

Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell Earle DSO, Grenadier Guards

A Grenadier Internee in Switzerland

By Peter Martin

On 31st May 1916, at a time when the horrors of war were very much to the fore in the minds of its readers, *The Times* published an article that must have given hope to the families of many wounded British, French, Belgian, Russian and German prisoners-of-war (POWs). Already from early 1915 seriously injured military and naval personnel had been repatriated to their home countries under arrangements set up and managed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Now, it was announced that as a result of humanitarian agreements made by the British and other national governments with the ICRC and the Swiss authorities thousands of wounded prisoners of war who were not sufficiently injured to be repatriated, but who might be capable of work away from the front line, were to be welcomed in Switzerland as internees under the auspices of the ICRC. Selected during visits to POW camps by travelling commissions of Swiss doctors, subsequent articles in *The Times* described the very warm welcome given to these servicemen on their arrival in Switzerland.



Fig. 2 An enthusiastic welcome for the British internees

Rather surprisingly the ICRC and Swiss archives contain no nominal rolls and little other information about these lucky men, but we do know that among the first British internees to reach this haven was Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell Earle DSO of the

Grenadier Guards. Born in 1871, he had joined the Army in 1891 and taken part in the Matabeleland War in 1893. During the Boer War he was awarded the DSO.



Fig. 2 Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell Earle DSO

In the early days of the Great War he commanded 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards during the First Battle of Ypres and was shot through the head and then the leg at Gheluvelt on 29th October 1914. Lieutenant Butt, the Medical Officer, was killed while dressing his wounds. Earle was reported lying in a house two hundred yards to the rear of the Battalion HQ dug-out. Several men volunteered to carry him back, but as the Germans were within a couple of hundred yards of the house this would have meant certain death for the stretcher bearers and for Earle himself. It was therefore decided to leave him where he was and in his words: "I was left with Venton of the Coldstream to whom I owe my life. I came under Schwend's care that night and he too contributed to my survival."

Extracts from a letter to Butt's parents from Earle on 5th December 1914 read: 'the Germans were rushing over where I lay with your son and his orderly and we were not touched. I regained consciousness and found your son bandaging my head. His man knelt at my feet. I spoke to your son. I said "Look out, we are well in front, we shall get taken" he told me we were alright and begged me to keep quiet. Shortly afterwards two or three Germans came up to us. I heard a shot quite close to my head and I felt your son collapse. I distinctly saw a German fire down on the back of the orderly at my feet, the bullet having passed through the man entered my leg and the man fell on me. I don't think it was very long after my second wound that I again lost consciousness and when I came to I found myself in a hut in the hands of the Germans.. I am sorry to say that I feel convinced that your son was killed. I am sure that he was killed instantaneously for he never spoke to me or moved. I am never quite clear how I got to the hut in question. Private Venton, Coldstream Guards, was there tending me. He told me that he saw the Doctor at my head and that he was dead. I sincerely wish I could hold out to you any hope of it being otherwise. I consider that he was murdered in cold blood contrary to all the laws and customs civilised warfare. I shall always think that he gave his life to save me and I have every reason to believe that his prompt action saved my life.'

Earle was captured soon afterwards and taken slowly to the rear, reaching an attic in Brussels on 11th November. From there he was taken to a German Hospital at

Frankfurt where he remained until June, and later to a POW camp at Friedburg, from which he applied to be repatriated; despite being graded as unfit, his request was unsuccessful. He then sought to be included among those who were to be interned in Switzerland and this application was approved at the end of May 1916. He wrote: "I don't want to review those eight months in hospital and twelve months in prison before I was sent to Switzerland." Colonel Sir Henry Streatfield, the Lieutenant Colonel of the Regiment wrote to a friend: "I hope that now his troubles and suffering are over, that his wife goes out, almost immediately, to be with him."

In September 1899, Earle married the Honourable Edith Elizabeth Loch, elder daughter of 1st Baron Loch, a soldier and colonial administrator, and the couple had three children. Their son Charles, who was born in 1913 and who, in his turn, joined the Grenadier Guards in 1934 and went on to enjoy a distinguished wartime career after joining the Guards Armoured Division in 1944. He commanded 2nd Battalion from 1952 until 1954.



Fig. 3 British and Indian internees enjoying their warm reception

Those married officers who could afford to have their wives join them in internment, were permitted this comfort provided the wives remained in the direct internment area. The Earle's rented a chalet, the Villa Myosotis ('Forget-me-not'), for themselves and their two daughters, Margaret 15 and Evelyn 12, their Nanny Dromey and Mary Elizabeth Tann, the cook.

In 1906, in India, before the Earle's enforced stay in Switzerland, Mary had married an English soldier, Sergeant William Philpott of the King's Own Royal Regiment of Lancashire, who had been taken prisoner, presumably injured, at the Battle of Le Cateau in France on 26th August 1914, when his battalion was cut to pieces by enemy machine gun fire; 400 casualties are recorded. Sadly, Mrs Philpott died in childbirth in Switzerland towards the end of the war, but the child survived; for his part, Sergeant Philpott remarried and fathered certainly one other child and, possibly, more than one. The date and place of the Philpott/Tann marriage have

been verified by the Swiss authorities but how and when Mrs Earle and Mrs Tann came to be together is not recorded.

Earle was repatriated in September 1917. The family went first and he saw them off in the train from Geneva. It was the last he was to see of his beloved daughter Evelyn who died shortly after her return home, from the return of a previous illness. Earle journeyed from Switzerland via Paris and Southampton. On arrival at Waterloo he was taken to Milbank for a medical board. In 1918 he was re-boarded and told he was entitled to 100% for his eye, 50% for his ear and 25% for his leg. He was awarded a CB and CMG and left the War Office in November 1922 on half-pay. He was invalided out of the Army in April 1923 and died in February 1953 at the age of eighty - one.

By the end of 1916 some 27,000 British, French, Belgian and German POWs were interned in Switzerland and by the time the war ended in late 1918 nearly 68,000 men had been given shelter by the Swiss. Some, like Arthur Whitten Browne, who made the first trans-Atlantic crossing by air in 1919, were certified as being unfit for further military service and were repatriated during the final stages of the war. Included among these men were a number who had been captive for over 18 months and were classified as suffering from so-called 'barbed wire disease', indicating that their mental health had been damaged by the experience. Almost all of the remaining POWs were repatriated at the end of the war.

At the end of May this year, there is due to be a major commemorative event at Chateau D'Oex, where the interneees and generosity of their Swiss hosts will be remembered 100 years after the arrival of Earle and his comrades.

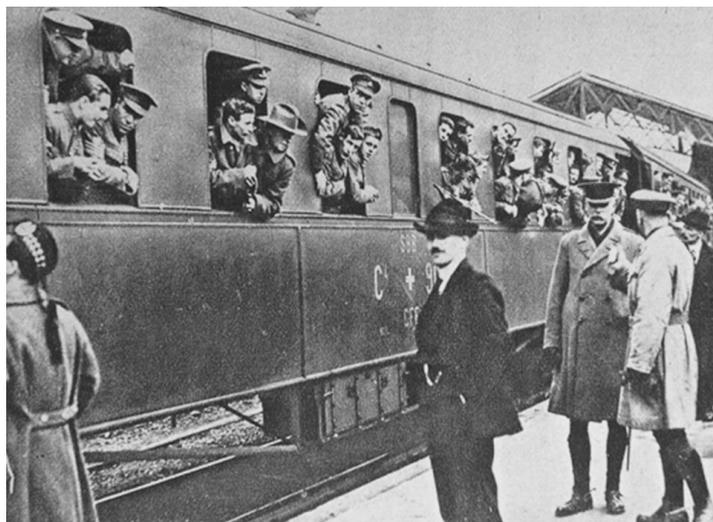


Fig. 4 British internees head home from Berne after the Armistice