



Lady Dorothea Mary Evelyn Feilding (1889-1935)

"The awful thing was that when you had got your wounded away from the lines, there was nowhere to take them. The hospital . . . could only take in the practically dying men . . . Please God I shall never see men suffer in conditions like that again"

The second daughter of the ninth earl of Denbigh, Lady Dorothe Feilding was one of the most decorated ambulance drivers of the First World War; she was awarded the British Military Medal, the French Croix de Guerre and was made a Knight of the Belgian Order of Leopold II.

Her father had been a Government Whip in the House of Lords but he was a military man through and through and that sense of patriotic duty passed down to his children: three of Dorothe's sisters and all of her brothers were to serve in the war alongside her.

On 25th September 1914, a few weeks short of her 25th birthday, Dorothe arrived in France as part of Dr Hector Munro's Ambulance Corps, charged with ferrying wounded soldiers from the frontline to clearing hospitals. Her early letters home are full of the excitement of a French holiday:

"Everything here most peaceful & not a bit war-like. The sea full of submarines yesterday. Looked chilly work – poor beggars . . . Don't worry about me. No kind of danger"

She was to stay at the Front in Flanders on and off until June 1917 and the brutality and horror of the war soon became apparent. After the Battle of Yser in October 1914 she commented:

"The town and villages and farms around were burning. The glare helped you to see at night but sometimes it looked like hell, with the flames curling and leaping up in the darkness and the crash as the houses fell in had something awful about it . . . I just had to drive through as quick as I could and how the tyres didn't get cut to blazes by glass or burnt by embers oftener than they did I cannot understand."

On New Year's Eve 1914, the French Admiral Ronarc'h published a special Order of the Day commending Dorothe for "showing, almost every day, the finest example of devotion and of disregard for danger". For this, she would later be awarded the Croix de Guerre and in early 1915, the Order of Leopold II. In August 1915, she modestly writes to her father about the awards:

"The Admiral said some very nice and touching things to me when he gave it me, and said it was the one gave him most pleasure to give of them all because it was genuinely deserved. Nice of him wasn't it? . . . The cross is a nice little bronze one with crossed swords and not gaudy like the Belgian order"

In 1916, she was also the first woman to be awarded the Military Medal, a decoration which had only been established in March of that year. In recommending the award, a British commander noted that:

"Lady Dorothe Feilding was thus frequently exposed to risks which probably no other woman has undergone. She has always displayed a devotion to duty and contempt of danger which has been a source of admiration to all"

The King himself presented her with the medal at Windsor Castle on 6th September 1916.

Before then, however, life at the Front had already taken its toll. Her brother Hughie was killed in May 1916 during the Battle of Jutland and "the sadness of it all worked its way into my very soul". By 1915, after her first year in Flanders, Dorothe's health had been in such a poor state that she had returned home for two months' leave. In her letters leading up to this time, she admits to her family how greatly she was affected by what she had witnessed:

"It's quaint little ways men have of showing their gratitude that often give me a lump in my throat. Sometimes it is the letters they write you afterwards. Sometimes it is just a hot and crumpled bunch of flowers . . . Often it has been the mute thanks in a man's eyes as his life ebbs away"

Brought up a devout Roman Catholic, her experiences at the Front meant she lost faith in an afterlife: ("Seeing the suddenness and completeness of death so often and so very close to one, somehow does away with the whole theory of a future of any kind") and by June 1917, Dorothea could take no more:

"I am feeling so small & stormtossed, I couldn't bear any more just yet. I need just a little bit of peace and happiness so badly Mother darling. Now I seem just to have crumpled up and I couldn't stand any more just for a little while"

That 'peace and happiness' came in the shape of Captain Charles Moore of the Irish Guards, and on 5th July 1917 they married in England. Although Dorothea did not return to the Front, she resumed her service, ferrying the wounded across London, "I had got tired of being merely ornamental". By the War's end, another brother, Henry, had died of his wounds in Flanders and her husband Charles was discharged with the Military Cross.

Dorothea and Charles went on to have five children and lived mostly in his family home, Mooresfoot House in Southern Tipperary. She became actively involved in the British Legion and was President of the Tipperary Jubilee Association. She died in 1935, aged just 46, of heart failure.

After Armistice Day, 11th November 1918, Dorothea had written to her mother:

"I couldn't bear to hear the people laughing and clapping yesterday. One was so haunted by the memories of those dear boys who have gone. But Mother dear, thank God that supreme sacrifice was not for nothing as I have feared it would be"

Bibliography

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