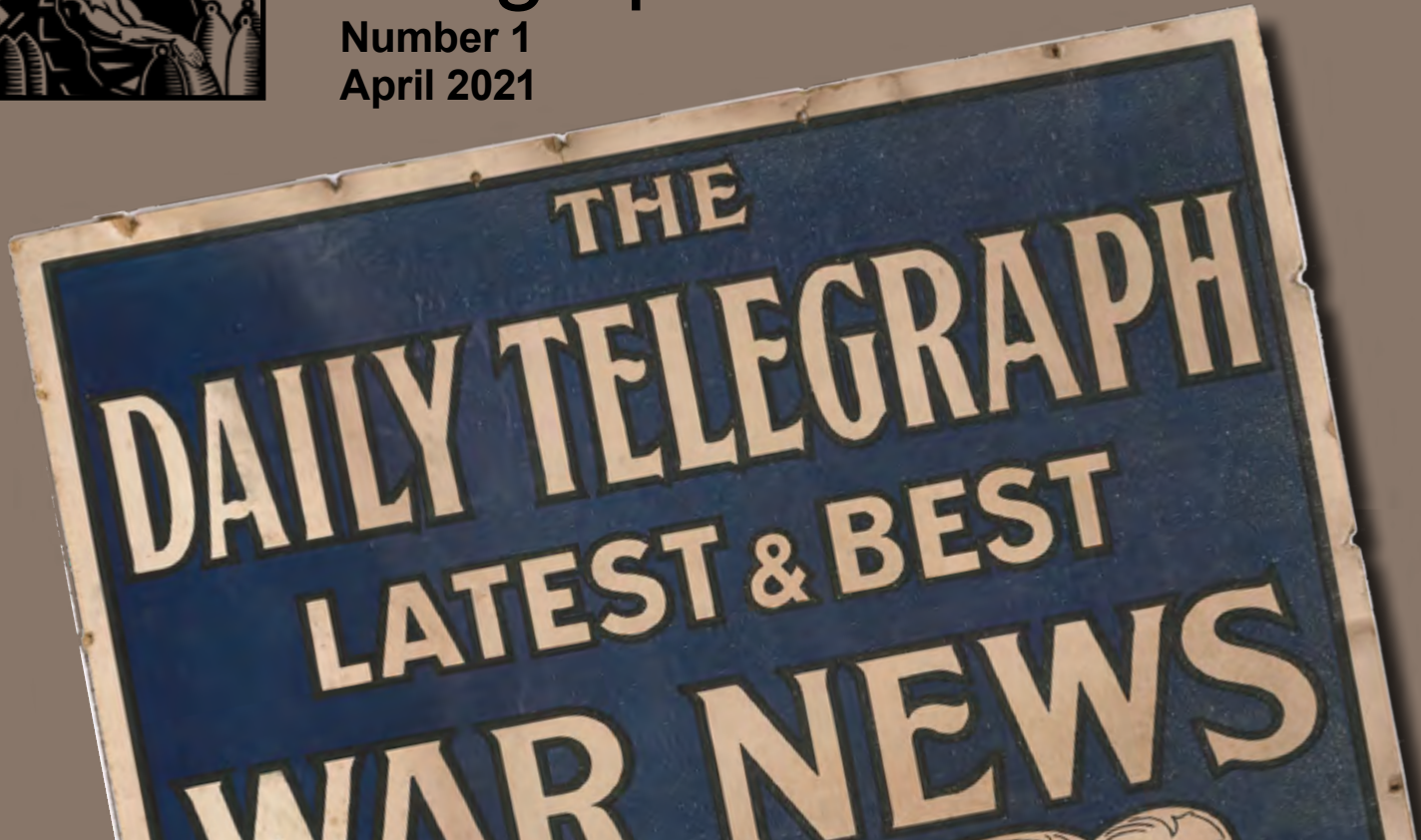




TurnerDonovan Telegraph

Number 1
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TurnerDonovan Telegraph Number 1, April 2021

The *TurnerDonovan Telegraph* is intended to be a forum for military book collectors to share their thoughts and experiences, and sometimes to showcase particular items or genres.

This long-awaited first issue is something of an exception. It contains the amusing story of the escapades of an Australian Divisional Concert Party in March 1918, to hopefully provide some light relief during the exceedingly trying times in which we find ourselves.

The second issue (in preparation) will contain a major survey by **Peter T. Scott** of exiled anti-Nazi Germans in Great Britain during WW2 and their literary output, alongside a catalogue of the printed works which emanated from the firm Inside Nazi Germany (I.N.G.) Publications, and associated material.

For the third issue **Larry Tritle**, Professor Emeritus of History at Loyola Marymount University in LA, and Vietnam veteran, contributes his thoughts on trauma, its psychological effects and its expression in literature in works ranging (generally) over The Great War and the Vietnam War.

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Tom Donovan is a specialist military historian, bookseller, publisher, writer and speaker with nearly forty years professional experience in several publishing and bookselling enterprises. His company, TurnerDonovan Military Books, is the world’s leading second hand and antiquarian military booksellers specialising in British military history from around 1800 to post-WW2. His particular specialities include the Great War, 1914-1918, India and the Indian Army. He is the author of several books and numerous articles on aspects of First World War and/or Indian Army history.

“The Digger Cinemas”

by Pte. Vivian Brahms, 42nd AIF

Introduction

Nielles-lès-Bléquin – a little village some twenty kilometres inland from Boulogne – was the scene of the story about to be related.

This account would probably have been written sooner, had not the ever present vague fear of the Censor’s searching eye – his inexhaustible blue pencil – and his inexorable mutilations, prevented during the War, the committal to writing of these hitherto unknown exploits in the Australian Annals of the Great War.

Although seemingly incredible the facts contained herein are perfectly true.

The Divisional Concert Party

The Spring of 1918 had just opened, and with it came the long expected German push. All Australian troops in the Northern districts of France were hastily despatched to the Somme with the exception of a small party of some thirty Diggers, who formed one of the Divisional Concert Parties.

In the hasty forward rush of the Australian Army to prevent Amiens falling into the hands of the Germans, Divisional Head Quarters had apparently forgotten the existence of this Concert Party – the members of which were for the time being, left to their own devices to fill in time as best they could.

They visited the estaminets (wine shops) in the village and vicinity and sampled the various blends of bière – vin blanc and cognac once, twice and thrice, until all available francs (silver money) had become extinct. The surrounding country was explored – Lovers of “Beauties” both scenic and human found plenty of either to suit their particular tastes. All military lorries and transport had by now completely disappeared from the highways in these parts. The dust upon the roads leading to adjacent villages became mixed with a large portion of powdered Australian boot leather, as “padding the hoof” had become the only means of transit, with the exception of a goods train that ran through at odd times from Boulogne to Lumbres.

The entire Australian Corps having been by this time removed to the Somme Region, the presence of any soldier in the well known turned up Felt Hat was looked upon with suspicion. On more than one occasion members of the Concert Party were bailed up when sent to Lumbres for rations by some zealous Tommy on the look out for deserters.

No letters or authentic news ever reached them, excepting what could be gleaned from the Paris edition of the London *Daily Mail*, from the columns of which all that could be gathered was that “the Censors were working overtime.” Being thus completely cut off from the outside military world the members of the Concert Party lived in the tranquility of the barns and cattle sheds of farmhouses – whilst the fiercest struggle in the World’s History of warfare was taking place.

Desultory rehearsals occupied a few hours some days, and once or twice the villagers were entertained with music and song. Most of the inhabitants had never seen any form of entertainment other than a Military Picture Show, which they termed a “Cinema,” hence a performance of any kind was called by them “Cinema” and knowing no other, they gave to each member of the Concert Party the name of “Cinema.”

Disconcerting News

Suddenly, in the midst of this serenity, came a bolt from the blue. The officer in charge confidentially informed the party that telegraphic communications to the coast-bases were being constantly cut and tampered with in their vicinity – further grave news was imparted: that many German prisoners had escaped from the neighbouring Cage at St Omer – and were probably living disguised as Tommies or French civilians, close at hand in the surrounding woods. Mysterious motor cars had been reported on the roads, and enemy aircraft were supposed to be dropping spies during the night. The locality was one that would have been dear to the heart of any fugitive, hidden as it was from main thoroughfares. The dense woods well stocked with rabbits and birds, and the lonely farmhouses scattered here and there would have provided him with ample sustenance. A single railway track ran through nearby. This track had suddenly become one of the principal lines of communication owing to other routes having been cut by the advancing enemy.

The personnel of the Concert Party was of a most heterogeneous character – the members having been selected for their artistic abilities without regard to unit or rank. Hence Infantry, Artillery, Army Medical Corps, Motor Transport, Engineers, Army Service Corps,

Machine Gunners and so forth were all intermingled. A good deal of the usual military discipline which was part and parcel of the daily routine in the units had been gradually relaxed until it came to be almost entirely dispensed with in the ranks of the Concert Party.

A Spy Hunt

On April 1st (a most appropriate day) a Spy Hunt was organised. It was also decided to place a guard at the village crossroads to stop and interrogate unknown pedestrians and strangers travelling by motor car or any other vehicle.

The Spy Hunt was unfortunately a fiasco – run as it was, on the lines of a Keystone Comedy.

Before starting on the Quest for Spies some of the Party, drawn from the Army Medical Corps, flatly refused to carry weapons of any description as being contrary to the Geneva Convention. They however, raised no objection to doing a little secret service work in Wine Shops or Egg and Chip joints.

In a very short space of time the entire village became aware of the forthcoming search and the inhabitants turned out en masse to witness the “Cinemas” start upon their hunt for “Espions” (Spies). At midday and in brilliant sunshine they set out upon the “secret” search, which by

now had become the main topic of conversation among the villagers.

Across the open fields the party advanced in full view to any fugitive lurking among the clusters of trees upon the surrounding heights.

At length the wood was reached with everybody on the alert. Rifles cocked and loaded. Suddenly the stillness was broken. A rifle shot rang out. Instantly everybody made for the direction from which the report came, and there upon the ground, bleeding from a gaping wound, his whiskers of apparently many weeks growth giving him a weird appearance, lay a Billy Goat – whose sudden appearance had made a nervy violinist touch the trigger, thus sending poor Billy to glory.

Further progress was made into the interior of the wood. Silently and more cautiously now. Presently, above the rustling of the leaves could be heard a steady tap-tap-tap. Too regular and continuous to be natural. Redoubling caution, all crawled towards the “noise.” At last the cause of it was discovered. Chipping off the branches of the trees was a man with an axe. Had it not been for the huge piles of firewood that were stacked around him, he would certainly have been arrested upon suspicion. He was spoken to in Digger French, which he possibly understood, but if he did, nobody could

understand what it was he said in reply; however, it sounded like French so he was allowed his liberty.

Then the railway line was patrolled, and there no signs of human beings could be discovered. A small gate-house stood in a particularly solitary part. A massive canine of the bull dog species barked and growled ferociously at the searchers. He strained at his chain to such an extent as to make them all remember that "A chain is only as strong as its weakest link." A dog such as this, coupled with the fact, the man and woman living there were of a morose disposition, and furthermore that it was rumoured they were abroad early in the morning and sometimes burnt a light at night, all seemed very suspicious.

It was, therefore, decided to pay them a nocturnal visit at a future date, and catch them on the hop. This was subsequently attempted, but the bull dog started to bark and growl immediately the party approached the neighbourhood, giving any suspect refugee ample time to clear almost as far away as Paris before the spy hunters got anywhere near the building.

When the return to Billets was made, another suspect was encountered on the way. He was wearing the ill-fitting tunic of a Tommy Labour Battalion, his puttees wound round the dirty looking khaki pants, in a slovenly

manner. He was unkempt and unshaven. A decidedly suspicious looking person. The foremost of the party was about to interrogate him, when the suspect got in first with "Good-day Auzzie, do yer'appen to 'ave a Woodboine abaht yer?" That was enough! He was given a "Capstan" and allowed to go on his way rejoicing.

The Mystery of the Motor Cars

The traffic guard was then detailed. It was a brilliant conception, so arranged as to enable everybody to be comfortably settled down in billets every night at a little after nine o'clock, thus giving persons of a spylike disposition ample time to perform their missions without interference. During the night-time, which was often weird and uncanny, the dogs belonging to the Chateau (castle) howled and barked intermittently, sometimes dismally, sometimes furiously, creating the impression that nocturnal visitors were prowling about the grounds. Later on, when the silence was broken only by the sonorous breathing of their comrades, the more restless could distinctly hear the throbbing of an engine in the distance, rapidly growing nearer and nearer, until it was unmistakably recognised to be that of a motor car or lorry passing through the village. The early morning revealed in the soft mud of the roadway, the newly made tracks of motor car tyres. It was indeed very mysterious, for remarkable as it may appear (with one

exception only) no motor traffic was ever seen by the traffic guard, which was posted once daily at 7 o'clock at night, and relieved two hours later. To say the guard was relieved is not quite exact: It simply turned in the job, when the specified two hours were considered to have transpired. The exception mentioned was the stopping of a French Doctor when on his way to an urgent case. His astonishment was great at finding himself called upon to "Halt" by armed Australians in this outwardly peaceful hamlet. Fortunately for his patient the doctor was able to produce some unintelligible document written in French, which he explained was a Passport for himself and car. Thus again were the "Cinemas" prevented from achieving the fame that was constantly eluding them.

Miraculous Escapes

Owing to the men from the Army Service Corps and Motor Transport having become unfamiliar with rifles, many accidents from bullet wounds were narrowly averted. On one occasion a rifle was in the hands of a lorry driver, being cleaned. He had failed to extract the cartridges from the magazine; consequently when he touched the trigger a bullet instantly whizzed down the hut where the Party was congregated, passing clean through the wood-work at the end, finishing its career among the pigs in an adjoining sty, doing damage, miraculously, to neither man nor beast.

On the Track of a Spy

It was this lorry driver's turn to go on traffic guard that night. He was a robust tenor – well built and tall. For his companion on duty, he had the smallest man in the troupe – a comedian when on the stage, but who, when doing military duties, took life rather seriously. He was particularly intent upon winning at least a Military Medal for the apprehension of an escaped German or spy. At seven o'clock they took their stand at the cross-roads. There was no dirty work although the weather was of that calibre. A cold rain was falling – no motor cars hove into sight. Pedestrians even were "Napoo." After one hour of misery had passed, the monotony became unbearable. Close by was a cosy estaminet, where hot coffee (avec rum) could be obtained for "huit sous" (fourpence) and a nice mademoiselle to talk to. When seated at the table facing the window the cross-roads were quite open to the view. It was far preferable to standing in the rain. The call of the estaminet was too powerful to be withstood. After several "café rums" had been placed carefully and lovingly away, two awe stricken faces appeared at the doorway – they belonged to the Second Violinist and the 'Cello player – obviously they had some important news to impart: "Don't speak out loud" whispered one – "we are on the track of a Bosche."

“Where is he?” they were asked.

“In this room!” was the astonishing reply – “don’t let him see you looking at him – he’s seated at the table behind.”

In a few moments they explained how, when in a wine shop at the other end of the village, this man had come in – asked for a drink – and demanded a bed. Naturally he was asked a few questions, but his replies were unsatisfactory. Nobody had seen him before – he was a complete stranger. Being refused a bed he thereupon set out to try his luck elsewhere.

They had been told by the Froggies (as the Villagers were affectionately termed) that the French he spoke was bad and was scarcely intelligible to them.

As the violinist could talk a bit of the lingo, he was made interpreter, and instructed to interrogate the Bosche, and demand his Passport, whilst the Sentries stood at either exit to bar his escape in the event of him bolting. The violin player soon returned stating that the man was alright. He could produce no Passport, but carried a French discharged soldiers book, which the suspect said was just as good as a Passport. His French (so the Interpreter said) was peculiar, but “HE” could understand it. A few minutes later the Estaminet madam called the guard and warned them against this man, whom she

was certain was a German. There being no means of proving it one way or the other, a messenger was despatched to the Mayor of the village with instructions to bring him to the Estaminet “at the toot” (immediately).

The Village Mayor

The mayor arrived. He was just an ordinary French farmer, but being the owner of the largest of the small farms in the village, he was given the title of “Monsieur le Maire” and his farm was called “Le Mairie.” Most of the French farms are laid out in three sides of a square. The centre portion being usually occupied as the living quarters, with the stables, pig styes and barns on either side. The most important feature of all is the manure heap, around which the farm is built. The larger the heap, the more affluent the farmer; hence the manure heap and the smell outside the “Mairie” were the biggest in all the village.

After a brief interval the mayor came out. As he did not speak English what he said in answer to enquiries was somewhat vague.

Digger: “Is he a German” he was asked.

Mayor: “Perhaps” he replied.

D: “Does he speak French?”

M: "Ah oui (yes) but not good".

D: "Do you think he is a spy?"

M: "Perhaps"

D: "Has he a passport."

M: "Non"

D: "Should he have a passport?"

M: "Oui certainement"

D: "Shall we arrest him?"

M: "If you like"

D: "Do you want us to arrest him?"

M: "Ça ne faire rien" (it doesn't matter to me)

D: "Do you suspect him?"

M: "Oui certainement! He is no bonne"

D: "Should you not arrest him for not having Passport?"

M: "Me? Why? Non it is for you"

D: "If we arrest him where could we keep him?"

M: "Je ne sais pas" (I don't know) at the same time handing over a large rusty key.

D: "What is this for?"

M: "It is the key of the village prison – I will send a messenger with you to show you where it is."

The Detention

The Bosche was thereupon apprehended – It was explained to him that he was not being arrested, but only detained until the "Officer in charge" was found.

He was told – "Perhaps you bonne – Perhaps you no bonne – if you want promenade it is necessary you have Passport. Compree? You no passport, we can no let you promenade."

The Bosche laughed. "You very humourous" he was understood to say. "You très drôle (very funny men). It is a good joke."

The news had spread to the outskirts of the hamlet. Everybody had turned out, and shouted on every side could be heard: "Les Cinemas ont attrapé un espion." (The concert party has caught a spy.)

And the spy called out to the crowd:

“Me no bosche! Me français, Ha'. ha'. ha'. Très drôle'.
Très drôle!”

So far he had not been placed under arrest. (No member of the concert party cared to take responsibility for such a step.) The crowd was assuming large proportions. Some of the women seemed threatening towards the man whom they called “sale bosche” (dirty German). The night was dark, and it was feared he might either make his escape or be lynched by the crowd.

The Gendarme

Then one of the Concert Party had a brilliant idea. “Why not take him to the village gendarme (policeman) and let him make the arrest.” The man thereupon was taken through the village to the Gendarme’s residence. Up came that sought for individual, dressed in military uniform and cap. The facts of the case were explained in Digger French in the following manner:

“Him stranger in village – him no parlez bon français – him no have passport. Peut-être him spy – M’sieur le Maire give key of prison.”

“Bien!” (good) replied the gendarme. “Why do you not put him in the prison?”

“Because – perhaps him Civil (civilian). We have brought him to you to make prisoner..”

“To Me? Pourquoi (why) to me?”

“Because you gendarme.”

“Non-non messieurs – it is not possible.”

“What! Not possible for a gendarme to take him in charge?”

“Non messieurs – me take letters but cannot take prisoners – me no gendarme – me postman.”

The Prison

There being no other course left open, the spy was taken to the prison. This prison turned out to be a small wooden shed, large enough to accommodate a fair sized cow. It was furnished with a small amount of dirty straw scattered upon a wooden bunk. The spy remonstrated against entering its portals – A long stream of verbosity issued from his lips, only snatches of which were at all comprehensible: “Me no pig – me no rest here in pig stye – me plenty money – me sleep in bed in estaminet.”

It was without avail that he was assured of plenty blankets and plenty manger (something to eat) if he would only be a good spy and go into his nice prison.

He was obdurate and persuasion was useless.

The Superior Officer

All at once another of the Party came on the scene. He was a corporal of the Army Medical Corps – one of the men who had volunteered to do detective work in the wine shops. He had evidently been doing a considerable amount of stocktaking, which caused him some difficulty in comprehending the narratives given to him by the sentries, the Mayor’s messenger, the excited villagers, and the Postman. He was, however, the only man in the crowd holding rank, and his words were waited with bated breath. At last he seemed to have collected his thoughts:

“Is he a Bosche?” he asked.

“We don’t know for certain, but they say in the village that he’s a stranger – can’t speak French – looks like a German, and has no passport.”

“What” hiccuped the corporal – “Has no passport?”

“No. What shall we do with him?”

“Do with him?” (hic) “Do with him?” (hic) “Why clink the cow.”

The Arrest

In the space of a moment both sentries had their bayonets at the ‘ready,’ with one word “Entrez” (enter) the spy was compelled into the prison to await the coming of the officer in charge of the Concert Party.

When at length the officer arrived upon the scene he had the prisoner searched and his money taken from him. He had a murderous looking knife in his hip pocket, several small files and a few tools that looked like wire cutters, some pieces of metal, some clock works probably used for infernal machines, a dozen watch glasses, a half empty bottle of wine, and a large loaf of bread. When stripped he was found to be a fine type of manhood, a decidedly ugly customer to meet in the dark without a rifle.

“Rewards and Distinctions”

The officer considered that the traffic sentries had done well in apprehending him and allowed the two who were responsible for the arrest to depart to their billets to enjoy a night of well earned repose, and to dream of military decorations, Blighty leave and large sums of money to be bestowed on them, by the grateful heads of the army.

Whilst they slept the remainder of the party were detailed for a guard around the prison, a duty which was made

none the more pleasant by the rain, which fell in torrents through the night. Many were the curses heaped upon the heads of the original captors, by their unfortunate companions on duty out in the open, without cover of any sort. It was not to be wondered at that some of them shared the captives dungeon with him rather than remain on guard outside in the falling deluge.

The night passed without mishap, and morning found the spy sleeping peacefully. He was given a good breakfast of “maconochie” stew, which he greatly enjoyed. He was by now so reconciled to his new apartment that he seemed to have no wish to leave it, but a couple of bayonets under his nose reminded him that there was more to follow.

The March to British Area Commandant's

The distance to the Area Commandant's quarters at Lumbres was eleven kilometres.

An escort was furnished which got well away from the village with their prisoner before the inhabitants had time to assemble in force. The few that were about, including the Postman, gave the Cinemas many cheers, and then began the long march to Lumbres.

The tramp, tramp, tramp, of the three pairs of feet continued until the village of Affringues was entered.

The news of the capture had evidently spread in the night, for the one street was lined with a gaping crowd of Madames, Messieurs, Mademoiselles, petite filles and garçons. The one phrase being constantly repeated: “The Cinemas have captured a spy.”

The hospitable country folk poured out “vin rouge” (red wine) for the escort, whilst the captive received from them only looks of hatred, and the words “Sale Bosche.” The escort however, shared their wine with the prisoner, and departed from the village later – amidst cheers.

The Examination

At last they reached the town of Lumbres and in little time the party presented itself at the Area Commandant's chateau. They were received by a Tommy Lance Corporal who reported to the Corporal. The Corporal brought the Sergeant – the Sergeant sent for the Sergeant Major, who brought along a subaltern, and he in his turn was followed by an officer of the staff, and so on and on until after much delay, word was brought that the Commandant was ready to receive the party. The facts of the case having been duly communicated, the official interpreter was sent for, and the prisoner subjected to a searching examination.

It was elicited that he was a native of a distant district in France, where a patois (dialect) is spoken. These French

dialects are so varied that it frequently happens they are not intelligible to uneducated peasants of another district speaking a different patois.

His means of livelihood was that of an itinerant watch and clock repairer, hence the tools in his possession. That he was a discharged soldier was proved by his old pay book – his name and description tallied exactly. Finally it was decided the prisoner was not of any military importance whatsoever, and the escort was told to report back to their officer.

The Cinemas Come a Thud

“One moment!” hesitated one of the staff, “You can take him to the Gendarmerie down the street; perhaps they will furnish him with a Passport, and this will prevent any further unnecessary arrests.”

At these words all visions of rewards, Blighty leave and military honours departed from the minds of the escort. They had come a big crash, and were somewhat despondent. The captive, on the contrary, was greatly elated, laughing and much enjoying his captors discomfiture. “Me tell you no Bosch” said he “Me no espion Ha! Ha! Ha! Très drôle, très drôle – me finish with you now – Good-day – Adieu.”

He was, however, much chagrined at his captors’ determination not to set him free, and he became visibly more agitated as they drew nearer to the Gendarmerie (police station).

The Reception by the French Police

At length the party stood in the Courtyard. The French police were surprised to see two Australian soldiers in charge of a civilian and interrogated them:

“Your prisoner – who is he?”

“You bring him here? Pourquoi?”

The first escort replied “Voo compree passport?”

“Oui M’sieur.”

“Him avez no passport – passport napoo.”

The unfortunate Frenchman was again subjected to a close examination, and his Army book re-examined. His description was found to tally exactly with the records at the Gendarmerie: His identity was established beyond the shadow of a doubt. At the conclusion of the examination the chief of the gendarmes congratulated the two Diggers upon their magnificent capture. The pair by now completely crestfallen and not fully understanding all that had transpired, were feeling

the humiliation of the apparent sarcasm of these congratulations.

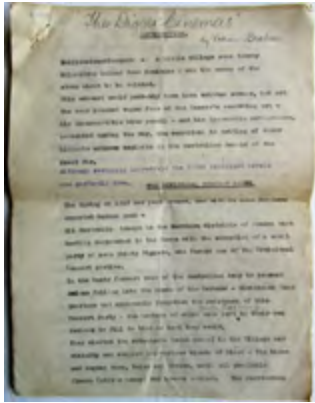
It added to their confusion when the enthusiastic chief warmly embraced them.

“Ah! You marvellous Australians” he said – “You not only perform wonders on the Battlefield – you make many of the Bosche’s prisoners and now you restore to us one whom we have vainly sought during many months past.

“He is, messieurs, a bad criminal – he has achieved 33 convictions, he has made his escape from prison some time ago. Convey – if you please – to your Officer and comrades, for his safe return to us, the many many thanks of the Gendarmerie de la République Française.”

For Sale

1. BRAHMS (1879 Pte. Vivian, 42th Bn. AIF) The Digger Cinemas.



Until now unpublished 17pp. carbon typescript, some 3700 words, titled in pencil & signed in ink by the author., incorporating his minor text annotations & corrections.

Vivian Brahms, an English-born Jewish soldier, enlisted in Dec. 1915, at which time he was 5 ft. 2 inches tall, lived in Brisbane & was a 38 year old draper. He sailed

for France on 1st May 1916 with the 3rd reinforcement to the 47th Bn. AIF but was posted to the 42nd Bn. in England & landed in France with it in Nov. 1916, serving on the strength until posted to the 44th Bn. in Dec. 1918, shortly before returning to Australia. He was Hon. Sec. of the 42nd Bn. Association & authored the battalion history published in Brisbane in 1938, but his service overseas was partly spent with the 3rd Australian Divisional

Concert Party. When the German Spring Offensive of 1918 commenced the Division was "hastily despatched to the Somme with the exception of a small party of some thirty Diggers, who formed one of the Divisional Concert parties." This party was left behind at Neilles-lez-Blecquin, about 20 kilometers inland from Boulogne. "In the hasty forward rush... Divisional HQ had apparently forgotten the existence of this Concert Party - the members of which were for the time being left to their own devices to fill in time as best they could" until caught up in the comical spy-hunt as described in this issue of the TurnerDonovan Telegraph. [Ref: 62153] **£225**

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