



**DURHAM**  
AT **WAR**



## **Stretcher Bearers**

Article from the trench newspaper of the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Durham Light Infantry: "The Whizz-Bang"

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## STRETCHER BEARERS

The Battalion Stretcher Bearers form a class distinct from the ordinary private soldier, and to call a Stretcher Bearer a Tommy would hurt the feelings of both. To begin with, they do not carry rifles, that is to say not their own; they frequently carry other people's on the way to the Dressing Station or on a long march. The fact that they do not carry rifles does not render them less bloodthirsty, but if anything more so, than the private soldier, for they can express their feelings by occasional three rounds rapid. Then they wear a brassard of white cloth with the mystic letters S. B. in red upon it. Some of the more ambitious have been known to sport a red cross, but this practice was soon put an end to by the water-duty men, who considered it an encroachment upon their rights. If the old man of the Battalion has the great virtue of being able to look after himself, the Stretcher Bearers possess this virtue, extremely well developed and practised. If there is a safe, comfortable dug-out to be found in the front line, there are Stretcher Bearers, and if such is not found, they soon make one. If the Corporal of the Stretcher Bearers has some specially tasty dish cooked over the Primus stove in the Dressing Station, trust the noses of the Stretcher Bearers to smell it from afar. They are the first to have a meal on the night of arrival in the trenches, for they have the strange gift of being able to fall over pieces of bacon lying in the road on the way up, or finding onions lying on the trench grids, or potatoes growing in the parapets, and no old lady was ever so skilful at making tea at all hours of the day and night as is the Corporal. The latter, it should be explained, holds the exalted post of Doctor's Orderly in the Dressing Station, and what he does not know about No. 9's is not worth knowing; he also specialises in drying socks,



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detecting malingerers, and being strafed by the Medical Officer without retaliation or going on strike.

Stretcher Bearers are the rumour mongers and the special news bureau of the Battalion. They study the Sunday papers from end to end, including the agony column, and one never need be in doubt as to past, present, or future happenings on any one of the hundred or so fronts, or as to the future movements of the Battalion; all doubts will flee away before the illuminating statements of the Stretcher Bearers. To-day it is snowing, thawing, shelling, and rifle grenading at the same time, but do not be depressed, for to-night we go into support, then back to the front line, then back to Muddiebush huts, and then back to a well-known seaside resort, where daily sea-bathing will quickly settle the scabies question, and other lively questions of the hour. The only people to complain will be the spade makers to His Majesty's Government, who will run short of work while the Durhams are resting. Indeed, rest and rumours of rest are favourite themes of the more prophetic Stretcher Bearers. Meanwhile the Second Line works hard at home at surprise attacks and sham battles, and says fiercely, like a good many other people who have not been bombarded by shells, that the war must go on to the bitter end, or, in other words, until the biter is bit.

The Stretcher Bearers had a really good time when we were in a certain part of the line, which comprised the orchard and the mushroom. As cases were not numerous, they gave vent to their superfluous energies by taking up various occupations, such as hair-cutting and shaving, carpentering, turnip collecting, occasional night expeditions up trees in the orchard, rat killing, and making trench jewels out of nose-caps. Two of them put out a signboard with the following legend: - "Stretcher Bearers. Repairs neatly executed," which caused



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a cold shiver to pass down the back of any imaginative person passing. The prize effort was the acquisition of a band. As is well known, a Stretcher Bearer is a bandsman in disguise, the idea being that when a man is wounded the band begins to play. Such a collection of musical talent could not long lie dormant, and when we were in trenches in the neighbourhood of Souplings, a once flourishing village on the outskirts of Barmantears, strange sounds were wafted on the breeze from the neighbourhood of the Stretcher Bearers' dug outs, and from the day to day these sounds increased in violence and diversity, until the Germans must have had recollections of former days, when they afflicted our cities with strange bands. The net result was that next time we returned to Barmantears for a few days' rest, our tried nerves were soothed by the sweet strains of a Battalion band in full blast. The instruments and music had probably been sent over disguised as "whizz-bangs" or sausages by our enemies in the hope that the music would demoralise the rank and file, as it used to demoralise the swank and style in London, but the reverse was the case, for when the band played at headquarters the appetite of the Commanding Officer greatly increased. Apart from the above explanation, it is difficult to account for the arrival of the band in our midst. The fact that two valiant Stretcher Bearers were tied to trees for two hours each day for a month for the alleged offence of coming out of a house at Souplings with frying pans tied round their necks can have nothing to do with the origin of the band.

The Stretcher Bearer is seen at his best when doing his special work. To dress a man's wounds and carry him for half a mile under heavy shell fire, to get over the front parapet and bring a wounded man in under full view of the enemy, to be as gentle as a woman in tending the wounded, to be always cheerful under the most trying circumstances, to close the eyes of those fallen in battle for the



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last time, to be unfailing in answering the call of the wounded for help under fire, to enter which would appear to be courting certain death – well, they are Stretcher Bearers, and it's their job! But we are proud of them!

E. W.



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