



A typical WWI Buffet ran by volunteer services

### **BRITISH SOLDIERS' BUFFET, FRANCE**

November 24th 1915

I am writing a short account of the Buffet work at Etaples as you asked me to.

When I first arrived at Etaples station there seemed to be nothing but sand and soldiers and tents, and I began to wonder if our lodgings would be in a "dug-out" or a set, and was considerably relieved when Jessica Cazalet arrived on the scene and told me to come with her to their "diggings" in the village, which proved to be a charming studio overlooking the river - which she had turned into a delightful bed-sitting room.

Our work commenced at 8 o'clock a.m., which meant arising at 6.45, as the camp was a mile from our lodgings. On arriving at the Buffet - the bar people cleaned and arranged everything behind their counter, and the cooks prepared the cocoa, tea, jellies, &c., and when everything was in readiness to "open" at 9 o'clock we had our breakfast on the verandah. This was generally a very hasty meal, as we always opened the Buffet doors at 9 o'clock sharp, when the men streamed in to purchase steaming bowls of cocoa or tea (we didn't have any cups), and the stodgy buns which always seem so dear to the heart of the British Tommy.

I, personally, was a cook, and although always very busy, I don't think it was quite as hard work as serving in the bar, where two unfortunate damsels were left to struggle with the wants of sometimes 30 or 40 hungry men all asking simultaneously for different things to the accompaniment of a "Wee Jock and Doris", if a Scottie was performing, or "Keep the Home Fires Burning", &c., on the loudest piano I have ever heard. I am quite convinced it is an art by itself to be a successful "bar girl" in a Tommies' Buffet. I only helped with the refreshments when I could be spared out of the kitchen, so really haven't one half as many funny and interesting anecdotes as some of the other people have. One of the most amusing things that happened fairly frequently was that new arrivals in the camp thought we must be French, not having realised that English girls were allowed over there. One day I tried for nearly five minutes to hear what a tall Scotch boy wanted, and began to think he was talking Gaelic, when he burst out in perfect English to the man next to him, "Here old man, you know French; tell the lady I want a pennoth of chocolate."

It really takes quite a long time to learn all the various dialects of the British Army, and is certainly most interesting. I shan't ever forget hearing one of our workers who prided herself on her fluent

Scotch, greeting a tall and apparently very Scotch Seaforth Highlander, in what she imagined his native tongue. The poor man looked very worried at first, and then said, with great pride: "No comprey Frances". It turned out that he had never been further north than Birmingham, and understood even less Scotch than French.

We worked from 8 to 9 hours a day in 4 and a half hour shifts, as a rule, and the Buffet was open from 9 a.m., to 9 p.m., but being very short-handed we very often worked longer; but it was so interesting and the men appreciated anything done for them so heartily, no one minded working overtime.

Besides our Buffet, there were five or six other refreshment and recreation huts, run by different societies in this one camp, and I believe they were just as busy as ours, so it only shows how much the soldiers enjoy having a place where they can go and get food, and write their letters home in comfort, besides playing games &c. I was only too sorry at having to leave the work, owing to being ill; but I hope to go back in spring, if not to Etaples "somewhere else in France".

GERALDINE BIRCH-REYNOLDS

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**OPC Note:-**

It is presumed that Geraldine Birch Reynolds was a former pupil of Godolphin School, Milford Hill.