

Hilton DeWitt Girdwood

and his Battle with British GHQ and the War Office

by Ralph Reiley

Anyone who collects stereoviews of World War One will come across stereo cards published by Realistic Travels. They have a distinctive logo, which indicated an impressive network that spanned the British Empire with offices in London, Cape Town, Bombay, Melbourne and Toronto. They also had an equally impressive Royal endorsement by King George V and Queen Mary. The Realistic Travels views are some of the highest quality stereo cards of the First World War and have the sharpest and clearest images. Details on Girdwood and his company have been hard to find. W. C. Darrah only gives a brief mention about Girdwood and Realistic Travels in his book. He wrote that H. D. Girdwood was the head of the company, he was known to have photographed the Delhi Durbar in

1903, and Realistic Travels was in operation from 1908 to 1916. I see this reference repeated in numerous articles that mention H. D. Girdwood and Realistic Travels.

Darrah's short description did not satisfy my curiosity, and the content of the sets of war views proved conclusively that stereo views were published under the name well into the 1920s. I was intrigued by the idea

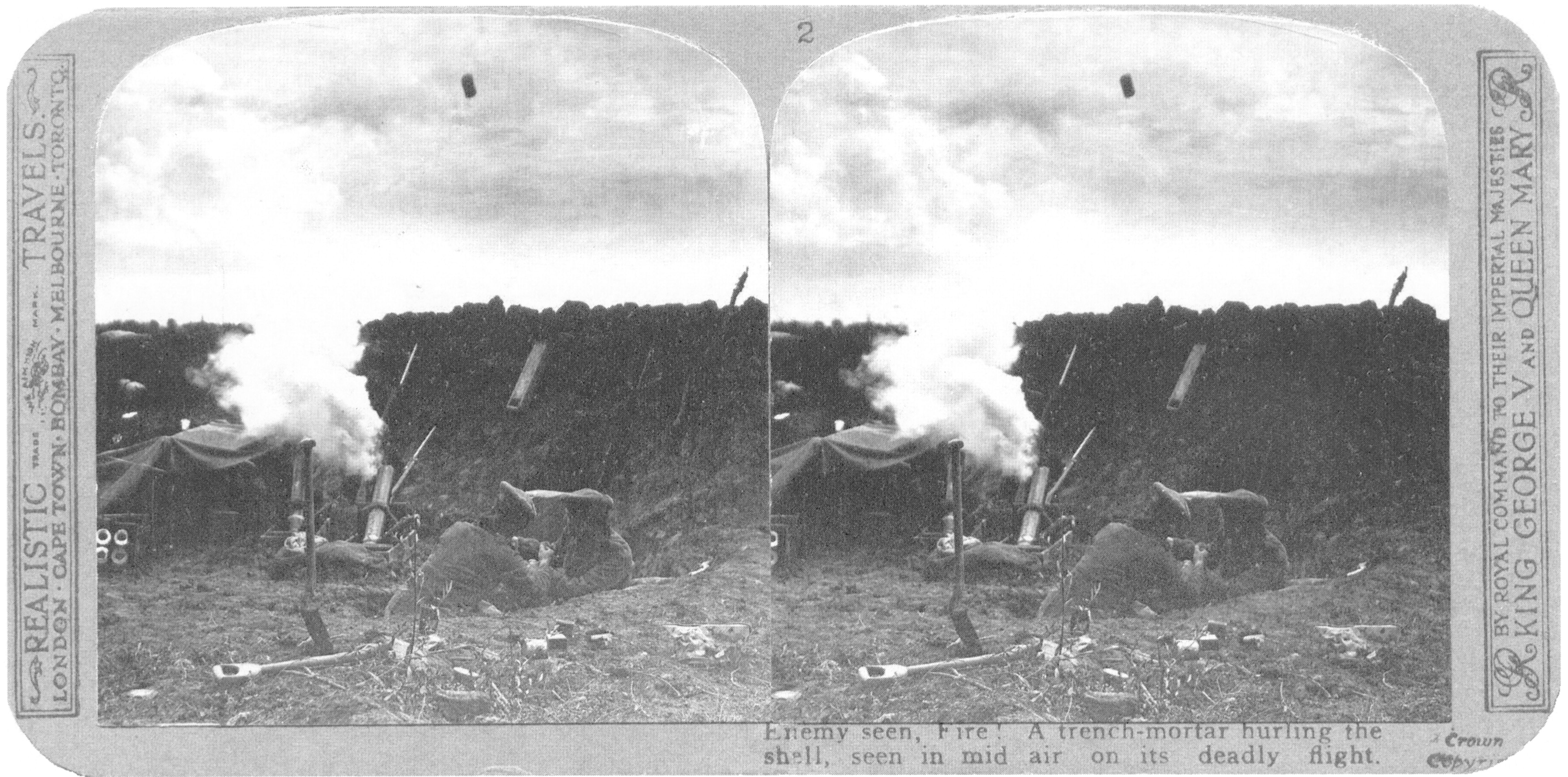
that such impressive looking stereo views published by a company with a Royal endorsement could remain such a mystery. With a little detective work, but mostly pure dumb luck, I found that in the academic world of British film historians, H. D. Girdwood is well known, but not for his stereo views.

Girdwood was born in Oxford, Ontario on June 1, 1878, the son of

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Realistic Travels No. 1, "Amid bursting crumps, with trench mortar ready, Seaforths watch through periscope for the Hun." Taken on July 23, 1915, on the first day of Girdwood's time as an official photographer at the front. They were near the village of St. Floris, miles behind the front lines. This is the first view in a set of 600. The gunners are from the 1st Battalion Seaforths Regiment, training with a pair of trench mortars. The 1st Battalion was in India at the outbreak of war. It was sent to France in late 1914, with the native regiments that made up the India Corps. The mortar is the British 3.7" trench mortar, unique to the India Corps. It could fire specially made 4 pounder rounds, or an improvised shell made from an empty ration can filled with explosive, nails or other bits of iron. It was fired by lighting a fuse with a match or cigarette. The mortar round also has a fuse, which was lit when the mortar fired the round. At the lower right corner is the Crown Copyright stamp found on most, but not all of Realistic Travels views made while Girdwood was in France in 1915.



Amid bursting crumps, with trench mortar ready, Seaforths watch through periscope for the Hun.



Enemy seen, Fire! A trench mortar hurling the shell, seen in mid air on its deadly flight.

Realistic Travels No. 2, "Enemy seen, Fire! A trench mortar hurling the shell, seen in mid air on its deadly flight." Taken July 23, 1915, this is the 2nd view from the set of 600, the same mortar crew from Photo 1. The Seaforths Regiment, a historic regiment is also known as the Seaforth Highlanders, active from 1881 to 1961. The static nature of the trench war created the need for units to have their own short range artillery to deal with a surprise attack by the enemy, or a troublesome enemy machine gun or sniper. As no nation envisioned a static trench war, there were no trench weapons in the arsenal, so trench mortars were hastily built and sent to the front lines while safer and more effective weapons were being designed and constructed. The 3.7" mortars in the photo had a slow rate of fire, a limited range, and were wildly inaccurate. The jam tin shell did not pack much of a punch. The mortars were as much a danger to the troops firing it as it was to the Germans on the receiving end. The mortar was better than nothing, but just barely.

Girdwood's words "an institution set up to bring the future political and intellectual elite to the heart of the East End." Girdwood had come to London with very little money, and began working as a traveling salesman for Underwood & Underwood, selling stereo viewers and views door to door. He became a salesman at a unique time for the stereo view industry, as did a number of other university students.

a Baptist minister. In 1900, he graduated from Kalamazoo College in Michigan, a Baptist affiliated school. He then went to England and began studying at the University of London. He was living at Toynbee Hall, in

Realistic Travels No. 511, "A quiet time in the trenches: Seaforths enjoy a game of cards." Taken July 23, 1915, This was no. 511 in a set of 600, clearly the same men as in photo 1 and photo 2, who were supposedly in the thick of battle. In this photo, taken a few moments before or after photos No. 1 & 2, the soldiers are relaxing with a game of cards. Continuity was not a strong point with the Realistic Travels war views.



A quiet time in the trenches; Seaforths enjoy a game of cards.



Jats wrestling; the favourite sport of our Indian fighters.

REALISTIC TRAVELS
LONDON · CAPE TOWN · BOMBAY · MELBOURNE · TORONTO

BY ROYAL COMMAND TO THEIR IMPERIAL MAJESTIES
KING GEORGE V AND QUEEN MARY

There was rapid growth in the industry from its introduction in 1851 to 1870. Then there was a period of decline into the 1880s. Starting in the 1880s, modern techniques of marketing were applied to stereo views as well as modern manufacturing techniques in mass producing them. The concept of a door to door salesman was not new, but modern methods applied to the concept revolutionized the marketing of stereo viewers and stereoviews. Rural

Realistic Travels No. 439, "Jats wrestling; the favorite sport of our Indian fighters." This wrestling match was staged for Girdwood on July 23, 1915. This is the type of activity the War Office instructed Haig at GHQ to present for Girdwood to photograph. The Jat people were an ethnic group of farmers from northern India. The British raised native regiments from all the various ethnic groups in India, making sure that a native regiment was composed of only one ethnic group. This practice helped maintain the caste system in India, which was not so different from the class system in England.

areas were targeted for the first time, as sales in large cities had gone flat. The idea of using university students as salesmen was pioneered in the USA, and the concept was taken to England. In 1894, Underwood

shipped three million stereo views and 160,000 viewers to England. Offices and manufacturing were soon set up there. By 1901, Underwood had 4000 salesmen in England; the majority of them students. High pressure sales techniques were developed and used successfully. Upon entering a region, the salesman would do some research and

Realistic Travels No. 18, "F.M. Sir John French, C-in-C of Expeditionary Force with A.D.C.s at General Head Quarters." July 25, 1915. Field Marshal Sir John French with some staff officers of the Indian Corps. The initial ban on photographing active duty officers did not last very long, especially with Girdwood on the spot taking photos.



F.M. Sir John French, C-in-C. of Expeditionary Force, with A.D.C.s at General Head Quarters.

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find out who were the prominent people of the area. In pitching a sale, the names of these prominent people would be dropped numerous times as having purchased the same items as the salesman was peddling. This proved to be a successful, if less than truthful, tactic in closing a sale.

In 1902, Girdwood earned 400 pounds in commissions, in just 10 months of work. Girdwood, and another salesman, I. H. Hart, were singled out as the top salesmen in England. Girdwood targeted solicitors, lawyers, doctors, stockbrokers, military and naval officers as clients. He also targeted the better hotels and military barracks for sales. Girdwood stated that he targeted the "better class" of customer, as they could be "encouraged to buy in larger quantities, and higher quality items." Girdwood even managed to land a few sales to members of the royal family. The Duke and Duchess of Teck were customers. So was the Duke of Connaught, the third son of Queen Victoria. He bought a set of Boer War views from Girdwood, as he was the Honorary Colonel of one of the regiments involved in the war.

Girdwood targeted professionals according to the time of day when they were free. He wrote that he would "look at a Directory and see if

there were any Barracks in the city, and then I go to the Commanding Office of the Barracks and canvas him, and subsequently all the Officers, and then try to place a library set in the Men's Library, in the Sergeants Mess, and also one in the Officers Mess. This work only consumes before noon, as military men cannot be seen after about 1:30. I then begin canvassing Solicitors, Doctors and Shopkeepers, and so forth until I have found someone in each class who takes a sort of interest and refers me on to others in the same class or other classes."

Girdwood's strategy of targeting the affluent social groups with disposable income was successful. His sales pitch, guided by the Underwood salesman's manual was to "focus on the idea of refinement through travel. Do not emphasize the stereoscope as a philosophical toy, but a tool for social aspiration." If the commanding officer could be landed as a customer, then that could be used as a social lever with the officers serving under him. Girdwood's rival at Underwood, I. H. Hart, specialized in hotels. Hart had a regular route with hotels in England, Scotland, Switzerland and Egypt, which needed ways to entertain guests on days when the weather

kept them indoors. The sales ploy of stressing social refinement with the stereo view was one end of the spectrum. The other end of the spectrum at the time were the stereo views gaining popularity with the lower classes at the penny arcades. Machines were available where for a penny, one could see moving pictures, or stereo views of less refinement and lower social aspirations, mainly scantily clad, or nude, young women in provocative poses.

Girdwood moved up as one of the top salesmen for Underwood and quickly became an accomplished stereo photographer. He is known to have photographed the Delhi Durbar in 1903 and 1911, according to Darrah. The Delhi Durbar was a grand government celebration to mark the coronation of the King of England, who was also the Emperor of India. In 1905, he photographed the Prince and Princess of Wales, the future King George V and Queen Mary, on their official tour of India. In 1906, he married Mildred Rennard in India. Having perfected the art of the sale, and armed with what seems to have been an unshakable self-confidence and chutzpah, Girdwood left Underwood. He then created his own stereo view company, Realistic Travels, in 1908. Records show that Hilton DeWitt Girdwood, Jr. was born in India in 1909, and in 1911 George Rennard Girdwood was born in Michigan.

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Realistic Travels No. 562, "Dhol and Sarnai band of a Pathan regiment playing in a French farm." July 23, 1915. Here the Pathan regimental band plays traditional instruments from home, the Dhol is a traditional drum from the Hindu Kush. The Sarnai, or Shehnai, is a double reed instrument, similar to the bombard or oboe. In 1914, each regiment had a band. During a battle, the band was generally recruited as stretcher bearers to bring in the wounded.



With the outbreak of the war, Girdwood claimed that he wanted to document the war effort with his photographs. He stated that, "having spent a good number of years in India, I found that nothing so impressed the vast multitude of the East as pictorial representation." He reached the War Office in London in September 1914, and began to request that he be made the official photographer of the Indian Corps in France. He lobbied heavily for an official position, stating that "so thoroughly convinced was I of the absolute necessity, especially for India, of having actual representations of the troops at the Front, which could be shown in all the vernacular press, that I left no stone unturned."

By April 1915, he had persuaded the India Office to allow him to photograph and film the hospitals in England, to show the great care being given to the Indian troops. He renewed his arguments that he should be allowed to go to France and join the troops in the field. Girdwood stressed that the publicity and propaganda value of his work would help the war effort. Memos that circulated at the War Office indicate that Girdwood was regarded with suspicion as "only wanting to further his own ends with the profits to be made from the films and photographs he planned to make." In June of 1915, the War Office reluctantly allowed him a permit for a 10-

14 day trip to France with the Indian Corps. He arrived in France wearing an officer's uniform, a bogus title he gave himself, *Geographer and Historical Photographer to the Government of India*, and a permit to photograph the Indian Corps. Girdwood invested 1000 pounds of his own money for new cameras, lenses, a great quantity of motion picture film, and other equipment. It was obvious to the War Office that he was planning on staying much longer than his 10-14 day pass allowed. His actions began to draw intense scrutiny by the War Office, which became convinced that the India Office was paying his expenses.

The India Office was not paying him, but he stood to make a considerable amount of money from his official photographer's commission. While he called himself a "geographer and educationalist," it was well known that he was a highly successful "commercial travel photographer." As his motives began to appear more commercial than patriotic, the India Office began to realize that his stereo views and films were poorly suited for an effective propaganda campaign in rural India, and they began to suspect that he was in fact intending to "exploit his own ends financially" by releasing his material into

the British market, and not India as he had said he would do.

The general distrust Girdwood was generating with the War Office and the India Office was only intensified when he got to France. The Indian Corps was part of the 1st Army, which was under the command of Sir Douglas Haig. Haig had a deep mistrust and suspicion of all photographers and journalists, and made no exception for Girdwood. There was an incident in early 1915, when a journalist wrote about a hidden artillery spotting post. Shortly after the newspaper published the story, the Germans shelled the area, caused a number of casualties and the loss of the artillery spotting post.

The India Corps was under the command of General Willcocks, who was sympathetic with Girdwood's cause, but since his commander was General Haig, he had to abide by his superior's ban on any journalists getting close to the front lines. Girdwood had two press officers who were to assist him, Lt. Col. Alexander Stuart and Captain John Faunthorpe. Capt. Faunthorpe was to accompany him at all times. On July 17, 1915, Stuart and Faunthorpe visited the Indian Army Corps and Indian Cavalry Corps to draw up a list of themes and subjects that Girdwood would be allowed to photograph.

Realistic Travels No. 541, "H.R.H. the Prince of Wales reading dispatches at his Headquarters in France." The Prince of Wales was 21 in 1915, and served through the war in France, but was prevented from serving in the front line trenches due to his status as future King of England.





The Leicester's fine charge baffles the Kaiser's bid to wipe out the Old Contemptibles at Ypres.

A schedule was drawn up and approved by Haig at GHQ.

On July 23, 1915, Girdwood and his assistant began to unpack their gear and set to work. That day the first stop was the village of St. Floris. Girdwood was asked to sign a statement that the copyright to any film and photographs would belong to the War Office. He was told not to photograph "depressing pictures of wounded men, and advised in addition that discouraging photographs

Realistic Travels No. 23, "The Leicester's fine charge baffles the Kaiser's bid to wipe out the Old Contemptibles at Ypres." In 1914, the Kaiser vowed to wipe England's "contemptible little army" out of existence. When that attempt failed, the surviving soldiers of 1914 referred to themselves as the Old Contemptibles. In September the War Office and GHQ gave Girdwood the green light to direct a staged battle with no interference. On September 6, 1915, Girdwood was given the 2nd Battalion of the Leicester Regiment at the village of Bout de Ville to use as he saw fit. He had a few of them dress in captured German uniforms and he set about staging an assault on the German position. In this view the men of the 2nd Leicester Regt. are storming the German position. Film and stereoviews were made of this staged battle. Only the stereoviews survive.

are to be deprecated." The schedule was hectic. In four days Girdwood took photographs at seventy different locations, and shot film at about

half of them. The film does not survive, but the stereo views show the First Battalion Seaforth's Regiment training with a pair of trench mortars. Later that day they took photos of the band of the 40th Pathans Regiment playing the Marseillaise to a

Realistic Travels No. 252, "After the storm and stress of battle, caring for the wounded." September 6, 1915. A good propaganda view, where friend and foe are being treated for injury.



After the storm and stress of battle, caring for the wounded



The famous Gurkhas with their deadly kukries, near Neuve Chapelle.

French audience at a farm. Two days later, on July 25, they were taking photos around the headquarters of the Indian Cavalry Corps. It was known that Lord Kitchener was going to visit General Haig at 1st Army Head Quarters, and Girdwood asked permission to photograph the event. Haig informed him that if he was seen anywhere in the vicinity of

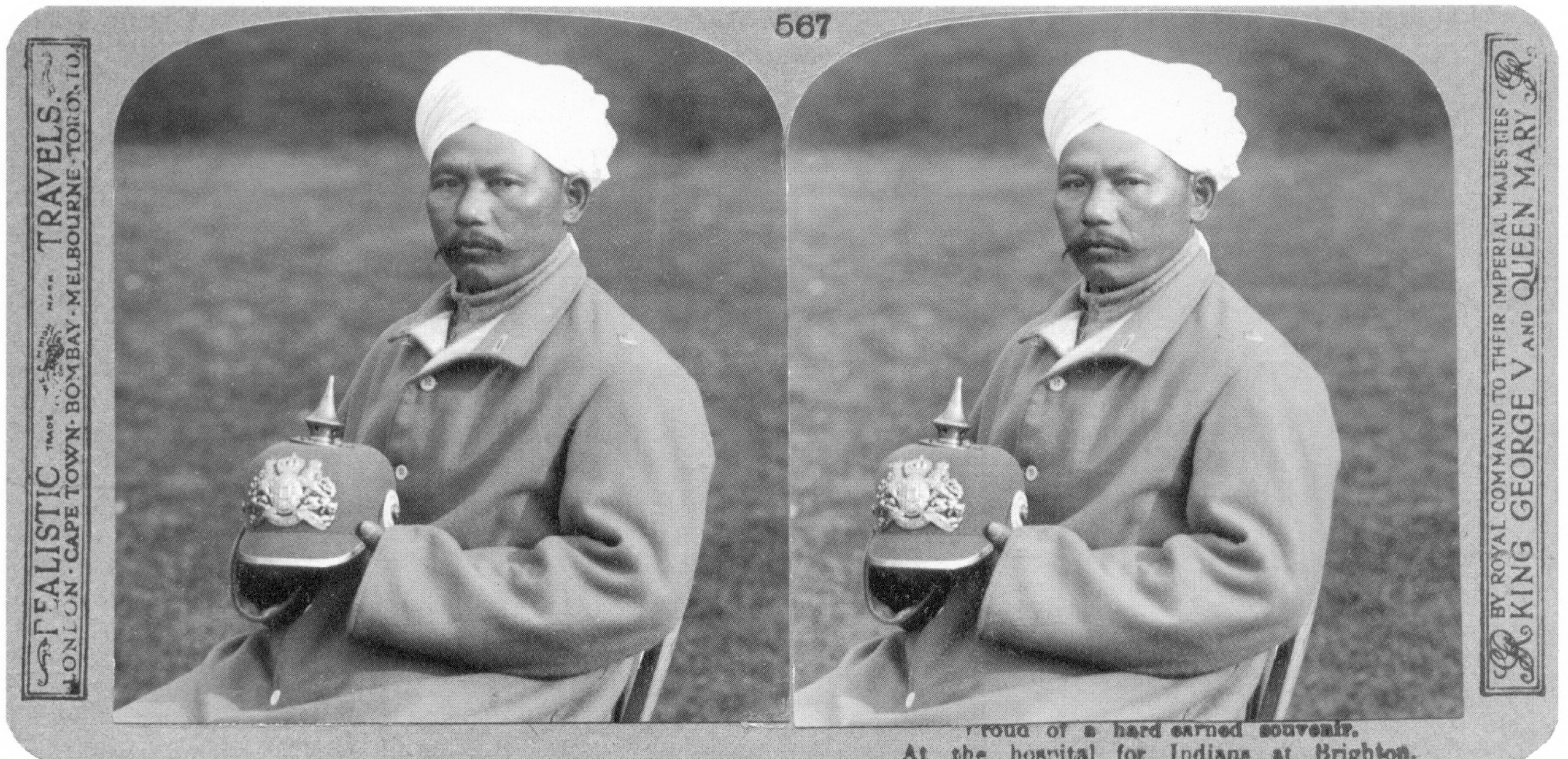
Realistic Travels No. 22, "The Gurkhas with their deadly kukries, near Nueve Chapelle." Taken July 29, 1915, this is no. 22 from the set of 600 views. This was the training exercise Girdwood was allowed to photograph, which he then portrayed as real battlefield action. The Battle at Nueve Chapelle had been over for several months when this photo was taken. The Gurkhas have a long and distinguished history with the British army. They were greatly feared by the Germans due to their fierce nature and the kukrie, a large curved knife with the edge on the inside face of the curve. A well trained Gurkha with a kukrie could take off a German's head with one swift slash.

GHQ with a camera, he would be arrested. At the time there was a

total ban on photographs of officers on active duty for security reasons. This ban was shortly done away with, as photos of officers and generals in the war views testify.

Problems began to come up as Girdwood grew frustrated from of the strict control he was under, as he was not getting the film and photos he wished. He demanded that he be

Realistic Travels No. 567, "Proud of a hard earned souvenir. At the hospital for Indians at Brighton." A soldier from India recovering from a wound holding a Bavarian felt pickelhaube. A good propaganda photo for the home front. The distinctive German spiked helmet, the pickelhaube, was made of leather imported from Argentina. Imports ended with the British Blockade. Many substitute materials for the pickelhaube were tried, such as thin sheet metal, patent leather, papier Mache, and felt. In Feb. 1916, the German army began to retire the pickelhaube, which provided no protection to the head, and introduced the stahlhelm, the only true ballistic helmet used in the First World War.



Proud of a hard earned souvenir. At the hospital for Indians at Brighton.

allowed to have the freedom to take photos in his own way. On July 27, he complained to the India Office about his treatment from the senior staff. Girdwood wrote that "he had been consistently refused permission to photograph British troops, and that Haig's ban meant they were not allowed to visit the firing line, or even the first or second line trenches so that the nature of the subjects are for the most part not very interesting." It seemed to be a deliberate policy and he concluded that "the whole idea seems to be for me to do as little as possible and do that in a few days, and clear out." Lt. Col. Stuart added a note that he thought Girdwood was just trying to lengthen his stay in France beyond his permit. Both Girdwood and Stuart were correct.

The complaints seem to have worked, and Girdwood was granted more time by the War Office, despite their suspicions of his motives. On July 29, Faunthorpe escorted Girdwood near the village of Merville, where Girdwood was allowed to photograph a practice attack by the First Battalion of the First Gurkha Regiment. Girdwood took advantage of the opportunity, and photographed the training exercise from a number of different positions. He even managed to get about six minutes of film that day. The press officers assigned to him hoped that this would satisfy Girdwood's desire to get some actual battlefield photo-

graphs. The India Office condemned the whole episode as a "deliberate fake, and Girdwood was expressly forbidden to describe it as a real scene of action." Nevertheless, in the end, he was allowed to pass off his film and photographs as actual battlefield action.

On July 31, with orders from the War Office, General Haig relaxed his rules about journalists, and let a party of journalist visit the forward area, including Girdwood. They entered the front lines held by the Indian Corps for a short visit. They took their cameras and shot some film in the front line, more or less under enemy fire, but in a fairly quiet sector. They returned safely later that day, but no film survives. There are some photos of troops in trenches, but they appear to be second or third line trenches and not the front line. Over the next few days the schedule remained fast and furious, and Girdwood wrote that they never got more than four hours of sleep at night. They would go into the trenches in the morning, and return the same night. Girdwood then began to complain that he had not been allowed to photograph "aircraft, artillery, German prisoners, bursting artillery shells, or anything of real war value." Again, he was attempting to prolong his stay, and

get access to more areas of the front. Dealing with the military had caused a lot of delays in Girdwood's schedule due to their reluctant cooperation. Bad weather also constantly interrupted the photo schedule.

Back in England, a rival team of official photographers was being formed under the name Topical Sub-Committee of the Kinematograph Manufacturers Association. This group would be in direct competition with Girdwood, as their plans were very similar to his. They seemed to have had better relations with the War Office than Girdwood and soon began to produce a film that was going to be much like Girdwood's, as the press officers escorted them to the same locations that Girdwood had been taken. Girdwood realized that his film would be greatly reduced in value if not completed very soon and released before the Topical Sub-Committee finished their film.

Then a remarkable event occurred. There seems to have been a total change of policy at the War Office and the India Office over the value of films and photographs of troops at the front. The India Office wanted Girdwood to film British and Indian troops to show the people of India that the British were taking the brunt of the war as much as the

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Realistic Travels No. 512, "Gurkha pipers playing 'Marseillaise' to French villagers." Taken July 29, it is no. 512 from the set of 600 views. This was an event staged for Girdwood's benefit, complete with French civilians being entertained by bagpipe playing Gurkha soldiers near the village of Merville. The War Office and GHQ wanted the war to be perceived on the home front as a tidy affair with photos like this.



Gurkha pipers playing the "Marseillaise" to French villagers.

Indian troops. This was to end rumors that agitators in India were circulating that the Indian troops were doing most of the fighting, while the British troops remained in the rear areas. Capt. Faunthorpe escorted Girdwood to the village of Bout de Ville on Sept. 6, 1915, where the Second Battalion of the Leicester Regiment had just gone to rest after its time on the front lines. Girdwood was given the freedom to film and photograph with no oversight or interference from his handlers.

The 2nd Leicester Battalion was instructed to fully cooperate with Girdwood. On September 6, 1915, he staged a battle, complete with British soldiers in German uniforms. There can be no doubt that the War Office, the India Office and GHQ knew what Girdwood had in mind. There was no effort to restrain his creative license in directing a simulated battle, or to prevent him from completing his work. It is likely that the War Office began to see the propaganda potential in anything that showed the war in a positive light, as the war was not going well for the British in 1915. Girdwood quickly wrapped up

his staged production, and he was back in London on September 10, 1915. He had stretched his initial 10-14 permit to 49 days at the front with the Indian Corp, but due to bad weather, only 18 days had been suitable for filming and photographs. Also during this time he was able to take a few photos of the Prince of Wales, as well as pose for a few photos while his assistant worked the camera.

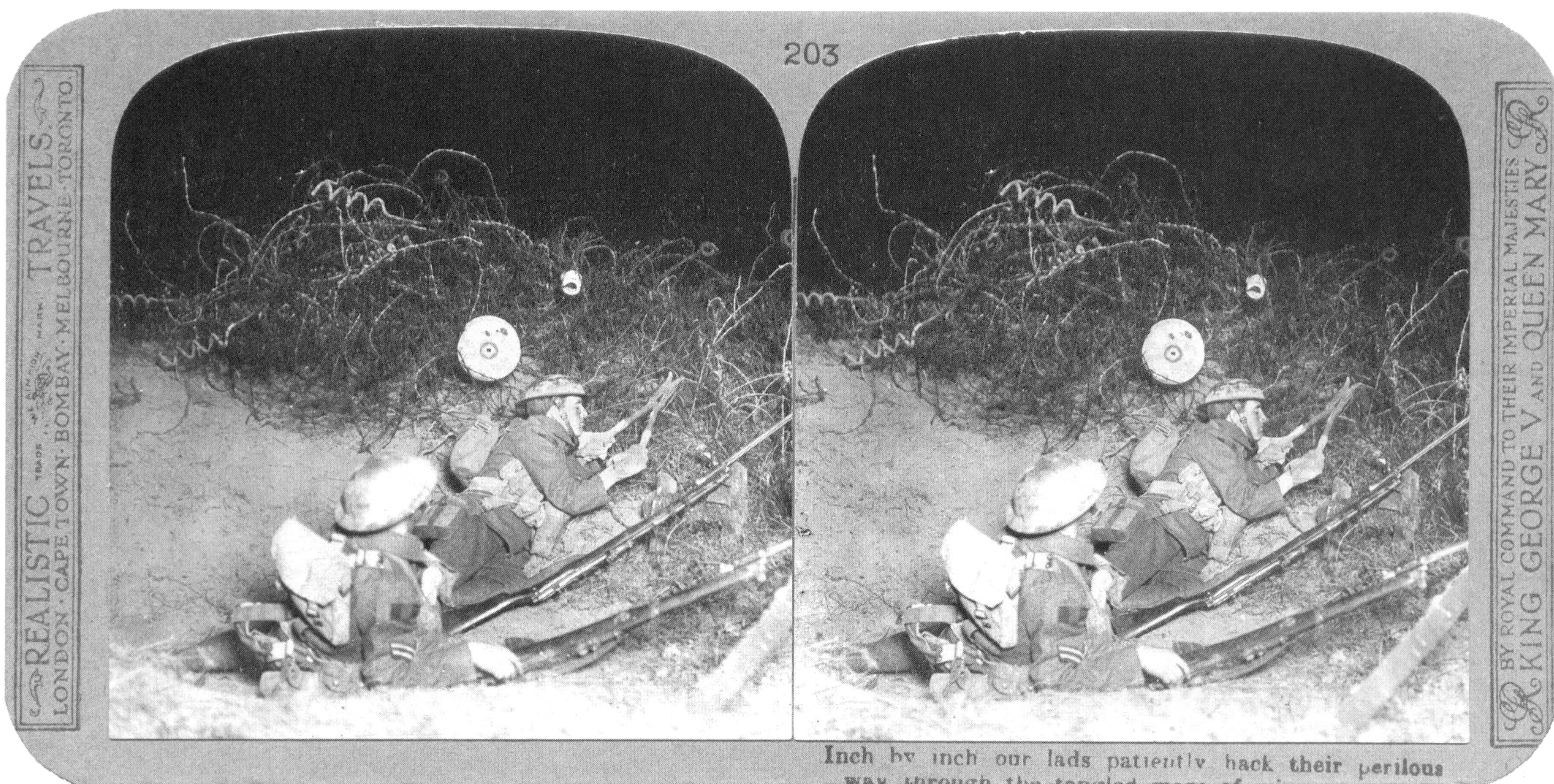
Back in London, Girdwood began the difficult process of obtaining the rights to use his film and photographs and begin his commercial venture. There was a lengthy legal fight between the War Office, Girdwood and the Topical Sub-Committee. A compromise was reached; it was not in Girdwood's favor. Since he had claimed all along to be working on the behalf of the India Office, he was given the rights to publish his photographs and present his film freely in India and Egypt. He was given the rights to only make a single print of his film while he was in England. He chose not to return to India, and went on a lecture tour throughout England with his single

movie print. His movie premiered on September 11, 1916, in London, under the title, *With the Empire's Fighters*.

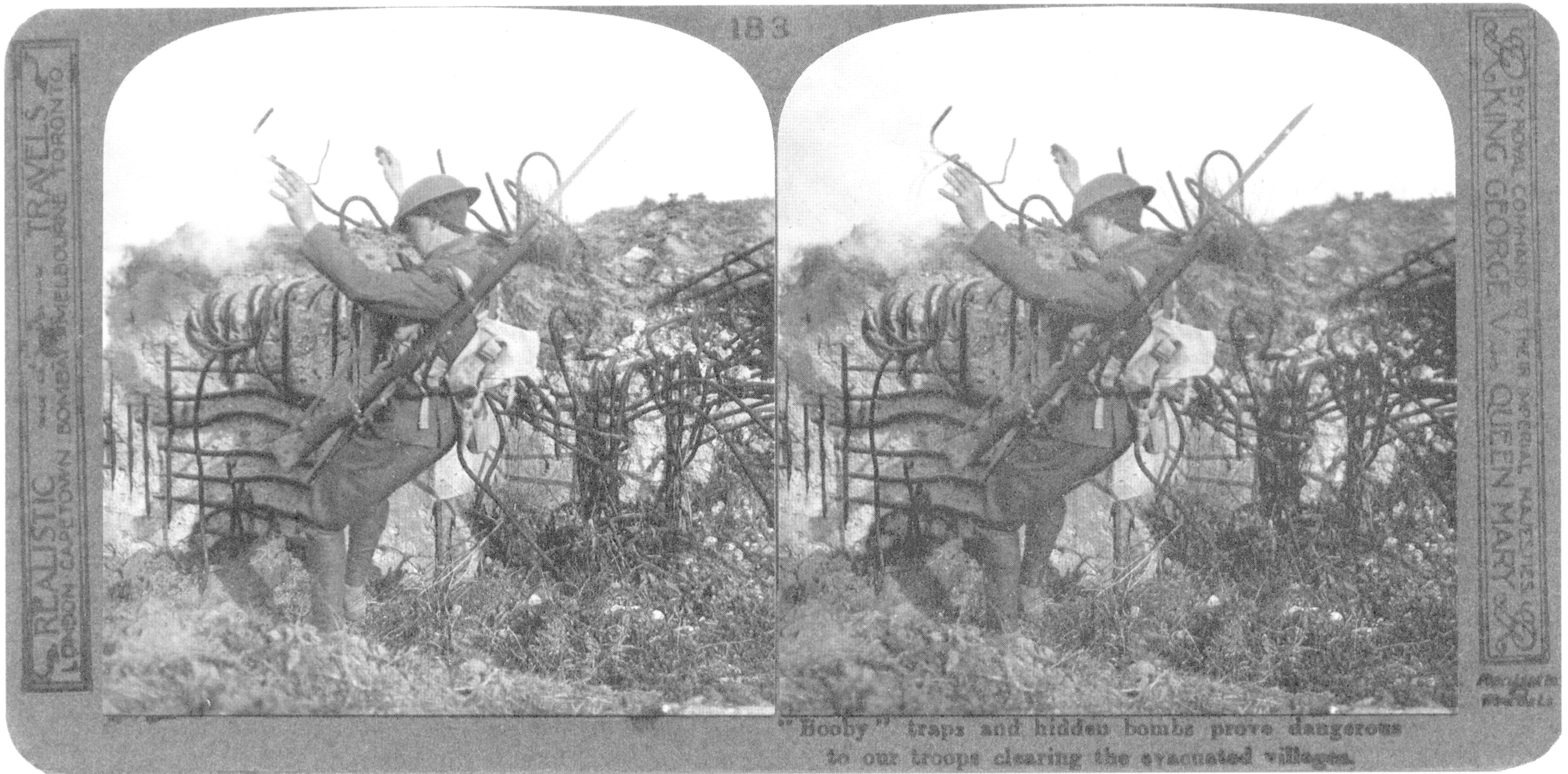
After his long legal battle to get his film out, the Topical Sub-Committee beat him to the punch, releasing *The Battle of the Somme* on August 21, 1916, three weeks before Girdwood had his premier. This is the film with the famous scene where British troops go over the top, then advance into the mist through barbed wire, and several men are "hit" by enemy fire. While *The Battle of the Somme* had many authentic scenes of the war, that sequence was staged. Girdwood's film was well received, but it was not the success he hoped it to be. He did better in rural areas that had limited access to more up to date newsreels. With all the problems he had with the War Office, the India Office and GHQ, H.D. Girdwood remains the first official British film photographer of World War One. That is what he is remembered for by British film historians.

In 1917, Girdwood wrote a series of articles for *The Windsor* magazine, a popular monthly magazine that ran from 1895 to 1939. The articles he wrote were wartime propaganda, with some factual information, but mostly fabricated stories illustrated with the photographs he took of his time in France in 1915. All of the photographs used in his articles are copyrighted by Realistic Travels. Most of the magazine photos also

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Realistic Travels No. 203, "Inch by inch our lads patiently hack their perilous way through the tangled mass of wire." A doubtful action shot, as a bright flash in No Man's Land would have invited enemy machine gun fire and an artillery barrage. It does illustrate one of the tools of war not mentioned very often, wire cutters. The photo does not really reflect what a night raiding party would look like. The soldiers would have traded their helmets for wool caps, and their faces would be blackened. Only a few of them would have rifles, with no bayonet, and most of the men would have been armed with clubs, pistols and trench knives. The field gear would have been left behind and tunic pockets would have been stuffed with bullets and hand grenades. Skirmishes at night in No Man's Land were short and brutal.



Inch by inch our lads patiently hack their perilous way through the tangled maze of wire



"Booby" traps and hidden bombs prove dangerous to our troops clearing the evacuated villages.

Realistic Travels No. 183, "Booby" traps and hidden bombs prove dangerous to our troops clearing the evacuated villages." One of the more blatantly posed action shots found in the set of war views. A well composed shot, just as the bomb goes off, what are the odds?

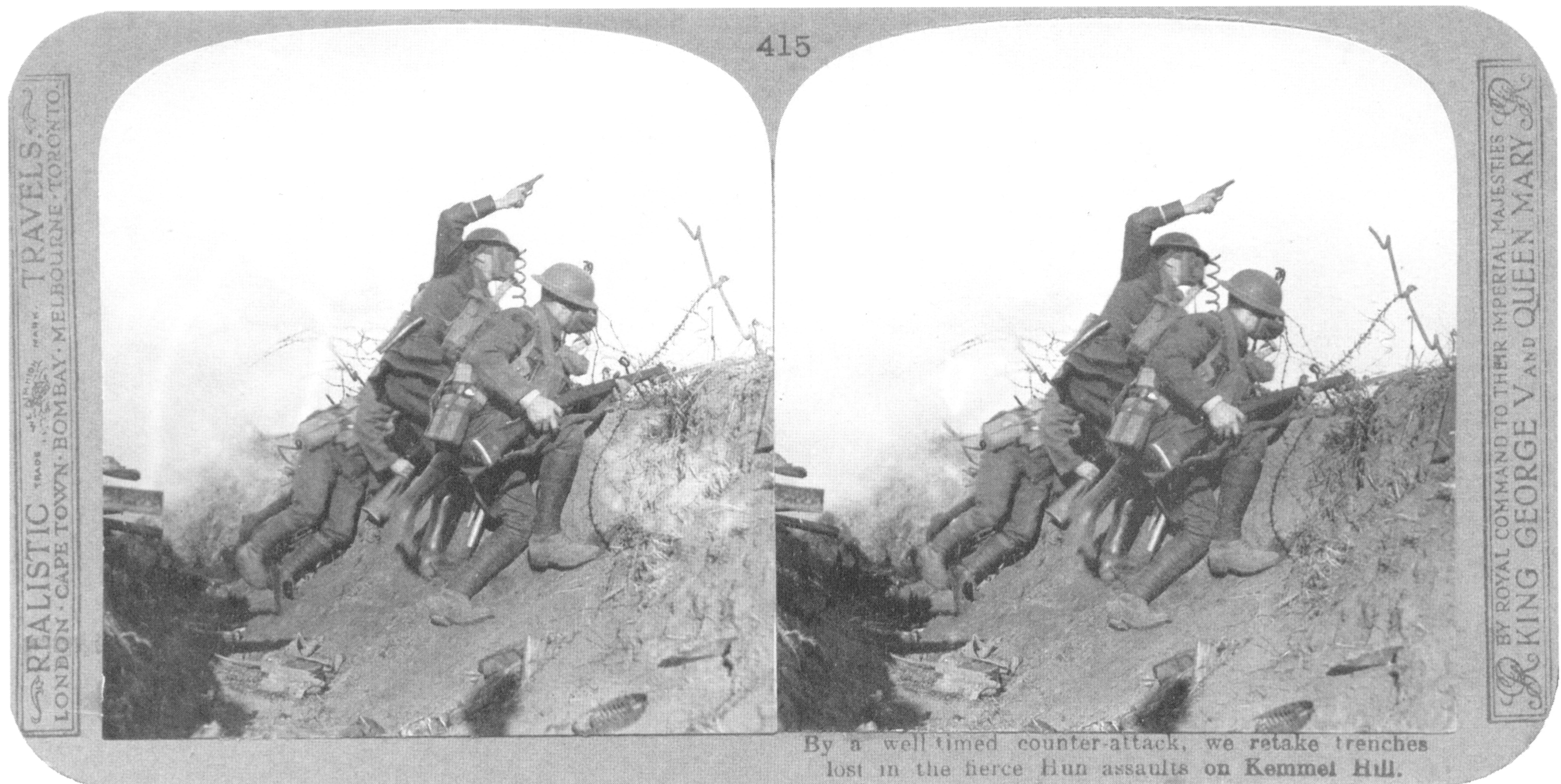
appeared in the Realistic Travels war views. His photos also appeared in other magazines, without an accompanying article. Girdwood soon received another blow from the War Office. An American producer was given the rights to distribute propaganda films in India while Girdwood was touring rural England with his film.

Girdwood claimed to have shown his film and given the accompanying lecture over one thousand times

by mid-1918. The pace was hectic, his health started to decline, and he was running into debt. In June 1918, he took his film and lecture to the United States, where he toured for another year. After his U.S. tour, he finally returned to India with his

film, and toured there with it until the middle of 1920. In 1939, Girdwood was living in London, at Anla-by House, on Lyndale Avenue N.W.2. He offered his services to the India office as World War II began, but he was politely turned down. In 1964, at the age of 86, he passed away in Michigan.

Realistic Travels No. 415, "By a well timed counter-attack, we retake trenches lost in the fierce Hun assaults on Kemmel Hill." A posed action shot, complete with poison gas and gas masks. The battle at Kemmel Hill took place during the German spring offensive of 1918. This staged photo could have been made while the war was still in progress, or just after the end of the war. Photos such as this still find their way into picture books of the First World War, usually with the caption intact.



By a well timed counter-attack, we retake trenches lost in the fierce Hun assaults on Kemmel Hill.



Kamerad! Dazed Huns pour out of their fortified cellars at Pilken in answer to our bombs.

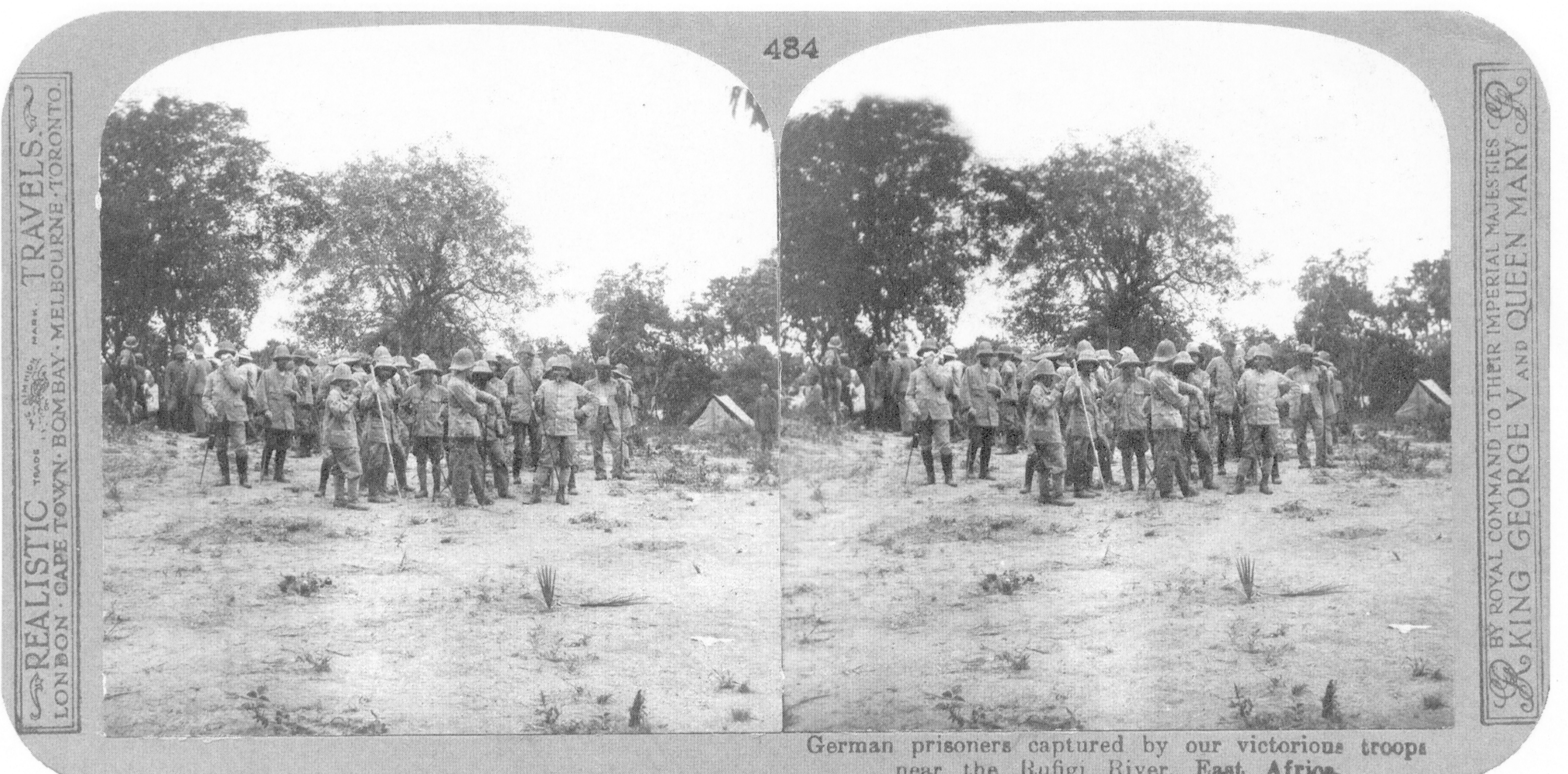
All nations involved in the war censored journalists and photographers. The British had the strictest censorship of all the nations involved. As with any rule, there were exceptions, but in 1915, most were still enforced. With the out-

Realistic Travels No. 87, "Kamerad! Huns pour out of their fortified cellars at Pilken in answer to our bombs." The battle at Pilken Ridge took place in August 1917. During the Third Battle for Ypres in Belgium, in Flanders. Note that the German has no field equipment, and no gas mask canister, something no soldier on the front lines would ever be without. As with most of the action shots in the Realistic Travels views, it is well composed, and the soldiers are very clean and free of mud stained uniforms.

break of the war the British set up the War Office Press Bureau and the

Defense of the Realm Act that gave the government wide control over what was reported on the war. Realistic Travels and Underwood & Underwood were the main stereo view publishers in England during the war. No sets of stereoviews published by either of them in England during the 1914-1918 period are known to exist, unlike France, Germany and the United States where

Realistic Travels No. 484, "German prisoners captured by our victorious troops near the Rufigi River, East Africa." Cameras were scarce in the East Africa campaign, especially stereo cameras. This is a photo that could not be faked, and the event is well documented. The Germans are sailors and marines from the SMS Königsberg, part of the East Asia Squadron, in German colonial uniforms. The had SMS Königsberg sailed up the Rufigi River on the coast of German East Africa in an attempt to escape the Royal Navy. The ship managed to survive for six months on the river, but was eventually disabled and wrecked in a combined land, water, and air operation. The sailors and marines then joined Lettow Vorbeck's German East Africa force, but their lack of training in bush fighting lead to most of them being killed or captured after a short time.



German prisoners captured by our victorious troops near the Rufigi River, East Africa.

sales of stereo war views was brisk. Both did have photos published in British newspapers and magazines during the war that showed up later in their war views.

Realistic Travels war views typically came in 100 view boxes. The deluxe set had 600 views, and there were smaller sets of 100, 200, 300, 400 and 500. There were also specialty sets of 25 and 32 views. There is little to no organization to the sets of views. The photos taken during Girdwood's time in France are spread throughout the set. The views numbered from 301 to 400 were taken shortly after the end of the war. They are all scenes of military cemeteries, destroyed buildings, battered towns, and ruined landscapes of France and Belgium, in the British sector of the war. After the war there was a brief period where tours of the recent battlefields were popular holiday excursions. Michelin put out a number of guide books for all the major battlefields. The photos in the 301-400 range may have been purely travel related, as Realistic Travels was originally intended to be. Photos 401-600 follow the pattern of the rest of the set, just random photos of the war. Views from Girdwood's trip to France in 1915 make up a sizeable portion of the set, and they are scattered throughout the 600 views, often with conflicting captions. There also seems to be some duplication of views. Some duplicate views have different captions, but this

could also have occurred by modern collectors combining incomplete sets.

It is not common to have evidence of when and where a stereo view of WW1 was made, as there is of Girdwood's photos when he was an official photographer in 1915. That makes them unique. The day, location, and the regiments photographed are known from military records. They all have captions that tell a much different story than the day they were made. Most claim to be front line action shots, some were, but most were taken well behind the lines and at different locations than the captions indicate. All give the correct name of the unit in the photograph, and military records show when and where they were taken. With the war time censorship in place, naming the regiment in the photo gives evidence that the photos were not sold until after the end of the war.

The other photos in the set, taken later in the war, mostly focused on the British involvement in the war. Some show troops getting ready for a night raid on the German lines. The photos were made at night, and a flash was used. It is doubtful that front line soldiers would have submitted themselves to such a suicidal act as signaling their position at

night just before a raid with a bright light.

In the same set with all the staged views, there are some very remarkable views of the war. There is a group of views of a wrecked zeppelin, complete with the imprint in the ground of the airship commander who leapt from his burning airship. This event was well documented, and could not have been staged. A group of photos show the details of launching an observation balloon. Photos were taken in the front lines during the Gallipoli Campaign in Turkey, and the various campaigns in Africa. Photos were taken at a British fighter squadron late in the war. A few photos are of a recently abandoned German bomber squadron, a few days after Nov. 11, 1918. Photos were taken at Scapa Flow in Scotland, the main base of the British Royal Navy, of surrendered German battleships and submarines. Part of the Armistice agreement was that Germany would surrender all vessels of the High Seas Fleet. The German fleet was directed to Scapa Flow in November 1918. On June 21, 1919, the German sailors scuttled their proud ships in the harbor in a last act of defiance.

It is hard to separate Girdwood's official films and photographic work

(Continued on page 33)

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Realistic Travels No. 14, "Black Watch and Indians hold advanced sector of the line near Facquissart Post guarding Calais." This looks to be a 2nd or 3rd line trench, and not the front line as stated. One of Gridwood's views from his time as an official war photographer. Note the partial Crown Copyright stamp at the lower left corner.



Hilton DeWitt Girdwood

(Continued from page 19)



THE LATE MR. JOHN BURNET, ENGRAVER.

Fig. 4. Portrait of John Burnet published in *The Illustrated London News* on May 13, 1868, shortly after his death. From a photograph by John Watkins.

between 1860 and 1870 and titled *The Best Card* (Fig. 3).

Nothing in the painting gives us any clue the scene takes place on a 24th of December which is probably why the titles of both the stereo and the fairing switch the attention to the card playing. When this artwork was made Christmas trees and the like had not yet been introduced in Britain and the artist may simply have wanted to show us that Christmas Eve was just an ordinary day, very different from the shopping, spending, cooking and drinking frenzy it has since turned into. The scene is simple and homely but one cannot wonder where the light illuminating the characters comes from. Days are short in December and night falls early. There should be a candle or an oil lamp on the table and the shadow of the elderly woman plainly shows that the room is not lit by a fire burning in the hearth but by a higher lighting source that we cannot see. 📷

After 15 years of interruption I have revived the *European Gems* column my friend Pierre Tavlitzki and I started in 1996 and ended in 2000. For the past 30 years I have never stopped researching the stories behind French and British staged stereocards and although a large part of this research has been published in book format thanks to my collaboration with Dr. Brian May and Paula Fleming, some of it hasn't made it into books and has been sitting in my archives, waiting to be turned into articles.

in France in 1915, as they were produced simultaneously. It should be noted that as an official British photographer, Girdwood was a civilian. Even though he wore a military uniform, he was never in the British Army. He received no money from the government for his equipment and expenses. This was a different policy from the official French photographers who, although a number of them had been professional photographers before the war, were all soldiers. Later on when the United States entered the war, the Signal Corps formed a photography section, and soldiers took the U.S. official photographs and films of the war. The British did have some soldiers as photographers, most from the Royal Engineer Regiment. The majority of them were civilians under special license, who produced the official photography and films of the war. It is not surprising that a conflict of interest would occur when the British government used commercial photographers and not those under direct military command for official photographs and film.

It is also evident from a number of the photos in the *Realistic Travels* set that talented amateur photographers sold the rights to their images to Girdwood. These amateurs could only have been soldiers. All the armies in the war had an official policy prohibiting soldiers carrying cameras, but, it seems the rules were not universally enforced. Kodak and other camera manufacturers sold pocket cameras specifically made for soldiers to carry with them to the front lines. French newspapers paid well for photos of bursting shells in No Man's Land, and many French soldiers risked their lives to get that front page photo. The *Realistic Travels* views are a mixed bag of images, some are the real deal, others less so. We must also remember, the stereoview was an entertainment medium, rather than a medium for journalistic truth. While most of the photos are staged, it is a mistake to only judge them by a standard that was never intended by their makers. Still, they do offer a kind of record of the time, just not a literal record we attempt to impose on them.

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