

BETTY FREUND: A NURSE IN FRANCE – PART III

Compiled and edited by Betty Hugo*

From this date onwards most of Betty's letters were written from Cannes and since the focal point of her 'story' is her experiences as a nurse during the Great War the letters that follow will be presented as excerpts.



One of the wards at Beau Rivage

2 February 1915

... This week I am writing you a short note. We were busy for some days receiving wounded. You need not worry about me, I don't think we'll ever be quite stranded, the French Gov. is doing a lot for us and we still hope to get right to the front. The days are perfect out and it is so beautiful here. Matrons says those lumps will go away. Do take care of yourself...

Since none of Metha Freund's letters to her daughter were kept, one can but speculate on some of Betty's remarks. For example, her evident keenness to go 'right to the front' was probably prompted not by a desire for adventure, but by the desire to treat wounded soldiers as soon as possible.

The 'lumps' she refers to above must have been one of the after-effects Metha suffered after her operation (she had a breast removed in 1913 and in those days they did not perform a mastectomy – it was a much bigger operation). In many of her letters Betty talks about Metha's arm and the 'swelling' and she keeps on telling her mother not to 'do too much'. This explains Betty's concern for her mother throughout – 'look after yourself', 'don't worry about me', 'I can go home any time', 'let me know if you need me', and so on.

15 February 1915

... Last week I did not write as we were so busy getting wounded in, we have to post our letters 5 days before the boat leaves England ... we are kept very busy now and I wish you could see our Hospital ... the ward I am in at present is the show ward of the Hospital. Sister Briscoe and I

worked it up ... Dr Blair from Senekal is in charge of this ward, we have 60 patients, he is awfully nice, takes a very keen interest in his work and ward, is very kind and considerate to his nurses ... His wife and children are in Scotland at present but he hopes to let them come over here soon ... he never could remember my name so he called me "Lady Betty" and now all the members of the Ambulance call me "Lady Betty" ... don't worry about me, I have everything and am well looked after ...

Sister Briscoe was evidently Sister-in-Charge for a while at Beau Rivage. In some of her early letters Betty mentions 'Matron' quite often, but she does not mention her name – presumably Metha must have known the Matron. Betty does talk about a Matron Castera who returned to South Africa and nursed lepers somewhere in Natal – she refers to this 'Matron Castera' again in a letter of 9 December 1916 and says that 'Matron is still nursing lepers'. It seems certain that Sister Briscoe was the daughter of Dr J.E. Briscoe who came to South Africa in 1898. He practised in Charlestown and in Volksrust. One of his sons died while serving with the RFC during the Great War; Dr Briscoe was, in fact, present when his son died.

Dr Briscoe died in 1944. (*The South African Medical Journal*, 14 Oct., 1944.)

2 March 1915 (to John Freund)

... This letter will reach you long after your birthday ... on the 13th I'll be thinking of you ... We are kept very busy and now that I know the French soldiers better I also like them better, but they do look so funny in their old dirty uniforms, their red trousers and long blue coats ... We don't hear much about the war here – only last week we heard about the terrible losses the Russians have had and their General taken prisoner as well ...

The Duke of Teck paid us an official visit yesterday and inspected our hospital. He was very pleased with everything –

Our wounded say they feel as if they are in heaven here, I only wish all wounded could be so well cared for as ours are ...

The Russians had, of course, incurred heavy losses in late August, early September 1914 during the battle of Tannenberg, where 100 000 men were taken prisoner and General Samsonov shot himself, and in the battle of the Masurian Lakes, but it is unlikely that the 'losses' referred to above would have been these. There was, however, fighting between the Turks and the Russians in January 1915 on the Caucasus Front and it is possible that news about losses incurred there could have taken some time to reach Cannes. Betty's references to battles are guarded, probably because of censorship.

The Duke of Teck was Adolphus (Charles Alexander Albert Edward George Philip Louis Ladislaus), 2nd Duke of Teck, GCB, GCVO, CMG,

Personal ADC to King George V, born at Kensington Palace 13 August 1868, son of Francis, 1st Duke of Teck and Princess Mary Adelaide of Cambridge, cousin of Queen Victoria. The Duke was the elder brother of Queen Mary, Consort of George V, and of the Earl of Athlone, who became Governor General of the Union of South Africa 1923–1931. Due to anti-German feelings during the Great War King George V authorised members of the Royal Family with German titles to relinquish such titles and granted them British names and titles instead. (This happened in June 1917, and the Duke then became the 1st Marquess of Cambridge. He died on 24 October 1927.)

The 2nd Duke of Teck married Lady Margaret Grosvenor, sister of the 2nd Duke of Westminster, who established the Westminster settlement in the Orange Free State after the Anglo-Boer War and to whom Chris Botha, my father, who later became Judge-President of the Orange Free State, was legal adviser.

The following is a letter written by Rene Juta to the Editor of the *South African Medical Record* on 5 March 1915, published in this Journal on 10 April of the same year (pp 103, 104):

I am asked to send you a series of photographs of the South African Ambulance taken soon after the hospital was ready to receive wounded. The hospital is the best here, and I shall never forget the hard work and untiring energy which all the staff have betrayed in the preparing of the hospital. Yesterday a party of French doctors and Red Cross people came over from Marseilles to inspect, and were most full of praise and appreciation. The Duke of Teck has inspected the wards; also the Duke and Duchess de Vendôme (she is a sister of the King of Belgium).

All through France and England thousands of beds have been ordered ready this month in preparation for anticipated batches of wounded, and it must be a tremendous satisfaction to the South Africans who have helped the Ambulance, to feel that South Africa is represented on this side, as well as Canada, Australia, and the other Colonies, who of course have ambulances in France, though not in connection with their troops. Should you wish for any further information or photos, I should be delighted to send you some.

Yours, etc.,

Rene Juta

Hotel Beau Rivage, Cannes

Philippe Emanuel Maximilian Marie Endes, Duke of Vendôme, was the great-grandson of Louis Philippe, King of France. The Duke was born in 1872 and married Princess Henriette of Belgium in February 1896. Henriette was the daughter of the Count of Flanders and sister to King Albert of Belgium. The Duke of Vendôme died in 1931.

15 March 1915

... Everywhere they are preparing to take more wounded ... they are starting the real fighting again and in England they have made room for

50 000 wounded, is it not dreadful! I wish this war were over. In Russia the Germans have driven the Russians back and have captured a lot of our soldiers ... our wounded soldiers are of course all French ... the Queen sent us 400 articles of clothing and different things for our wounded ... yesterday I spent all morning in the Theatre, went down with 4 of our patients. They all had several fingers amputated, I feel so sorry for all of them ... the soldiers all called out "La Mere" when they arrived here, they say it is like heaven after the trenches ...

Presumably Betty meant 'made provision for', not 'made room for', as there was something of a lull before the Second Battle of Ypres (April--May 1915). On the other hand, during February/March 1915 the French lost more than 240 000 men for gain of less than a mile in Champagne, and British losses at Neuve-Chapelle were almost 100 000 men. 'La Mere' is probably Betty's rendering of 'la mer': the sea.

30 March 1915

... I think the war will not be over till the end of the year if then, it is all very sad, you can't realise what war means until you have seen wounded soldiers - we get some very heavy cases in, sometimes they are 5 days in the train and you can imagine what their wounds smell like by that time ...

Alistair Horne (The Price of Glory) has this to say about the French Ambulance services:

To cope with these mutilations on so massive a scale, medical services were singularly ill-equipped. In this respect ... France in 1914 was notably, and notoriously, behind both Britain and Germany. She remained so throughout the war. Her Medical Service had been prepared in 1914 for a short sharp war, and was hopelessly caught out. Its doctors, inculcated in the de Grandmaison notions of war *en rase campagne* and clean bullet wounds, also reckoned on an 'aseptic' war. Their miscalculation possibly cost France an army corps of men; for, with wounds impregnated by dirt and debris from the explosion of shells, hideous 'gas gangrene' became the single largest mortality factor among the wounded ...

If a badly injured man survived the brutal jolting in the two-man handcarts used by the French to collect the wounded, the crude attention of over-worked medicos in the clearing stations, and the long bumping about in the ambulances with their solid tyres and unyielding springs, even then his prospects were poor (p 74).

10 April 1915

... I do wonder when the war will be over, at present they are not making much headway either side. We had a big concern here last Tuesday in aid of our Ambulance ... artists from Paris. Caruso is in Monte Carlo at present, only two hours from here. They asked him to sing but he would not as he sings only in Neutral Coun-

tries, being a great friend of the German Emperor's ...

Are you in Cape Town now, I wonder, do take care of yourself. I don't think Mina is very strong and she is really a very loving sort of a girl if you understand her ...

'Mina' was, of course, her youngest sister (my mother) and it is quite likely that Metha must have said something about Mina's 'being difficult'. It is quite likely, judging by the date, that it was at about this time that Mina had met Chris Botha (my father) and was beginning, in Betty's words in her June 1917 letter to her brother Willy, to 'spoil all her chances by being in love with the wrong man'.

26 April 1915

... We had another death in Hospital this week, one of my patients, poor man he could not possibly live as his arteries were ruptured and he bled to death ...

5 May 1915

... They have had some very heavy fighting lately ... many wounded and killed, it is awful to think about it all ... I am very tired this evening ...

This must have been the Second Battle of Ypres, and it was in mid-April of this year that the Germans used poison-gas for the first time.

11 May 1915

... I have had heaps of operations in my ward lately and that means extra work, so am always tired ... soon we expect some more wounded ... every week ... wounded arrive here. They are generally 8 days in the train and (their wounds) are never dressed once during that time. Some of them of course smell dreadfully, you can imagine what they must feel like having been for months in the trenches without a change of clothing, and then days in the train. They don't know yet what we are going to do in the summer as they say it is too hot here during July and August. Col Casalis is going to Paris today. I suppose he'll fix things up then ...

18 May 1915

... Col Casalis has gone to Paris and London to make arrangements for the summer, but I am sure we are not going nearer the front ...



An operation in progress at Beau Rivage

1 June 1915

... It is getting very hot here and they don't send so many wounded down any more. They have to keep them higher up north as they can't stand the train journey ... Col Casalis has come back from London and Paris and they said if we did not get wounded from the Dardanelles we would have to go to Paris ... all the English soldiers are sent over to England, they have a few very bad ones in the coast town and they are kept till they are a little better and are then at once sent to England. In Brighton they have 4 big hospitals ... the largest has 2 000 beds, 50 Drs attend to the patients and all orderlies – no sisters or nurses at all ...

Keep well till I come back ...

Dardanelles, or Gallipoli: the unsuccessful landing on the Peninsula in 1915. It cost an appalling number of casualties and it was finally evacuated in January 1916. The chronology of the Peninsular was as follows: naval attack on the Dardanelles 18 March 1915; landings April 1915; ground held at 'Anzac Cove' until August 1915; landings at Suvla in August 1915. The nursing of the casualties was a great problem; most of the wounded were eventually evacuated either to Egypt or to Malta (Vera Brittain also nursed there in 1916–1917).

9 June 1915

... The report has gone to the London Committee and if they think they have enough funds in hand they apply to the War Office for our removal, so in any case it will be 6 weeks still before we get there if we move at all ...

The 'London Committee' was the London Committee of the South African Ambulance. There was also a Cape Town Committee. Funds were obtained from public subscription. In one of her subsequent letters Betty mentions Baron Erlanger who supported the Ambulance very generously and on one occasion offered to pay for a holiday trip for Betty herself. Baron Erlanger was either Emile d'Erlanger or his brother Frederick. The Erlanger family was of German-Jewish origin and was famous for its Banking concerns, the largest of which were in Frankfurt, Paris and London.

At about this time Betty received a letter from Willy Kronemann, one of her cousins in America. She mentions him again in a letter of November 1917, saying that Willy had sent her an invitation to his wedding in New York. Also at this time she refers to Dr Reitz who was in a convalescent home 'in a forest' somewhere after having contracted pneumonia (she mentions this is a letter dated 1 June 1915). According to the Reitz family this must have been Dr Frank Reitz (Francis William 1895–1976) who, while he was at Guys Hospital in England, contracted a bad bout of flu and took a steamer to the USA, having paid £5 for his passage!

15 June 1915

... We are not quite sure whether we are going to Paris but I suppose it will end up by our staying here after all. Don't ever worry about me, Mama...

I don't often see Col. Casalis just at present. I am nursing a private case of his, he has often operated on outside people and they pay a fee to the Ambulance...

Last week I got a lovely gold bangle – a present from a patient's sister. He is a very well known architect from Paris and was one of my very bad patients. He is up now but still on crutches...

22 June 1915

... We are not going to Paris any more, I wish we were. Some more of our nurses are leaving at the end of this month and we are getting some new ones. I have signed on for another 6 months, but of course can go home whenever I want to; some of the others have signed on for the duration of the war. I am afraid the war won't be over for another year or more...

From this last remark it is clear that people were beginning to accept the idea of a longer war. The years 1915–1917 were the years of stalemate: heavy losses on all sides, no gains.

The German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, said: 'This may be a violent storm, but short, very short. I count on a war of not more than three, or, perhaps at the very most, four months.' By June 1915 the irony of these words must have begun to impinge on everyone.

6 July 1915

... For three days train loads full of wounded poured into Cannes, Nice and all the places where they have hospitals, we are more than full up again and some very badly wounded, mostly young boys – we hardly get old men now. One man is so bad they have to give him chloroform to dress his wounds. One of the saddest sights is to see a very long train come in with about 100 cases on stretchers and all the arms, heads, or legs bandaged up. Although we are not right at the front it makes you realise the awfulness of it all and you can only hope and pray may it soon all end. But I am afraid Lord Kitchener was right when he said the war is going to last three years...

This was the time of the heavy fighting of the Second Battle of Ypres (May 1915), mostly a British engagement but the French were also heavily committed. There was fighting along the Yser canal, at Neuve Chapelle. The French were also engaged in Alsace Lorraine and the Voges. The whole of the Western Front at this time of high summer was virtually ablaze.



One of the operating theatres: Betty Freund second on the right

24 July 1915

... I have a patient, such a nice boy, he came in with a tiny hole in the back, about the 4th rib, it seemed deep but nobody thought much about it. Three days ago I went to look at him at about 3 o'clock as he looked so pale to me all day, to my horror I found him in a bath of blood, blood simply pouring from him and he in a faint. I got his bandages off and sent for the Dr and he was operated on in his bed. I have hardly left him these last days. This morning he had another operation and they found a big piece of shell near his lungs. Now of course he'll get better soon but is very weak tonight – he is wonderfully brave. Another boy I have who is very badly wounded, his sisters came to see him from afar, they were all three in black and asked me whether they might tell him his mother had died ... the poor boy sobbed his heart out ... there is so much sadness, if only it were all over ... I don't want to tell you all this to make you sad, but you live so much with your patients that their world is your world ...

2 August 1915

... Patients brought me some nice flowers, they are always so happy to give you something, and say "Sister it is for you". I can understand everything they say to me in French but of course can't speak it fluently yet. It is so funny to hear them say a few English sentences they have caught from me, such as "come along", "rub-bish" and "hurry up" ...

In several of her letters at about this time Betty talks about 'bathing machines', tennis tournaments, and bridge parties. Her salary was increased to £4 a month, an increase of about 10/-!

She also explains that the 'dressers' were medical students who helped at Beau Rivage (C.L. Darley-Hartley was one of them; his letter to Metha Freund is quoted on p 44).

16 August 1915

... When I come back, which will be some time after Xmas, I think you must have a long holiday. I don't think I'll stay longer than after January. I am sure the war will not be over for at least another two years. Casalis is ill, he performed an operation the other day, pricked his finger and got some dirt in it, it is fearfully swollen and they had to cut it open ... really nothing serious but he is such a baby, all men are when they are ill ...

Betty indicates in subsequent letters that this infection – pooh-pooched here – became serious and that Dr Casalis was quite ill, running a high temperature and so on. Tetanus infection was an added complication: most of the fighting occurred in rural areas where there was contact with animal dung, and this, of course, made matters infinitely worse. In a subsequent letter Betty mentions that Casalis sustained permanent damage to this finger, and that both his index-fingers were 'bent' (probably due to damage to the tendons).

19 September 1915

... Many thanks for your cable to my birthday ... I spent such a happy birthday here – the patients all lined up on the balcony and as I came down the stairs they sang to me and gave me a most wonderful bouquet of flowers ... they all shook hands with me, some kissed my hand and some of the younger one who are special favourites kissed me on both cheeks (French fashion). The tears came to my eyes, these men are all so good to me ...

24 September 1915

... We had two men from the London Committee over here to enquire into things ... they were charming men ... we all had to give evidence one by one ... they now have put things on a proper footing ... they are getting a new Dr over from London and as soon as he arrives Dr Ackermann leaves as well ... Dr Smuts is also going back to London to finish his studies ... he has been so nice to me always and reminds me of Willy in all his ways ...

'Dr Ackermann': Hendrikus Daniel Maximilian Ackermann, who was registered with the South African Medical and Dental Council in 1907. He died in November 1957. His testimonial for Betty Freund (see Appendix) was written in London in 1915.

Dr Smuts, mentioned here, was Dr Phineas Smuts who was born in Malmesbury in 1890. In 1911 he went to Europe to pursue his medical studies in Munich, Heidelberg and Vienna. At the outbreak of the Great War he joined the South African Ambulance in Cannes, but was transferred to London in 1915 to continue his medical training. He took the 'Conjoint' from St Bartholomew's Hospital in 1917 and then joined the South African Medical Corps at Richmond and at Abbeville, where he remained until the end of the war (S.A.M.J. July 1975). Dr Smuts died in May 1975, a few weeks before his 85th birthday. I remember being taken to him by my father in the 1940s, when he had a flourishing private practice in Cape Town. He was married to Ivy Philips, a well-known singer who used to give concerts together with Elsie Hall. Their daughter Pamela and son Peter still live in Cape Town.

14 November 1915

... We only have a very few wounded now and we cannot afford to be without wounded as the expense to the Ambulance is greater when we



Betty Freund (extreme left) at a patient's bedside

are not full – all the hospitals down here are empty, in fact, all the hospitals in the South of France are empty ... I said to Matron I felt like leaving, the Red Cross Society is very anxious to have nurses. They send you anywhere you would like to go if you have done 6 months in a hospital and have a matron's reference ... on the 21st of this month my year is up but the London Committee have written to ask whether I'll stay on. I am only signing this time for 3 months not for 6 months ...

22 November 1915

... There has not been much fighting in the north of France lately, that is why we have not had any wounded – if we don't get any new ones by the 31st of January ... I believe we are going to close down here in Cannes, either go somewhere else or the Ambulance breaks up and the war office in England want a number of nurses. I am on night duty now and have a very easy time ...

After the September attacks by the French on German lines in Champagne and the Anglo-French attacks in Artois (the Battle of Loos) – with heavy casualties on both sides – fighting had ceased for a while. It was at this time that Gen Douglas Haig became Commander in Chief of the British Forces, and in France René Raphael Viviani's government was ousted and Aristide Briand became Prime Minister.

23 December 1915

... I do hope the Ambulance will not have to close down ... I have got to like (France) very much during the year we spent in it ...

25 December 1915

... Don't worry too much about things and whenever you feel you want me to come back – when you feel you want somebody to look after you – cable for me, I am always ready to come to you ...

Wishing you a very bright and happy New Year, and with much love, your loving daughter

Betty

3 January 1916

... Casalis is going to Paris on the 7th of this month then we'll know what is going to happen, whether we are going away or stay here – if we go away I'll cable to you ...

17 January 1916

... I think I told you some time back that we had some trouble ... the 2 members of the London Committee came over to see us and everything was settled ... but the new Matron had to leave, and the Head Doctor left ... and we only had 9 patients left, so were nearly all asked to go for a holiday. When we were in London we had a letter from the London Committee to say that they were most likely closing the hospital and that we had not to come back. Two days after that I received a wire from Casalis telling me to come back. Sister Archer was in London then too and came back with me. On our arrival here ... I went and stayed with the Tophams, and when I came to see Casalis he said "yes, I wish you to come back".

Last week he went up to Paris and the Ambulance has now been entirely taken over by the French Red Cross Society under the French War Office and we are run on French lines. Mrs Casalis is a "Directrice" and Sister Archer under her as "Sister in Charge". Both Casalis and she are awfully nice to me. I am very busy studying for a French Red Cross exam which comes off at the end of this month. Three French doctors examine you, Casalis will be there to translate for us. Now he won't take back any of the other members of staff who have left and we feel that very much. He says he is only having the girls who came from South Africa with him back, as he is responsible for us ...

I think I'll take a maternity course before I go back to South Africa again, it might always help me later in life ...

We are having 25 French officers in a villa next door to us. They have arrived already, but as the villa is not quite ready they are on my floor ...

Sister Archer-Isaac was the daughter of Dr Archer-Isaac from Molteno in the Cape Province. She was a qualified nurse, and was Sister-in-Charge at Beau Rivage for a while. She and Betty became great friends, and after the war she spent a week or more with the Friends in Luckhoff to tell them about Betty's work and to give them a detailed, personal account of her illness and death.

The Tophams were from England. They used to rent a flat at Villa Haute Rive, Route de Fréjus, in Cannes. Miss Topham and Betty became good friends and Miss Topham (or Topsy as Betty called her) also nursed at Beau Rivage for a while. They frequently went on short holiday trips together.

In a letter of 9 November 1916 Betty mentions a table cloth that Metha had evidently sent over for the Tophams: she tactfully suggests that it might be better not to give them a table cloth, since they used only 'polished tables for handpainted or real lace cloths'. She adds that her sister Mimie had better write to the Tophams because they are 'very English'. She probably felt that Metha's English might prove to be an embarrassment. The following excerpt from one of Metha's letters shows how right she was:

31/3/1901

... 4 weeks Christiaan kept at home never came to Luckhoff, but other good friends of him forced him to go and rapped (sic) us to Hertzog we had advised him not to join. The Boers locked our shop and looted out stores, but let me rather be quiet, I get too bitter if I think on all these things. My husband was before Hertzog not less than 9 times ... my husband is at the present at Orange River trying to do something that we can live, we lost everything and that trough (sic) people we always (sic) did good ...

No wonder Betty did not want her mother to write to Mrs Topham!

23 January 1916

... They are playing the "Barber of Seville" in the Casino – some well-known Parisian artists are coming down – it is in aid of the three men I have in my ward who have had their legs amputated. It is sad to see big fellows so helpless. Last Friday Miss Paget sent her car down for me and I took them for a nice motor drive. She had put a tea basket in as well so they had a lovely time. We have opened the Villa for the French officers, 25 are there always. The one I am nursing is not going over to the Villa as his wound is still too bad. You have no idea how quickly their wounds heal when we put them out into the sun for 2 or 3 hours a day. The sun has a wonderful healing power ... I am going in for my French exam on the 28th ...

Sun treatment for wounds was one of Dr Casalis's particular interests – he was 'conspicuously successful' in this while he was at Beau Rivage (*The Journal of the Medical Association of S.A. (B.M.A.)* p 295).

Miss Dorothy Paget was one of the residents in Cannes. Her niece, Lady Paget, was in Serbia at the time and another niece, also a Lady Paget, was nursing with an Ambulance in Dunkirk in 1915. (This hospital at Dunkirk, or Dunkirque, on the French coast between Calais and Ostend, was taken 'prisoner' by the Bulgarians in November 1915). Miss Paget

offered to get Betty a post with this Ambulance should Beau Rivage close down. Among the many floral tributes sent to Betty's funeral there was a bouquet from Miss Paget with flowers from her own garden – a garden in which Betty had spent many happy hours.

Miss Paget was, of course, extremely well known for her thoroughbred stud. Trainers and owners remember her name to this day.

22 February 1916

... I passed my French exam and am going in for the British Red Cross exam next month ... such a sweet baby comes to my ward to be dressed every day, Dr Griffin does not think it will live ... there are hundreds of children in this place who need attention but we are not allowed to have out-patients ...

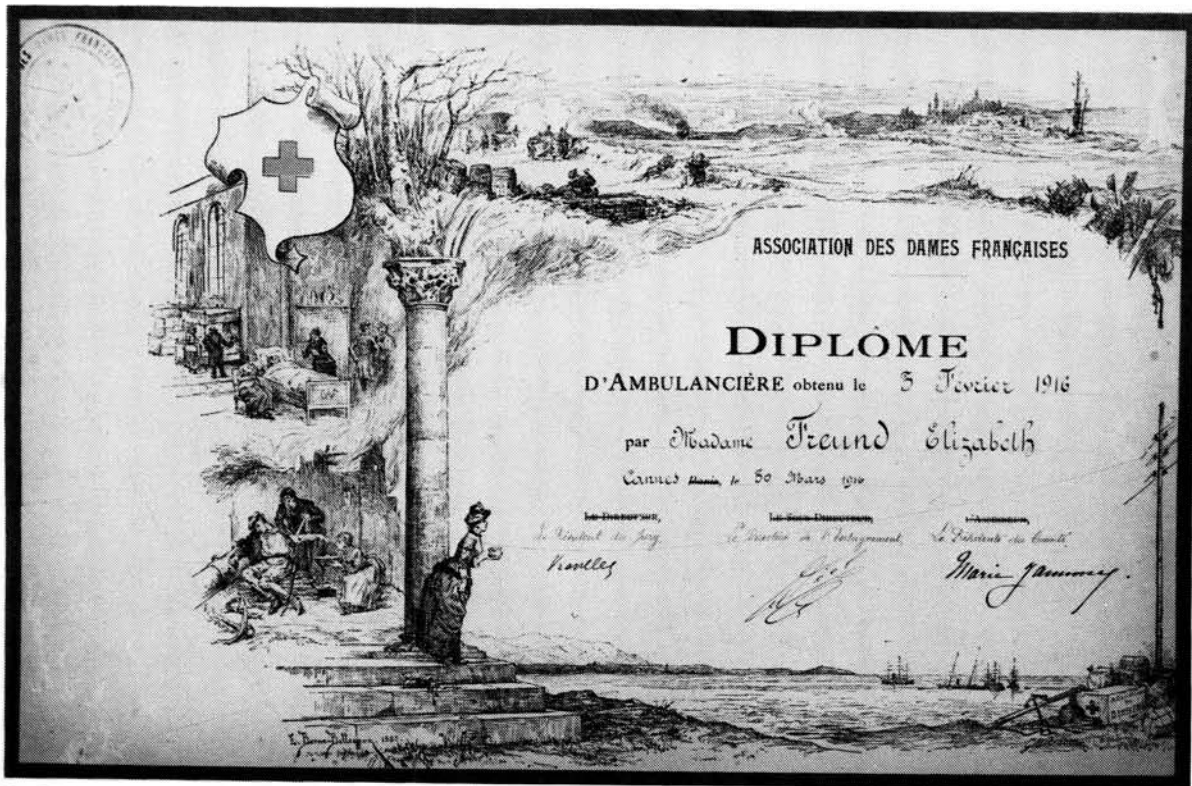
This was Dr Walter B. Griffin (FRCS) who worked at Beau Rivage – he was in charge of Betty's ward – and at the Scarborough Hospital. He gave Betty an excellent testimonial (see Appendix).

28 February 1916

... Some of us sat up (last night) watching for a ghost, but the ghost did not appear. I think it is the night sister's imagination, she says he always takes a bath at 12 o'clock at night ... we are expecting wounded soon after the heavy fighting they have had in the north ...

Vera Brittain says: 'France was certainly a queer, haunted country ... peopled by ghosts and bogies ...' (*Testament of Youth*, p 406); and 'I recognised my world for a kingdom of death, in which the poor ghosts of the victims had no power to help their comrades by breaking nature's laws ...' (*ibid.*, p 416.) There were many tales about soldiers who would suddenly 'see' their dead comrades standing next to them in the trenches. No doubt shock had a great deal to do with this kind of experience.

The 'heavy fighting' referred to here was the 'Hell of Verdun', the five-month siege that began on 21 February, which has been described as the most terrifying artillery barrage in history. Together with the Battle of the Somme (which began 1 July) the casualties on both sides mounted to more than 2 million men.



The Diploma issued to Betty by the Association Des Dames Francaises on 30 March 1916. These documents were hand-engraved on metal plate and then printed, according to line-printing process. The engraver was E. Berne-Bellecour (1885) and the artist was Gillot, Sc.

Horne has this to say about Verdun:

From October 1914 until February 1916 the sector had been one of the quietest on the whole front. For Verdun was reputedly unassailable, the strongest fortress on earth ... Verdun stood like a rock against the Crown Prince's repeated assaults, forming a vital anchor and pivot for the whole left wing of the French Army falling back on Paris. Had it in fact been abandoned, Joffre's front would have been cut in two, the Miracle of the Marne would never have taken place, Paris – and probably the war – would have been lost. In 1914 the importance of Verdun was as simple as that (p 56). ... In theory Verdun in 1916 should have been the strongest point of the whole Allied line. Yet, in practice, it was one of the weakest (p 58).

It was to Verdun that Falkenhayn's code name 'Gericht' applied.

26 March 1916

...Yesterday afternoon we got about 70 new wounded and last night, at least this morning, another 30. New wounded always mean a lot of work so I am very tired this evening. Our Red Cross exam comes off next week. I must study for that too now ... we will have quite a number of operations again this week, poor fellows, more than half of them will never be able to be any good again in life ...

One of the worst aspects, discreetly hinted at here as 'a lot of work', was the cleaning of wounded soldiers when they arrived at hospitals. This had to be done before anyone could attend to the wounds.

3 April 1916

... Tomorrow some of us are going up to Miss Paget for tea, she is having some Australian Officers and Canadians who are on leave for tea and so wants a Colonial party ...

One of my patients has an awful mouth wound. Casalis took some of his lower jaw away. He has been a very trying case to nurse, lots of pus and his dressing has to be done every two hours. When I am not there the Doctor does it for me. He is so good to me – insists on my going out when I have such bad cases ...

10 April 1916

... Last week we had our British Red Cross

exam and I passed it. I am glad that is over, but I think there is another one to come. Home nursing. I'll go in for that as well ...

I am nursing a soldier now who has been a German prisoner and he was in hospital in Stuttgart, he was one of the exchanged prisoners and it is very interesting to hear him talk. He is a very funny man too and keeps them all amused ...

16 April 1916

... The Casino closed today for the season. Last week I heard Madame Maeterlinck sing again ... she recites very well too – I have not heard from Mina for quite a long time and tell Willy to write, he has more time than I have. I wish the war were over, but I am afraid it won't be this year ...

'Madame Maeterlinck' was probably Georgette Le Blanc, the noted French singer. She lived with playwright Maurice Maeterlinck for about 20 years. They parted company soon after the war, and he married a Miss Renee Dahon in 1919. Georgette was probably called 'Madame' so as not to offend the public's sense of decorum.

The association of ideas between Madame Maeterlinck's ability to 'recite' and her sister Mina is an obvious one: Mina was an 'elocution teacher' in Cape Town at the time and presented many public performances – also as a fund-raising drive for what was called 'war work'.

2 May 1916

... I had three operations in my ward today and one was so bad he nearly died on the operating table – there has been no South African mail for 2 weeks and I feel quite worried not having heard from you for such a time ...

This week they had a tennis tournament for our hospital and they made £20 – always something for the soldiers ...

9 May 1916

... Dr Griffin left for England on Sunday, he had to go back ... he hopes to be back in two months' time if the Government will let him, if not we are getting a young Doctor from South Africa ...

This week I had a very serious operation in my ward, a nerve case, he needed all my attention. Fortunately he is getting better. The roses are simply perfect now and I long to show them to you ... today is such a perfect day the sea is like glass and all the tiny boats about – few places can be more beautiful than here ...

Betty mentions Dr Griffin quite frequently. He was very good to her and she clearly thought highly of his ability. Dr Griffin returned to England in December 1916 because, Betty says, 'he says he feels he has done enough for the French and now wants to do something for the English'.

Dr Griffin's wife wrote to Betty, inviting her to come and stay with them whenever she might feel like a holiday. Dr Griffin became surgeon to the Scarborough Hospital after he had served at Beau Rivage.



This certificate was issued by the British Committee of the French Red Cross for services rendered in France, dated London 10 May 1920. The engraver was Jos Girard and the artist Henri Manesse.

28 May 1916

... The Russians land at Marseilles and are at once put into camp so they are hardly seen by any one. They have no arms or ammunition, France will have to provide them with everything they need. Most of the Servians have gone back to Corfu. They had their headquarters there and I see they have started fighting in Salonika again, so we will have more wounded soon. The last lot that came from there were all sick. I don't like nursing sick soldiers, but fortunately we have not many. We have a lot of new nurses, all nice English girls – one plays the piano most beauti-

fully ... we have one girl from Peru in America, very nice but highly strung, she has taken a fancy to me and always brings me a cup of tea to my room at night ...

Quite why the Russians landed at Marseilles is not clear but it is known that they had problems with supplies. After the surprise attack on Verdun in February 1916 the French Commander in Chief (Joffre) appealed to Russia for an immediate assault in the east to divert the Germans from Verdun. The result was the battle at Lake Naroch – in northeast Poland – where Russia suffered heavy losses. On 4 June – about a week after Betty's letter was written – the Russian General Brusilov penetrated into the Carpathian Mountains and, initially, scored a few resounding victories before this offensive lost momentum. The last major Russian offensive was in the summer of 1917. This failed, and then came the Russian Revolution and Russia withdrew from the war.

Servia is the same as Serbia. By late November 1915 the Serbs had begun retreating to the Island of Corfu in the Adriatic Sea. An Allied force which had landed in Salonika, Greece, to aid the Serbs, was defeated by the Bulgarians.

12 June 1916

... Last Friday 16 officers got decorated with medals – one of my officers as well – it was at ... the military headquarters here. He was awfully anxious for me to go so I went with Casalis and his wife. It is very pretty to see it all, about 2 000 troops were lined up and the Band played. In the afternoon we had a big luncheon party. He has to go back to the front in a month's time ... Gordon Bennett's big yacht that was always lying in the bay here was sold to a Russian as a

hospital ship ... left yesterday morning escorted by torpedo boats ...

The Gordon Bennett mentioned here is probably Maj G.M. Bennett who is mentioned in *Despatches* and who took over command of the 74th Battery when it had moved to the neighbourhood of Ypres, taking up ground near 'Shrapnel Corner'. Maj Bennett succeeded Maj Murray-MacGregor (John Buchan: *The S.A. Forces in France* p 274).

This reference to Gordon Bennett's yacht being converted into a hospital ship is interesting. In a letter of July 1915 – almost a year before – Betty writes about a private pleasure boat that had been turned into a hospital ship that carried wounded soldiers from Boulogne to Southampton throughout the winter of 1915. She adds that it was a small boat and could not take many wounded, but that it fulfilled a necessary function.

* Mrs Betty Hugo is a senior lecturer, Dept of English, University of Pretoria. A full biographical sketch re Mrs Hugo appears at the end of part one of the article, in *Militaria* 15/1 of 1985.



One of the large dining rooms of Beau Rivage on some official occasion (Betty is seated at the back, centre row)