

'Oh what a horrible War'

Mr Richard Pusey

Some reflections on the Crimean War 1853 – 55

We all know the history of the Crimea and the tragic loss of life due to incompetent aged officers, supply defects, poor medical services and evacuation chain. Essentially the Russians wanted to secure all year access to the World's high seas through the Black Sea and the Bosphorus to the Mediterranean and this started a war with Turkey who felt Constantinople was threatened. The British, French and Sardinians (Piedmont) supported the Turks and declared war on Russia who fell back with their fleet on Sevastopol at the SW corner of the Crimea. Here they barricaded themselves in and the war was all about taking Sevastopol by siege.

The allies landed at Calamata Bay (aptly named) north of Sevastopol and the first big battle was at the river Alma where the Russians tried to stop them crossing. This resulted in the first large number of battle casualties although there had been over a thousand British lives lost even before this from diseases such as cholera and dysentery. Following this, the allied command became overcautious and instead of a direct assault on Sevastopol, decided to surround the town and set up a supply base at the small harbour at Balaklava 5 miles to the south.

The Allies then encamped on the heights around Sevastopol in trenches and started bombarding the town. The Russians tried to relieve the siege by sending a large army to cut off the British supply route from Balaclava and on 25th October this was stopped by the "thin red line" of the 93rd Highlanders and repulsed by the "Charge of the Heavy Brigade" at the battle of Balaclava. What happened next is remembered by every schoolboy when the Light Brigade was sent to retrieve some captured British guns but the order was misinterpreted and a charge was made straight at the main Russian guns instead.

Ten days later the Russians tried to break out from Sevastopol and the Battle of Inkerman was fought and the Russians repulsed. This resulted in stalemate and prolonged trench warfare (a forerunner of the 1st WW) and it was the best part of a year before the siege ended and the guns fell silent. During this time the troops had to endure a Russian winter on the heights around Sevastopol. On 14th November 1854 there was a terrible storm at Balaclava harbour and many ships were lost including the SS Prince which carried 40,000 winter uniforms. Conditions must have been terrible for the troops with inadequate clothing, poor food and cases of frost bite and deaths from disease, cold and malnutrition were common.

The base hospital for evacuation was at Scutari in an old Turkish barracks on the Asian side of the Bosphorus which is now in the suburbs of Istanbul 400 miles away. Again we all know the story of Florence Nightingale who found awful conditions in the hospital when she arrived with blocked drains, rotten floors and vermin everywhere. Lighting was poor and she purchased some Turkish travelling candle lamps from the local bazaar. The Russian medical services inside Sevastopol were notable particularly the surgeon Nikolai Pirogov who was the first to use *ether* on the battlefield, instigated a *triage* system, segregated clean

from infected wounds and was the first in practice to use Plaster of Paris for splinting fractures. The Bosphorus has a rapid current and it often took several weeks for the casualties to arrive at the hospital from the Crimea and the conditions on these hospital ships must have been terrible. Next to the main barrack hospital there is a large British cemetery where many of the casualties were buried.

This was the first war when journalists were present and William Howard Russell of the Times was able to report back by telegraph the disasters of the War and Roger Fenton with his mobile dark room on a cart was able to photograph the realities. The British public was therefore made well aware of the atrocities which caused a public outcry.

My talk will outline the War but concentrate on the medical aspects. I have visited the battlefields and Scutari and would like to share this experience with you.

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