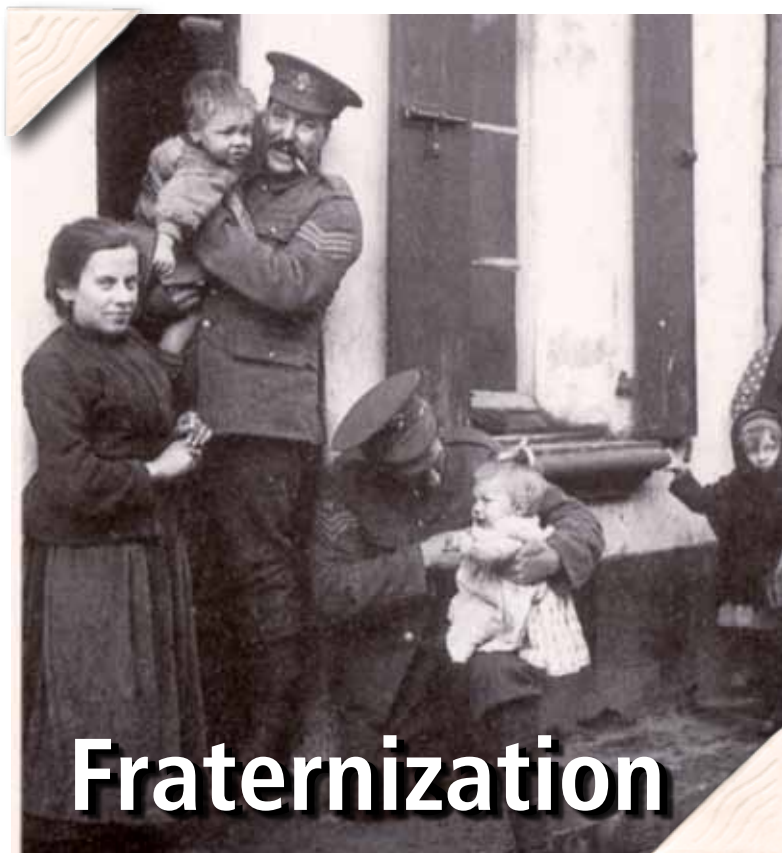


ENGLISH

The camp at Étaples



Photos: Pierre Baudelicque collection

Fraternization

Local women and children... and English soldiers.

ÉTAPLES was a remarkable railway crossroads, as it was from here that the battlefields of the Somme and Artois could be reached. If you take into account the proximity of Boulogne-sur-Mer and the existence of extensive available land, you can easily understand why the British were so keen to establish themselves in this perfect strategic location. It was here that the military had extended the largest British base in France. In all probability, over a million men passed through here between March 1915 and November 1918, and the base accommodated 60-80,000 soldiers at any one time.

A huge camp was therefore set up to store equipment, to provide training for troops and to ensure their fitness. It also

housed around twenty hospitals, with 20,000 beds, to receive full trainloads of wounded soldiers arriving here. It even

became necessary to build an additional station. The injured were first received at rest posts before being taken to the camp in ambulances by British army auxiliaries known as the “*Khaki Girls*”, who were quickly given the nickname of “*Cats qui gueulent*” (screaming cats) by locals in Étaples. These young women, who also fulfilled the role of cooks, typists, telephonists for military staff etc, “*elicited not even the slightest astonishment from local inhabitants who, for the first time in their lives, were seeing women dressed in uniform*”, explains Pierre Baudelicque, a history professor at the university. Upon their arrival, in Étaples as elsewhere in the Pas-de-Calais region, the soldiers received a warm welcome from the local population, “*who saw them as allies determined to support the French fight, even if in reality Great Britain had declared war to protest against the German violation of Belgian neutrality*”, adds Xavier Boniface, a lecturer at the Université du Littoral.

Illegitimate babies

On occasion, romances developed between soldiers and local women. There were marriages, very few in fact (the figure of just five is mentioned), perhaps because of the differences in reli-

gion (the soldiers were Anglican, the local women Catholic). These “fraternisations” resulted in several illegitimate births in every social category of the population. “*Babies born from these day- or month-long liaisons were of course subjected to gibes which the cocky and ever-alert locals of Étaples never missed an opportunity to make up,*” wrote Pierre Baudelicque in his famous work “*Histoire d’Étaples. Des origines à nos jours*”. These poor children were picked upon and often subjected to insults: “*Va donc, espèce ed’monster ed’batard d’inglé!*” (Clear off you little monster and bastard of an Englishman)

The “Black Plague”

Prostitution clearly prospered and with it the “Black Plague”, namely venereal diseases. This curse was not immediately noticed due to the attention given solely to the war-wounded. In France, the big cities and most of the country’s secondary towns

became sources of contagion. In Étaples, a hospital was entirely set aside for soldiers who had contracted these “special” illnesses. The epidemic also spread within the civilian population and is one of the reason why the Franco-British cohabitation became a little less harmonious over time. In addition to venereal diseases and prostitution, other problems which tend to develop wherever there are soldiers manifested themselves: the sale of alcohol, fights, an increase in crime etc, even though in Étaples the soldiers rarely left their camp.

Furthermore, the population was unhappy that its rights were being restricted, particularly in terms of movement (passes, ceasefires etc). Relations were stretched even further when, on the occasion of the mutiny at the end of 1917, the soldiers left their camp furious with rage, as a result of which local “Étaplois” were subjected to a week of hell... which is still talked about even to this day.



Vera Brittain

A volunteer turned spirited pacifist

Vera Brittain was born in 1893 into a wealthy English family. From an early age she refused to accept the restrictions placed on young women of the time, and envied her younger brother who was able to leave the family home without getting married. A rebel by nature, she talked of nothing else except her independence, her studies and her career. Despite the disapproval of her father, she succeeded in gaining a place at Somerville College, Oxford, where she fell in love with Roland Leighton, a friend of her brother. The future seemed nothing but rosy for them when war broke out in 1914. “Carried away with emotion and the glorious face of patriotism” (these were her words), Vera put her name forward as a volunteer and underwent training as an auxiliary nurse, once again against the wishes of her father.



Vera Brittain was a nurse in Étaples. Her involvement in the Great War made her name as a militant and internationally famous pacifist.

It was only three weeks later that she began to truly understand the meaning of war, and every day she was more and more horrified by the butchery of it all. In England, Malta, France and Étaples in particular, she learnt of the deaths of her friends, her fiancé, and later on, her brother. She found herself in the absurd position of working relentlessly to save lives, in particular those of German prisoners, at the same time as her brother was trying to destroy them! It was at this time that her pacifism took root. She wrote and published her war diary from 1913 to 1917, entitled “*Chronicle of Youth*”, as well her “*Testament of Youth 1933*”, an autobiography in which, she says, she appealed more to the mind than the heart. The story has been screened in England in a very popular TV series. Vera Brittain became tirelessly involved in the pacifist campaign during the inter-war years, and later campaigned for nuclear disarmament, the independence of the colonies, and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

A MUTINY beneath a veil of silence

BRITISH cemeteries are dotted around the Pas-de-Calais, with most of them located on the Artois front. The largest cemetery is situated in Étaples, far from the trenches. The explanation is simple: Étaples was the base camp for the British, who had established several hospitals on the hill (nowadays occupied by buildings) overlooking the old town.

“Étaples is the most painful of all the cemeteries. It is here that men killed slowly by gangrene and gas, blind and with their lungs destroyed, are laid to rest. They were buried ten, fifteen, twenty at a time”. In total there are 11,658 graves here, 800 of which followed the German bombardment in 1918.

The Bull Ring

What we do know is that this cemetery situated above the Canche river, on the road to Boulogne, stood alongside a training ground, the Bull Ring, in the military camp at Étaples, a compulsory stopping-point for all those who, having disembarked at Boulogne, required training before being sent to the fronts in the Artois and Flanders. It was a veritable hell where men were subjected to extreme discipline and very hard training, and from where they left, with few regrets, for the front. This was, in short, psychological preparation which could have been justified had it not been so excessive that it led to a huge mutiny in September 1917 – a mutiny which Great Britain covered up with a veil of silence.

A six-day revolt

Even historians, who were aware of the facts from accounts gathered from the local population, were unable to get to the very bottom of a story that the vast majority of English, and more widely the British, ignored until 1978, the year a book by William Allison and John Fairley, entitled *The Monocled Mutineer*, was published. In the view of the history professor Pierre Baudelicque, this work needs to be read with a hint of caution. It was criticised in England, although it had the benefit of forcing an admission that this revolt, which lasted six days, actually took place. It was a controversy at the time, is still a controversy today, and will remain so until 2017, the year in which the cloak of secrecy relating to military archives can be lifted. For all that, the historian from Étaples confirms the majority of



Training in the Bull Ring, the scene of daily bullying and insults. The site was situated alongside the present-day military cemetery.

the views put forward in this book translated by Claudine Lesage in 1990, including the fact that a very large number of soldiers deserted to live in the woods, marshland and dunes surrounding the camp, as well as in the tunnels and caves dug in the chalky landscapes around Camiers. Among these deserters was a certain Percy Toplis, to whom Allison and Fairley attributed an important role in the sequence of events. According to Pierre Baudelicque, this man was certainly among the deserters and was one of the agitators, but we should attach a little less importance to his role and actions.

It appears that the revolt was partly triggered by a tragedy: the killing (by accidental gunshot according to the official report) of Corporal Wood, who was surprised by a military policeman while in conversation with a young woman from Aberdeen wearing a WAAC (Women's Auxiliary Army Corps) uniform – a liaison which was strictly forbidden. This was the straw that broke the camel's back for the soldiers of the camp, who had had enough of the treatment metered out to them by Brigadier General Thomson, the camp commander – described as a model of brutality and tyranny – as well as by military instructors and police. The entire camp was overcome by anger at the killing, which resulted in 3-4,000 soldiers, mainly from Scotland, Australia and New Zealand, storming through the doors and fences surrounding their billets. Their uncontrollable fury was targeted at their “torturers”, as well as at French civilians, nurses etc, and resulted in repeated beatings and rapes.

Pierre Baudelicque highlights the

recollections of Lucien Roussel, who was 15 years old at the time, and who witnessed the British troops *“attack the town like real savages, pillaging and destroying everything before them”*.

A mutiny waiting to happen

At the beginning, Brigadier General Thomson had wanted to convince people that this was just a fit of anger. However, it was much more serious than that given that it lasted for six days.

Alongside the brutalities endured by the soldiers, and the death of Corporal Wood, other factors almost certainly contributed to this mutiny which had been simmering for some time. The questions that need asking are numerous. What information did the soldiers have in their possession? Did they know that there was also talk of mutinies on the French side? What influence was exerted by the deserters who were acting as camp guards and who joined the troops? Had pacifist and communist propaganda infiltrated the camp?

Mutineers killed in combat

The opening-up of the archives will perhaps shed new light on this affair which ended on Friday 14 September, the date on which calm was considered to have returned. This was made possible by the arrival of troops whose role was to restore order, including Bengal Lancers who only required a single order to open fire. Faced with this impressive demonstration of force, the mutineers returned to their ranks and were soon moved to the Flanders front

where General Haig was readying himself to launch the deadly offensive at Passchendaele. Most of the mutineers were killed there without having had the opportunity to explain exactly what happened in Étaples, where a commission of enquiry identified the ring-leaders. *“It is thought that a dozen or so executions took place”*, Pierre Baudelicque wrote in his *Histoire d'Étaples*. Other sentences were also passed. How many men were executed? This is another question that remains unanswered as the bodies of those shot were taken back to England. Nowadays, all that remains of the Étaples camp is this impressive

cemetery. Nothing, of course, to indicate that the power of the British army had wavered here. Allison and Fairley reaffirmed this. Pierre Baudelicque takes a more level-headed approach: *“the Étaples mutiny wasn't the only one. Others had taken place in Le Havre, in Calais... and in Dover”*. What is certain, however, is that censorship had worked effectively and that the British silence had done its job. *“The older brother of my mother, who was English, remained in Étaples throughout the war, and never spoke of a revolt among his colleagues”*, adds Pierre Baudelicque.

Abuse in the Bull Ring

Eye-witness accounts gathered from veterans, fifty or sixty years after the event, are edifying. Troops arriving in Boulogne immediately came under the control of the dreaded Canaries (so-named because of their yellow armbands), who would make them walk all the way to Étaples by forced march, with only a half a slice of bread and a glass of water for sustenance during a brief stop in Neufchâtel – a foretaste of what was in store for them once they arrived in Étaples. Cut off from the world, they were the victims of both moral and physical abuse during their entire training period. This breakdown of mental strength was etched on their faces. The poet Wilfred Owen, who viewed the Étaples camp as “an enclosure where animals are left for several days before the final carnage”, expressed this feeling, speaking of the blind look in the eyes of his fellow men, “expressionless, like a dead rabbit”. The Bull Ring was the scene of every kind of bullying and insult on a daily basis. “I was wounded twice but that was nothing compared with what I went through in Étaples”, wrote one veteran. “To tell the truth, I had experiences in Étaples that were as bad as those at the front”, another added, “but nowhere did I feel such a strong sense of anger”. A sentiment that was even more legitimate given that the instructors who were putting them through so much had never set foot in the trenches themselves.