

How Edith came face to face with the reality of war

BEHIND THE NEWS



Historical author Hugh Sebag-Montefiore highlights the torment of a nurse who dealt with the victims of the Battle of the Somme

BY THE time Sister Edith Appleton retired to the IW, she had learned a sobering lesson from her time as a nurse in France during the Battle of the Somme: while it takes just seconds to shoot a man, caring for him afterwards can last a lifetime.

It took three days for the first of the men wounded on July 1, 1916, that terrible first day of the Battle



Trenches at the Battle of the Somme.

of the Somme when the British Army sustained more than 57,000 casualties, to reach General Hospital No1 in Etretat (12 miles north of Le Havre) where Edith Appleton was working.

On July 4, her hospital took more than 1,000 of the wounded soldiers. Many were in a shocking state. According to her diary, some were 'crawling with maggots' while others were 'stinking with gangrene'.

"One boy had both eyes shot through, and there they were, all smashed and mixed up with the eyelashes. He said: 'Shall I need an operation? I can't see anything.' Poor boy, he never will."

But that day was just the beginning. On July 8, Edith Appleton wrote: "The surgeons are amputating limbs and boring through skulls at the rate of 30 a day, and not a day passes without Death taking his toll."

No sooner had the hospital doctors stabilised their patients so they could be sent home, than another trainload of wounded arrived without warning.

The first thing they asked for was a drink. But nurses had to learn only give it in moderation.

"Some drink deep, then vomit it anywhere, then plead for more water," Edith Appleton reported.

Not that vomiting was so terrible compared with some of the injuries that had to deal with.

On July 10, her audit of the wounded under her care included 'one with his brain out, another his intestines, and a third wounded all over and wildly off his head'.

When writing about one fatally wounded soldier, Edith Appleton concluded her account by writing: "The smell was so very terrible I had to move him away from everyone. Happily, I don't think he could smell it himself."

As if the physical injuries were not enough, Edith Appleton's diary discloses the nurses also had to contend with shell-shocked soldiers: "They dither like palsied old men and talk all the time about their mates who were blown to bits, or their mates who were wounded and never brought in."

One man told her he saw men with their arms blown off and how he stumbled over an object in a trench only to discover it was a dying or dead man covered in mud.

One patient features in her diary more than any other. James Lennox was a 24-year-old private in the 12th Royal Irish Rifles. During the fighting for Schwaben Redoubt, a German stronghold at the northern end of the Somme front, on July 1, a bullet or a piece of shrapnel had become lodged in his diaphragm, a wound that condemned him to a slow agonizing death.

At first, the soldier Edith Appleton referred to as her 'poor little chest boy' had a painful



Nurse Edith Appleton.



Soldiers at the Battle of the Somme.

internal abscess, and on July 16-17, his temperature shot up to 104 as the iron or lead bullet or shrapnel poisoned him. That prompted Edith to 'wish him well away, where he will only know about happy things'.

For one glorious day he appeared to be getting a shade better. His temperature dropped on July 17. But as Edith recorded in her diary on July 21, 'he does not look right and has such a quick pulse. I think he will die quite soon.'

No such luck. He was doomed not to escape so easily, and more than two weeks after she wrote wishing he could pass away, she was called upon to write to his fiancée and his mother, who had written to Edith asking whether he could write to her.

There was no question of him doing the writing for himself. He was so weak it was even hard for him to turn his head.

"I wanted him to tell me his own words," Edith recalled when she wrote up that her diary entry for August 8.

"But all he said was 'I don't know what there is you could say.'"

"I knew his mother was his greatest anxiety and so wrote: 'I am no stronger at all. But I have tried

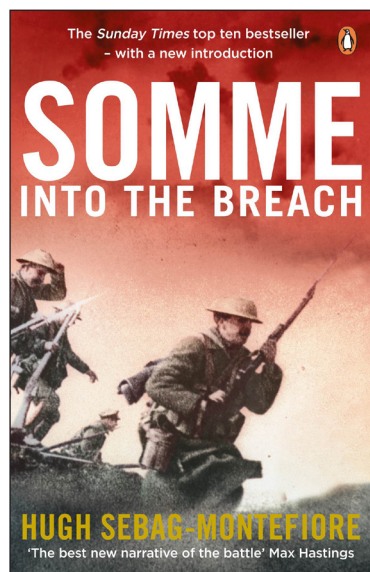
my hardest to take all my food and medicine, and to get well.'

"He said: 'Yes, say I wanted her to know just that'."

Edith finished her note about him in her diary with the words: "I don't think he'll be detained longer than this week and hope not for his sake."

But he confounded all her expectations and it was only on August 23 he died, prompting Edith to write in her diary: "Never have I seen such a slow painful death. It was as if the boy were chained to earth for punishment. Towards the end it was agony for him to draw his little gasping breaths. And I felt I must clasp my hand over his nose and mouth, and quench the flickering flame. I am very glad for the boy to be away."

● The paperback edition of Hugh Sebag-Montefiore's *Somme: Into the Breach* published by Penguin is out now, price £9.99, as is the updated 75th anniversary paperback edition of his *Enigma: the Battle for the Code*, with new material, published by Orion's Weidenfeld and Nicolson, price £10.99. *A Nurse at the Front*, edited by Ruth Cowen, is published by Simon and Schuster, price £7.99.



Edith's caring time on the Island

EDITH Appleton originally moved to the IW in 1923, when she was 45 years old, thinking it would be a good place for her and Lil, one of her older sisters, to look after Eliza, their elderly mother.

They bought Buddlebrook, in Brighthelm, which was originally a small terrace of little cottages joined together, but which was eventually extended to include a new house built in front of the terrace.

It had a large garden where the sisters grew vegetables and kept chickens, Edith's passion after she retired from nursing.

One reason for the extension of Buddlebrook was after Eliza Appleton died, Edith's older brother, Fred, a retired vicar, joined Edith and Lil,

a retired midwife, in Buddlebrook, following his wife's death in 1940, along with Minnie, another of Edith's older sisters, who had devoted her life to looking after members of the very large family.

Edith had ten siblings. Fred became the part-time vicar of nearby Brook and Mottistone. Sadly, none of the occupants had children, although they loved being visited by nephews and nieces and their offspring.

By this time, Edith, who had married Lt Cmdr John Ledger in 1926, had also lost her partner. She lived on in Buddlebrook until her death in 1958.

Fred ended his days in The Lodge, a nearby retirement home, until his death in 1953. Minnie had died in 1947.