

From Mons to Loos

Being the Diary of a
Supply Officer

BY

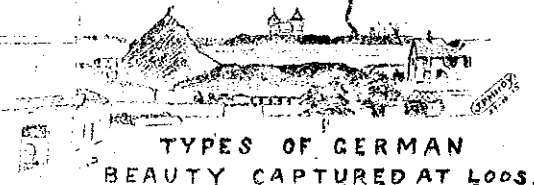
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ARMY SERVICE CORPS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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TYPES OF GERMAN
BEAUTY CAPTURED AT LOOS.

shoulders rested the responsibility for maintaining the Army, supplying its every need, preserving its efficiency, increasing its strength, alleviating its suffering.

At last, to the inexpressible relief of all, the winter, with its incessant rain pouring into an ocean of mud, gave place to a dry and sunny spring. The trees and hedges blossomed into green, and the soaked earth rose from the waters to life and brightness.

The spring brought not only fresh life to the earth, but new hopes to us for a successful campaign in the summer.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SECOND NEUVE CHAPELLE, AND THE SECOND YPRES.

As soon as the fine weather was ushered in, operations of an active nature were undertaken at various points along the whole Western Front, and during March, April, and May very severe battles were fought opposite both flanks of the British line. In these battles the fighting was of the most desperate character.

In the southern sector of the British front Neuve Chapelle was the first objective. This village had been in possession of the enemy since October.

The plan of attack was worked out by the Army Staff with great thoroughness and in the most minute detail.

A battle has often been compared to a great game of chess, in which the players are the commanders on each side, and the

pieces are battalions, batteries, and Divisions. To look at a General Staff map with the positions of the various units shown upon it heightens this impression, and operation orders detailing the movement of troops from one square to another farther on which is the next objective, convey the idea of a skilful player moving his pieces on the chess-board. The enemy's probable dispositions, as progress is made, are taken into consideration in the same manner as the player endeavours to counter a probable move by his opponent in the game.

The attack commenced with a bombardment of the German position at 7.30 A.M. on the 10th March, and as the first shell sang its dirge over the heads of the waiting thousands of men, many eyes glanced upwards, as if to follow the trail of the iron missile speeding through the air. As soon as the range had been accurately secured, a tremendous fire was opened on the village of Neuve Chapelle and the neighbouring trenches occupied by the enemy.

Neuve Chapelle was part of the German line and strongly defended. The inhabitants had long since deserted their homes. During the previous bombardment in

October the village had suffered severely: now the artillery fire was more intense, and from a greater number of big-calibre guns. Under this hail of flying metal, the village, the neighbouring trenches, and the whole German position selected for attack were blotted from sight under a pall of smoke and dust. The earth shook and the air was filled with the thunderous roar of the exploding shells. To the watching thousands the sight was a terrible one: amidst the clouds of smoke and dust they could see human bodies with earth and rock, portions of houses, and fragments of trench hurtling through the air. The shell fire was intended not merely to destroy the enemy's entrenchments and their defenders, but also to break up all obstacles, such as wire entanglements and walls, which might check or arrest the forward movement of the attacking troops. There is little doubt that the Germans were taken entirely by surprise by the concentration and severity of the artillery fire to which they were subjected.

As soon as the bombardment ceased the assaulting infantry dashed forward with great *élan*, a living wave of men, against the enemy's emplacements.

In and around Neuve Chapelle the artillery had done its work well. The majority of the defenders had been killed, and were lying buried beneath the *debris* of the shattered houses.

Wherever the work of the artillery had been complete our troops met with little resistance. Those of the enemy who had not been killed were stunned, deafened, and stupefied by the hideous clamour and awful upheavals of the high-explosive shells; a few were even bereft of reason, all were incapable of resistance. The barbed-wire entanglements and all obstructions had been torn up and cut to pieces, offering no further obstacle to our infantry.

In other places the work of the artillery had been ineffective; whether this was due to insufficient ammunition or incomplete concentration of fire, or to one of those mischances of war which no man can foresee, it is impossible to say. As a result, however, the attacking troops were held up by strong barbed-wire entanglements, and in one place by a single brick wall, loopholed and fortified.

Here the enemy, safe in his untouched and strong defences, opened a tremendous rifle and machine-gun fire upon our infantry,



Neuve Chapelle.

struggling painfully to cut their way through the wire which was pegged over the ground like a huge net. Caught in the fatal meshes, our gallant fellows melted away before the withering storm of rifle bullets. In a moment hundreds of casualties strewed the ground.

The struggle continued by day and night during the 11th and 12th. As each position was gained trenches were dug and the new line consolidated. The enemy brought up fresh troops and launched the most desperate counter-attacks against our new line. These were all beaten off with immense loss to the enemy. One such counter-attack was made through the Bois de Biez. A solid mass of men debouched from the trees, led by their officers, two of whom were mounted on horseback and headed the charge with drawn swords, as in the battles of a century ago. Such courage compels admiration, but it is madness in the face of modern rifles and machine-guns. A murderous fire met the advancing German infantry, and in a few seconds that column of living men was but a heap of dead or writhing bodies, a sight so appalling as to sicken even the hardened soldiers who had seen eight months of slaughter.

The village of Neuve Chapelle was once

again in British possession, though little semblance of a village remained. The one main street was strewn with *débris* of all kinds and the houses on each side were gaunt and shattered skeletons. Of the church but a fragment of the porch survived, while the houses which once had clustered round it were now a confused mass of wreckage. The cemetery presented a terrible spectacle, even the graves had been plucked open and the dead uprooted. Tombstones, artificial wreaths, the cemetery walls, and the trees within the enclosure, in splintered fragments strewed the ground. A few isolated graves, with cheap little wooden crosses and the big crucifix in the churchyard alone escaped the hurricane. It was nothing short of wonderful that so prominent an object as the great wooden cross, with its representation of the crucifixion, should have been untouched by the storm of shells, when all around had been levelled in a pile of wreckage to the ground.

Around the village the country presented a scene of indescribable desolation, mournful to a degree.

Measured by the standard of this colossal war Neuve Chapelle is but a minor engagement, yet our casualties in the fight

were nearly double those sustained by the purely British troops at Waterloo.

In return for the toll of human life two valuable lessons were learned. Firstly, that given sufficient heavy guns and howitzers and an unlimited quantity of high-explosive shells, it is possible to blast one's way through any defended line, however strongly held; and conversely, that to attempt to break through an entrenched position without adequate artillery and ammunition is to invite costly failure. Secondly, that a line protected by good barbed-wire entanglements and defended by numerous machine-guns in concrete emplacements can be held successfully by a few men.

The wire entanglements and the machine-guns in protected shelters can only be destroyed by direct hits with high-explosive shells from heavy calibre howitzers. The ammunition must be in unlimited quantities, for it may take a hundred shells before the one direct hit on the machine-gun emplacement is recorded.

When the guns have fulfilled their *rôle* the infantry can dash forward and occupy the shell-riven position which a living enemy previously held.

In the northern sector the British left was

occupying much the same ground as had been fought for so stubbornly in November, while a French Division continued the line to the north.

The whole Allied front before the town of Ypres formed a very pronounced salient, rather more than a semicircle, with Ypres itself as the centre. The French front was along the northern half of this semicircle, covering the Ypres-Yser canal. On the fringe of the southern portion of the semicircle held by the British was Hill 60 and the little village of Saint Eloi, both in possession of the Germans. Hill 60, dignified by the name hill, is only a slight rise in the ground, sufficiently high, nevertheless, in such flat country, to give the enemy an excellent artillery observation post towards the British lines. Its capture was therefore deemed necessary.

The hill was mined, and on the evening of Saturday, the 17th April, the mine was fired. Two battalions then stormed the position under cover of a tremendous artillery fire, and occupied the hill without much resistance from its dazed defenders. No sooner, however, were our troops in complete possession than a deluge of shells from

numerous and powerful German guns was rained on our devoted infantry. Every inch of the surface of the hill was scarred and rent and the trenches blown to fragments. Under that awful hail our men suffered terribly. In spite of their sufferings, however, these splendid soldiers beat off attack after attack. Finally, reduced in numbers, dazed and stupefied by the continuous and terrible artillery fire, they were forced back to the edge of the reverse slope. Two fresh battalions were now flung into the fight. Storming the shot-scarred death-strewn hill, they forced the Germans back once more. Taking advantage of shell holes and scraping what cover they could, these magnificent fellows with their native tenacity clung to the hard-won hill. Though hell was bursting and cracking around them, though the very ground quaked beneath their feet and was flung into the air as if by miniature volcanoes by the explosions of the shells, with only such food and drink as could reach them at night, aching with fatigue and in constant and deadly peril, they beat off wave after wave of hostile infantry launched against them in ceaseless counter-attacks. The most desperate efforts of the enemy to

win back the lost position proved unavailing, and his dead strewed the slopes in countless numbers.

During the afternoon of the 22nd April, while the fight for Hill 60 was still raging, the Germans launched a most powerful attack on the northern sector of the Ypres salient held by the French Territorial Division. This attack had for its object the seizure of the Ypres-Yser canal, and the driving of a deep wedge between the British troops south of Ypres and the French and Belgians who prolonged the line northward to the sea. The attack also drew off attention and reinforcements from Hill 60, but this was only of secondary importance to the main purpose. The German attack north of Ypres was doubtless conceived and prepared long before the British attack on Hill 60 took place.

In this attack on the French Division a new and terrible death-dealing device was employed in defiance of the Hague Convention. One would have thought that the weapons of destruction already in use were surely complete enough for the taking of poor human life, without any additional terror.

How paltry and ineffectual are the efforts

of Peace Societies and Hague Conventions to check the horror or lessen the destructiveness of war! War is horror and destruction carried to extreme by the aid of every agency which the mind of man can devise. The Apostles of Peace rely for the observance of their nice conventions on the honour and decent feeling of peoples, but there always have been, and unfortunately always must be, people to whom honour has no meaning and whose sense of decency is lost in the desire for gain. To such people one argument alone appeals, and that is *Force*. And if the unrighteous be the stronger in this argument, then of what avail indeed are Hague Conventions?

Now with fiendish ingenuity the Germans let loose the new and perhaps deadliest weapon of war—poison gas—a weapon which deals death not swiftly and painlessly but with lingering agony.

The attack on the French Division was opened with a heavy artillery bombardment of their position, followed by a great yellow cloud of gas, which, with the wind behind it, rolled slowly over the ground into the trenches of our gallant allies. In a moment thousands of men were in the throes of

torment and rendered incapable of offering any resistance. Great numbers were soon reduced to a dying condition, while those who were able to move and avoid the gas were forced to abandon the position. After the gas had done its work, the German infantry advanced and occupied the trenches then tenanted by the dead and dying. In addition to the position many guns were lost, including some heavy British howitzers which were in action behind the French lines. Pressing on, the enemy finally reached the canal, crossed it, and occupied the villages of Steenstraate and Lizerne, thereby jeopardising the safety of the British force in the Ypres salient by threatening their rear and driving the point of a wedge between the British and Belgian armies. The Canadian Division, the new and untried troops of the greatest of British Dominions beyond the seas, were on the immediate right of the French. Mid the dark clouds of gas and the smoke and confusion of battle it was difficult for them to know the situation. Their left flank was dangerously exposed, and there was the prospect of their being cut off and overwhelmed. These glorious children of the Empire nevertheless were undaunted. Throwing back their left flank

they checked the oncoming legions of the Kaiser, and then in spite of a hurricane of shells counter-attacked the enemy. In one brilliant charge they recaptured the lost guns, but reduced in numbers and overborne by the enemy's artillery they were themselves in turn driven back.

Fresh British troops were now hurried to the scene from other portions of the line; the Lahore Division of the Indian Corps was lent from the 1st Army. As the fresh troops arrived they were thrust into the maelstrom of the conflict. By the 26th April reinforcements of French troops and a British Cavalry Division had also arrived and had been pushed into the fight. Day after day and night after night the German attacks continued—a volume of gas, a hurricane of shells, and wave after wave of men. The desperate struggle for Ypres in November was not more terrible than this, and the loss of human life was appalling. As for the Germans, they lost holocausts of men.

During these days of prolonged agony the battle raged along the front of the whole salient, from Steenstraate in the north, through St Julien to Hill 60 and St Eloi in the south. Time after time the British line was broken by a tornado of shells

and an avalanche of men, only to be restored on each occasion by desperate counter-attacks. The French most gallantly drove the Germans back beyond the canal and a new allied line was formed to the west of the original line. Over the ground, now strewn thickly with human bodies, the Germans pressed their attacks in the opening days of May, determined at whatever the cost to capture Ypres.

On the 5th May the gallant defenders of Hill 60 were overwhelmed by a cloud of gas, and the Germans following on, trampling over the countless bodies of friends and foes, remained the victors of that storm-blasted mound. Among the many heroic souls who died upon this fatal hill was a great friend of mine, Major George Walford of the Suffolk Regiment, then serving as Brigade-Major to the 83rd Brigade. A gallant soldier, a charming friend, in him England lost a young officer of great promise. He was shot through the head in the foremost trench while observing the enemy. What more noble death can there be than to give one's life for one's country?

On the 15th May the French, with the assistance of a British Cavalry Division, drove the Germans out of Steenstraate with

tremendous slaughter, over 2000 of the enemy's dead strewn the ground to the north and east of the village. A new line to the east of Ypres was then formed, which ran through Hooze and the chateau grounds. Of the white chateau itself, but a pile of rubbish now remained.

By the third week in May the fighting, which had been continuous for the past month, gradually subsided, with the exhaustion of the enemy, and Ypres still remained in our hands.

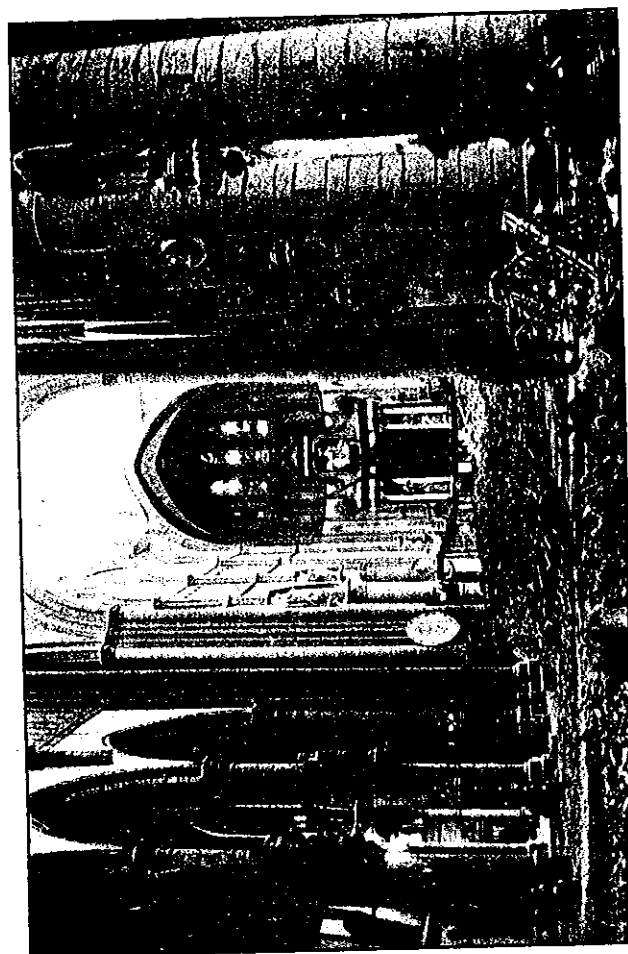
What the struggle for this town has cost in human life it is impossible to say, but Death has reaped a terrible harvest. Not only has the toll of human suffering been intense, but the town and the country for miles around, within the great semicircle of the salient, is blasted as if struck by some awful upheaval of nature. The chateau and the hamlet of Hooze and all the villages in the zone of the battle are utterly destroyed, and remain mere heaps of broken bricks and charred woodwork. In the woods round Hooze hardly a tree is whole, many are uprooted, while the jagged tops and lopped-off branches of thousands appear as if struck by lightning. The ground is littered with the bodies of the

slain, and spattered with the yellow stain of high explosive; everywhere the surface is pitted and furrowed as if by some giant plough. Here truly the Devil has been the ploughman and Death the reaper.

Of the historic old town of Ypres scarcely one stone now rests upon another, and as I stood in the Square, where lay the remains of the once famous Cloth Hall, and surveyed the mournful picture of ruin and desolation around, I felt that I should raise my hand to my cap and salute this mutilated corpse of what had once been a noble city. The Prussians had rained high explosive on Ypres till not a house remained whole—the majority were piles of smouldering, evil-smelling rubbish. Poor Ypres! once a city of princes, now a dust-heap! Sodom and Gomorrah, those cities of the Plain, were not more utterly destroyed. Had God's curse fallen too upon this city?

Near the remains of the Cloth Hall lay the ruins of the Cathedral, roofless, its floor strewn with a mass of *débris*—broken stone, bricks and smashed church furniture, the stone pillars scarred and notched by shell fire.

In all directions the town lay in ruins,



Cathedral at Ypres.

and in appearance resembled a locality that had suffered from a severe earthquake or volcanic eruption. Photographs which I remember of the ill-fated town of St Pierre, in the West Indies, after its destruction by the volcano Mount Pelé, in whose shadow it nestled, bore an astonishing similarity to the scene around me. Streets were still distinctly traceable by the huge ash-heaps along each side, but of houses no resemblance remained except portions of outside walls still standing here and there, jagged, broken, like the stumps of teeth in an old man's jaw, an ugly, horrible sight.

I wondered what had become of the inhabitants, many of whom had returned to Ypres in December and January. Did the bodies of helpless women and tiny children lie buried in this deserted ghost of a city? I wondered especially what fate had befallen my little acquaintance of the light step and brave heart who had befriended me the previous November. Her house had probably been one of the first to be reduced to ashes, as it stood at the top of the Menin road. I prayed that she and her father had escaped from the avalanche of shells.

As I stood in the heart of ancient Ypres

I dreamed a dream; and this was my dream. I—a representative of that great community of cultured nations which boasts in this twentieth century of its civilisation and the wonders of modern science—was standing amid the ruins watching a great multitude pass by, shades of the millions who had lived in Ypres in bygone ages. In that crowd rode merchant princes richly garbed, beautiful ladies in wonderful costumes carried along in litters; shopkeepers, soldiers, Spanish adventurers, apprentices, all looking sadly and wonderingly at the scene of desolation around. They stared at me as they passed by, but the first expression of interest which dawned on their faces as they beheld man of the twentieth century changed to the deepest scorn. They seemed to point to the ashes around and then glance at me. Was this the much-vaunted civilisation of my age, and was this how the wonders of modern science were applied?

I felt that I ought to stop that crowd and explain how civilisation had improved and spread since their day. But no, I dared not. I could see the scorn deepen on the faces of the women, and a glow of anger mount to the countenance of prince and shopkeeper as they surveyed the ruins of the

Cloth Hall which they had so lovingly erected. I could see the Spanish soldier furrow his brow and half draw his Toledo steel. "Go hence, Barbarian!" they seemed to shout: "compare not your boasted civilisation with the honour and chivalry of our time."

And I turned away and hung my head lest they should see the flush of shame upon my face.

They passed on, and on, and on, that multitude, countless as the stars in heaven. Where were they going? O God, not through those awful woods of Hooge?

I groaned in mental anguish. I could see those dainty ladies scream with fright, and cover their faces to blot out the terrible sights. I could see the soldiers pause in horror and then draw their swords and close round the women, to protect them from the unknown danger that seemed to lurk between the trees. I saw the cavalier twirl his moustaches as he looked with disgust to right and left.

The murmur of that throng filled my ears as I woke from my dream with a start.

The sun was shining in the heavens, and the murmur came from the engine of the car as it pulled up behind me. I smiled at the recollection of my dream; doubtless

there had been acts of barbarism and scenes of horror in that long vista of time which I had seen unrolled before me. Science has gained immeasurably in that period, but has civilisation made any appreciable improvement during those seven hundred years? I thought of the cavalier twirling his moustaches, and sadly shook my head. Was he, that ghost of man long dead, a whit less brave than the brave whose bodies he had seen in the woods of Hooge? No, he had faced his man in fair fight perchance a score of times, and killed him, but he would have scorned to mutilate, to poison with gas, or to blow to fragments a gallant foe.

In our modern craze for materialism we have lost that sensitiveness to honour which pricked and quickened the more delicate minds of our forefathers, while of the beautiful chivalry of bygone ages but a fleeting shadow now remains.

It has been a subject of discussion as to whether Ypres was destroyed in a deliberate spirit of wanton destructiveness or for military necessity. The destruction of the town is so complete, and appears to have been done so systematically, that there is little room to doubt that this historic old town was deliberately destroyed with the callous

disregard of the barbarian for ancient monuments or works of art. Unable to capture the old capital of Flanders, the Huns destroyed it in a spirit of vindictiveness.

While the second battle of Ypres was still in progress, an attack by the First Army was carried out farther south against that portion of the German position which extended from the Bois de Biez to Givenchy.

The bombardment of the enemy's trenches began at 5 A.M. on the 9th of May, and half an hour later the infantry assault was made. Several lines of German trenches and some fortified posts were rushed by our gallant troops, but the enemy's position was found to be stronger than had been anticipated. Though our artillery had done its work well, many of the enemy's machine-guns in their deep and well-protected shelters had managed to survive. These terrible weapons, advantageously posted and most skilfully handled, took heavy toll of the attacking troops, and in some cases rendered it impossible to hold the trenches which had been captured.

The battle continued during the 9th, 10th, and subsequent days. On the 19th the Highland Division and the Canadians who had achieved such glory at Ypres were

flung into the fight and a further advance was won. By day and night the Germans made the most violent counter-attacks on our new line. Though these were beaten off in every case by our intrepid infantry, our further advance was checked, and the enemy was given time to bring up reinforcements. About the third week in May this series of engagements, which had taken place on a width of front stretching from Richebourg-l'Avoué to Givenchy, ceased as the result of the exhaustion of both sides.

While these severe battles were in progress, we who sat behind at Headquarters, out of the danger as well as out of the wild excitement and turmoil of the struggle, could only work on and wait in suspense for news. We could hear the guns, and knew that in the seething cauldron of the fight ahead tens of thousands of brave men were struggling for mastery. We were fighting a foe as courageous as any in Europe, and better organised and more skilfully led than any troops in the world. To succeed against such adversaries demanded prodigies of valour and endurance. For one act recorded that wins the coveted V.C. we knew that countless others, perhaps more gallant still, would remain unrecorded, the witnesses

and the heroes themselves lying still and silent on the blood-soaked fields of Flanders. Flanders! battle-ground of centuries, cockpit of Europe, how rich are the crops raised annually from your soil—and rich indeed they ought to be, for have not your fields been watered with the blood of millions of brave men?

Ypres and Neuve Chapelle. What visions of awful slaughter do these names conjure forth. Holocausts of splendid manhood.

The horror, the pity of it all. And what shall be the end thereof?

Shall Europe, nay, the whole world, live under the iron heel of Prussia, unified by the sword—organised and controlled by an autocratic central authority measuring out to every man his duty for peace and war,—where patriotism is not left to the inclination and interpretation of the individual, but is defined and apportioned by law?

But if such should come to pass, who is bold enough to say that stern discipline is bad for frail, uncertain-minded humanity?

Or shall we continue to live as we do now in old England, free to recognise the duty we owe to the land of our birth, to respond nobly to our best instincts, to

make those sacrifices, even of life itself, for our Country's sake?—free, too, to be selfish and cowardly,—free to make no sacrifices, but to accept them from others, even the lives of tens of thousands, that we may live in safety and comfort,—free to strike for higher wages whenever we feel discontented, regardless of the danger and suffering we impose on the land that bred us?

Freedom! what a mockery is the word! There can never be absolute freedom amongst a community of people. Each individual owes his neighbour a duty, and must pay it, if all are to live in harmony together. Where, then, is each man's freedom?

In Germany the liberties of the subject are naught, the liberty of the State is everything.

In England the liberties of the subject are paramount, the liberty of the State is apparently of less importance. The British idea of individual freedom is grand in its conception and fruitful of great results. It develops initiative, resourcefulness, and bravery of a high order. It encourages all a man's best instincts and produces originality and magnificent character, but unfortunately for our ideals human nature is

frail and prone to weakness. Unfettered personal freedom also encourages slothfulness, cowardice, selfishness, and greed.

In Germany there is little personal freedom, but there is national unity and discipline under a rule of blood and iron.

In England the liberty of the subject is our Magna Charta, and there is little national discipline under a mild and generous rule.

Though our ideals may produce the finer national character, there can be little doubt that the rule of Blood and Iron produces the stronger nation for war.