

An Unusual Swimming Race

The first anniversary of the landings by troops of the 53rd (Welsh) Division at Suvla Bay on Gallipoli in August 1915 was commemorated a year later with a race organised by officers across the Suez Canal.

Not just the picture but the caption, too, on a 99-year-old picture tell of a different era. *“Whites v. Blacks Swimming Race. Whites Won.”* Third right bottom row is Sapper Dewi David of the Royal Engineers who joined up on his seventeenth birthday on March 1st 1915 and took part in August a year later in a race organised by officers to commemorate the 53rd (Welsh) Division’s landings a year earlier at Suvla Bay. Dewi’s team, chosen from heats, swam against men from the British West Indies Regiment, with the officers placing wagers on who would win. He wrote:

“Last Wednesday [possibly August 2nd 1916] some officers arranged a race to pick a swimming team. Ten of us swam in the heat and the first four picked. The race was across the Canal about 120 yards, that is, and we went like greased fork lightning. Some race. Our ‘captain’ came in first by about six inches and I and another chap on top of one another dead heat, as second, and the fourth a foot or so behind. My word it was a pull across, and the winning post officer declared it a very good race. ‘Matter of inches’, those were his words (not bad my first aquatic accomplishment, eh?) The other six never came in at all, chucked it up half way. Anyhow, we few were pretty evenly contested. I s’pose it’s because being in the same section we always bathed together and know each other’s points. One for the old R.Es, what? We four swam a relay race the next day against a quartet from the British West Indies Regiment. The prize was 100 piastre note, the officers backing the losing team to stump up. We stripped off and when I saw those darkies with big arms and muscular chests, I said to the other chaps, ‘Well I haven’t seen these [fellows] swim but I think it’s adieu to that quid. It’s us for a lose, and darkies can always swim.’ Well, we started, and what a surprise we had, I swam third and did my little bit, and we knocked the beggars into a cocked hat, beating them by about 80 yards at the finish. You should see the officer’s face who had backed the [other side] (his own regt). He had been so cock sure that he never brought any money for the prize. But we got it alright, don’t you worry, and our hut had a feed that night, not ‘arf we didn’t (“Dado”, that’s me, was in funds d’ye see). Anyhow, we made rings round ‘em and, although I was tempted before we started to sing ‘Oh darkies how my heart sinks really’ when scrutinising their biceps, I didn’t forget to ask ‘em to pay my best respects to ‘Uncle Tom’ when we finished. We had our photos taken afterwards, victors and vanquished, in ‘black and white’. I hope it comes out, I’ll send you one then.”

Patronising, and to today’s audience, a little offensive perhaps, but the words convey some of the excitement felt by the young men taking part in this sporting encounter to celebrate a notable anniversary. “Uncle Tom”, it should perhaps be noted, too, had not by that stage acquired the pejorative connotations it now has. Indeed, the author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe was a heroine of the anti-slavery campaign.

After signing on (stating his age as two years older) Dewi spent the next few months in 1915 training in Cambridge (in tents on Parker’s Piece), in Bedford and Northampton, before sailing for Lemnos and Gallipoli in October. * He missed some of the worst of the action on the Peninsula but during his short stay he shared many of the hardships, including life in dug-outs, the lack of food, the absence

of parcels and the Great Storm of late November. On arrival after a long and boring sea journey he is cheerful. In a letter dated October 25th and headed Suvla Bay, he writes:

“Our present abode is a dug-out on the coast of which we have just put the finishing touches to. We have made ourselves fairly comfortable by now and the six of us are in the same dug-out. For the last few days the weather has been rather cold and wind blowing the sand about made it very uncomfortable but today has been fairly warm and sunny and I have just returned from a bathe in the bay. I am able to head my letters now so you will be able to answer them. If you send any parcels, please pack them strongly. I may get them if you do this. Please send out some chocolates, sweets, Spearmint and plenty of cigarettes. They will be very acceptable out here and are the best things in the way of creature comforts. We start work today in the signal office and I commence duty at 8 tonight. I hope you are all well at home and quite happy.”

Writing a week later on October 31st, again from Suvla Bay, he reports that he and his colleagues – several of them like him telegraphists from the Post Office in Cardiff serving with the Welsh Divisional Signal Company – were managing in the new conditions:

“We are still going strong out here and living underground all the time. I am in the pink and working in the signal office regularly now 6 hours on and 12 off. We have settled down into the run of things alright and getting quite used to the life here. It’s rather queer with no newspapers or any kind of books here and we can’t spend money at all except to send an order to a canteen about 5 miles away now and again. We manage to get some tinned stuff from there but chocolate and decent cigs are barred. We don’t do so bad, however, having “Tabs” and tobacco issued to us every Sunday.”

The food is very good, considering the conditions, except that we have to be sparing with the bread and every alternate day or so are obliged to manage with biscuits. Today, for instance, we had one loaf between six men to last all day. Jam is very plentiful, and syrup, which goes O.K. with rice at dinner. The weather is very mild at present and I have had several bathes in the bay, which compensates for the impossibility of having a hot bath, which, by the way, I should like very much. I look forward very much to the arrival of a letter with all the news and a parcel, which perhaps is on the way, at least I hope so. Today is Sunday but what a different Sunday to the one at home.”

Though he had not yet tired of Army food, the absence of parcels and of letters from home was to be a problem throughout his stay on Gallipoli as another of the fairly frequent short letters he wrote after first arriving indicates (Letter: November 4th).

“We have been here a fortnight tomorrow and was awfully disappointed yesterday to find no letter or parcels from you when the mail came. It was a little surprise, however, to receive a letter from Cecil London posted from ItalyThe grub continues to be alright but please send out some decent fags and chocolates. Everybody’s fed up with smoking the issue of Tabs. It’s no good sending cake out, I’m afraid, because it goes bad before it arrives. ... By the way Doll [his 15-year-old sister] please let me have a long letter when you can. It will be a treat to hear from home again. The arrival of a mail here brings everybody out of their dug-outs like so many rabbits from a warren, and they positively gloat over parcels. Today or tomorrow should see the arrival of the canteen order we put in about a week ago. We have to wait for these things, you know, for the canteen is such a long way off. So with a lot of luck we’ll have tinned salmon (just think of it) in our mess tins very soon. It makes my mouth water when I think of it. We do live extravagantly and no mistake.”

The plea is much the same in his next letter on November 8th from Suvla Bay but in this letter he mentions another of the pre-occupations of men on service – a yearning for photographs of loved ones that kept photographic studios busy the length and breadth of Britain. A week later, on November 14th, he was able to report that warm clothing had been issued and that his mother would be receiving an allotment from his pay, presumably to save for him on his return.

“Our boys think of little else but mails, letters from home, and canteen orders. Those letters coming from so many miles away mean such a lot to us exiles and I envy the lucky ones.... I should like to mention a few things which you might send in a parcel next time. Cigarettes, chocolate, Pepsin [indigestion tablets], malted milk tablets, envelopes, tinned fruit, soap and a pair of socks. Cake would, of course, go bad but a few nice biscuits would be very acceptable. I hope this little list will not be too much for you to cope with and I thank you in anticipation. I hope you are all quite well and happy and a Christmas gift I should be delighted to receive would be a photograph of you three taken in a group.” {November 8th}

“The grub here is very decent and we have been served out with warm underclothing and cardigans recently. We are able to draw money here occasionally so it won’t be necessary for you to send some out. Unfortunately, we can’t spend it very freely. The only chance we get is the weekly canteen order and then we never get half the stuff we order. I have made you a weekly allotment, of my wages, of 10/- in Mum’s name. It may be some time before you get it.” [November 14th]

Later in the month [Letter: November 22nd] the weather had started to turn, with possible consequences for what seems to have remained their number one priority – parcels. Though the basic food may have kept life and soul together, clearly men who had recently joined up were missing the sort of cooking – and the new branded foods – they were used to at home.

“I haven’t seen your parcel yet and hope it hasn’t been lost on the way. They say that there have been a great many mail bags washed overboard in a storm so it doesn’t look very cheerful, does it? ... Anyhow, please continue to send parcels because I am sure to get some of them and the stuff in them will be very acceptable, I assure you. We have had some rough weather here lately, monsoons or some such nuisances and the first one that came along was a rotter. The wind blew like fury and I’ve never seen such rain in my life. The result was that our dug out was flooded out, the water and mud being ankle deep. We didn’t know how to sleep but eventually solved the problem by utilising some corrugated iron as a bed. Since that storm it has been very cold here and the wind is strong, blowing practically all day. We have, however, improved our dug out since that experience and have put a better roof of corrugated iron on, instead of frail waterproofs (?).

I have plenty of warm clothes but you might send me 2 pairs of socks in your parcel please. We are unable to buy anything here because that canteen order we put in is a proper wash-out. For instance, we put in for about 30/- worth of eatables etc. last week and in the end all we got was 2 Lemonade powders each in our dug-out.

The weather continues to deteriorate and in his letter of December 3rd he mentions the famous late November storm that eventually persuaded the authorities that they had little option other than to evacuate the peninsula before worse winter conditions ensued. His log had recorded the events of November 26th with the simple description “Washed Out”.

"It is pretty cold out here now and I am glad to wear all the warm underclothes I can. We have had rather a rough time lately owing to a three-day storm descending upon us suddenly. It was very fierce and lasted quite three days. The rain was simply awful and the ground ankle deep in slush all over the place. The wind also was so strong that you could hardly stand. Most of our chaps had their dug-outs swamped out and waist deep in water which took some bailing out, I can tell you, but fortunately we had plenty of corrugated iron on our roof which kept us fairly dry so we took in about a dozen "homeless" chaps whose dug-outs were untenable during the storm so we were like sardines in a tin in our place. However, I managed to keep dry alright and got off pretty lucky. (We have had decent waterproof coats supplied to us.) We are just recovering from the effects of our experience and it has been very cold since.

"They were unable to land food, of course, during the storm so we have had to exist on iron rations ever since. I would give much for a good square meal, believe me. The weather will surely get worse as the winter gets on and I am dreading the thoughts of a few more storms like that. The poor fellows in the trenches, however, had a fearful time and we count ourselves jolly lucky in getting off so lightly. I haven't had a letter from you since Nov 2nd and I haven't seen a glimpse of the parcel you advised me was on the way so I suppose it's lost,"

Supplies were clearly affected by the storm and perhaps by the preparations being put in place for withdrawal. Three days after describing the storm another letter he reports that bread has become a great luxury.

"It does get monotonous chewing biscuits for five days out of six."

Gallipoli drops out of Sapper David's letters for the next few years, with memories of that ill-fated campaign perhaps being deliberately pushed to one side. News from home in the Spring of 1918 that young men were joining up with new enthusiasm prompts him, however, to an uncharacteristically bitter outburst. In his letter of May 28th 1918 reflecting perhaps the general view of men who had served on the Peninsula, he writes:

"Your remarks re the scores of young men rolling up to the Colours stirred me, too – I thought they were all out. It is very gratifying news, indeed, but, tell me – I'm dead serious – why the hell couldn't they have come before? Never gave it a thought, I s'pose - never dreamt in '15 of poor, brave blighters on Gallipoli holding the line with brigades only 200-300 strong, dwindling, dwindling and never a reinforcement, with Turks like flies in front, - and the sea a daily dreaded emergency backdoor. The state of affairs which K of K after his visit there confessed to a friend kept him awake at night "thinking of those brave fellows and the pitiful line they held", O! Yes I can tell you why the Narrows weren't taken.....

"And now I s'pose those young fellows who haven't lost any time but enlisted straightaway in 1918 will be fussed about – gallant this and gallant that, go to France in time for the coup de grace, come back and get crowned with laurels etc. What a difference to the way I can see the 53rd and their comrades here being treated when they go back. "O! Yes, you skulked and shirked for 3 years on Suvla, Egypt, Palestine and Salonica – hid in petty side-shows like that" – Skulked? Shirked? Hid? – My Heaven! "The gratitude (?) of a very grateful country".

And also news filters thro' even to this benighted accursed hole of the rapturous applause bawled out from gallery to stalls in our London music halls in nightly hate and contempt for the victims of Miss Marie Lloyd's very popular ballad "If you don't want to fight, go to Palestine." Is this not so? Bah! I'm too disgusted to be even slightly annoyed. And isn't Mrs

Pankhurst suggesting that we all be exiled on some remote island in quarantine for a few years before being allowed to set foot on that dearly beloved land? - which after all doesn't seem to be so blamed beloved as I once imagined. How excruciatingly amusing – really! Guess Abdul Hamid, Enver Pasha and their countrymen would treat us better and certainly with more respect. I've often smiled at some chaps when they express their views that "England will be too small for 'em after this" but I don't now 'cos I realise what they really mean is that its loathsome attitude towards them will cause them to shake its dust from their feet for all time in highly justified disgust. We are, you see, well versed in passing events – too well versed for any hopes of an attempt at [avoiding] disillusionment meeting with success. Certainly, I do not credit to the full such exaggerated instances as I have here cited – rumours are rumours but there is a strong undercurrent which gets my goat.

These could just be the rather disillusioned words of a fed-up young man away in the East for three years and not able to get home until April 1919. Despite some researches I have yet to find any reference to the song Marie Lloyd is supposed to have sung, though perhaps others can help with this. The men of Gallipoli, however, might just have been thinking that their heroism was now forgotten – not to mention their subsequent deeds at Gaza and in Palestine – and that their welcome home would be more muted than that offered to their compatriots who had fought in Belgium and France.

After service Sapper David resumed his career as a Post Office civil servant and remained there until retirement in 1961. He died in 1963 shortly after his 65th birthday.

Rhys David
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