in uniform used to mix in the camps with impunity and almost complete safety for no one knew who they were or from what camp they were visiting. They generally ran two-up schools, and started gambling generally. They were crooks and never played fair if they could help it.

One night at Codford two diggers crawled into camp and reported they had been knocked down and robbed in the park. Every man in camp went man hunting and passed the night beating the country around without success. Next day when strangers started two-up schools the Diggers were suspicious. After a while they started to ask the strangers who they were and where they came from. The strangers tried to bluff things through and one drew a revolver and fired, luckily not hitting anybody. Then they cleared with a hundred Diggers chasing them, thirsting for their blood. One was caught and beaten and kicked unmercifully, being left unconscious at the side of the road. The other evaded the pursuers and escaped across the fields. England was fairly unsafe outside the camps and in France the Digger also had the same state of affairs to put up with. Around Le Havre, Rouen and other concentration camps and bases garotting may perhaps be expected, yet it was in the forward area that garotting, thieving and other offences against the person and property of the Digger were often heard of. Around Citernt sand-bagging, &c., was prevalent, The French people who suffered along with the Diggers blamed the Aussies and considered them rogues. The authorities at last made an effort to put it down, and to find out where the gang was operating from. After much trouble and detective work it was reported that seventy men, Australians, were rounded up in a ruined village, amongst the ruins of which dugouts, cellars and shelters were the homes of the deserters. It was said that 60 of these were British army deserters in Aussie uniform and that out of the seventy only four or five were Aussies. Several gangs of deserters and French natives were operating in France causing much trouble and uncertainty amongst the Diggers. In a body of thousands of men drawn from every class and condition of society, there must of necessity be some who live by their wits, and these ran gambling schools, and tried other methods of relieving soldiers of their cash.....

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