

Cigars, caves and the calm before the storm

Watercolours of the Somme commissioned by a German officer haunt and delight
Melissa van der Klugt

In the years before the war the general could often be found in the Alps. He honeymooned there with his British wife, in the Swiss town of Zermatt, and was a keen mountaineer. But from August 1914 he could be found instead on the Somme in northern France.

He was to spend two years there, making his quarters at several villages, first Courcellette, then Miraumont and finally in the dugouts of Thiepval. He had published accounts of his Alpine expeditions and his poetry too and now he commissioned a young illustrator serving in the brigade to record his life at war. The 62 watercolours can be seen for the first time this month at Abbott and Holder in London where they offer a rare and unfamiliar view of the war — that of the Germans.

The general who commissioned them between the summer of 1914 and 1916 was Lieutenant-General Theodor von Wundt, of a German military family and commander of 6,500 Württemberger men in the 51st Reserve Infantry Brigade; the artist was Albert Heim, who survived the war to become a commercial illustrator.

The paintings are a new record of the build-up to the battle of the Somme, the four-and-a-half-month British and French offensive over a few miles of soil which cost a million lives, but also a very personal story.

"People are intrigued by their personal nature," says Philip Athill, the gallery's director, who recently returned from a visit to northern France to locate the scenes in Heim's work and discover more about von Wundt. He believes their lucid style and the occasional mark of a censor's stamp suggests the general intended them for publication. "As a series they confound the stereotypes and apocalyptic imagery associated with the war. But they are also extremely informative."

Many depict Courcellette and Miraumont in the summer of 1915, a relatively quiet time for von Wundt, in contrast to the devastating battles of the following year. They are full of surprising humour and detail of the brigade's daily life and its characters. Here the general has his hair cut in the sun outside his quarters at Little Miraumont behind the lines. There he smokes his pipe on a hill above the village or studies a map pinned to the floral wallpaper of his rooms.

His men climb trees, drink in local caves and — in one inscribed "In the dugout it's cosy!" — swap jokes and stories. Corpulent Basil, a recurring figure, takes delivery of parcels — champagne, a pile of books and boxes of loo roll labelled "For our hero: Germany's best". The little luxury of lavatory paper is a theme; the general is later seen clutching his stomach while Basil proffers a roll. Moritz, his patch-coloured dog, appears eating on a table or in front of a fire in the general's room. There is poignancy too. The general's own young son, Max, was killed in the first weeks of the war. One painting of an empty bedroom is inscribed, "A room becomes vacant in the dugout."

By July 1916 the general and his men were in the thick of the battle of the Somme. Heim caught the prelude to the fighting and German preparations — the layouts of the trenches, views of the countryside from German vantage points, inspections of the battle field. In the build-up to the centenary of the war's outbreak, Abbott and Holder



ABBOTT AND HOLDER



Clockwise from left: "In the dug-out it's cosy!" Lieutenant General Theodor von Wundt with officers; the field menu; and von Wundt watching the battle for Thiepval in 1916

believes these scenes deserve the attention of historians and collectors.

What is remarkable are Heim's paintings of villages, churches and farm buildings, all later razed. There in the corner of one is Mouquet farm, where many Canadian and Australian soldiers lost their lives that summer. *The Times* reporting on the spot in autumn 1916 wrote: "It must be understood that such names as Mouquet Farm are now mere names for spots on the map. There is no farm at Mouquet, but only a certain area of battered brick and stone." The fields and hills of Thiepval, still little marked by war in Heim's pictures, were devastated: "On all the circuit the heather is ablaze."

Thiepval, one of the fortress villages at the centre of von Wundt's sector of the line, was largely destroyed by British bombardment but the Germans clung on in a network of cellars beneath a ruined château that appears in several of Heim's paintings. British reports described it standing among

shattered remnants of apple trees, "a heap of broken brick and rubbish making the entrances to the subterranean lairs" and "bristling with machine-guns". In the ruins and passages below, hand-to-hand fighting with bayonets and fists raged, before it finally fell to the British and Heim's drawings come to an end.

"They were stout troops, and they fought hard," *The Times* wrote of the Württemberger men. "They are not new men but veterans who have had in their keeping one of Germany's strongholds for 24 months, types of the best men with whom Germany started the war; and they have told us today how they have lain snug in their dug-outs while our worst bombardments have torn the ground above them and have laughed at the idea of our ever winning Thiepval." The small luxuries of Heim's paintings such as electric lighting and cigars were all discovered in the cellars. British soldiers also found "a little dog patched with black and yel-

low and white", the only thing alive, crouched between the knees of a German officer.

Von Wundt stayed on the Somme commanding the 18th Reserve Division before moving to Arras. He died in 1929 in Germany, and left his paintings to his second son, Rolf. They had one last extraordinary journey. Rolf, a radio physicist during the Second World War, was chosen by the Americans as one of hundreds of German scientists (among them the designers of the V2) potentially useful to the US in the race for new technology. He was transferred by ship with his belongings and family. The gallery bought the paintings from Theodor von Wundt's American great-grand-daughter.

Württembergers on the Somme, an exhibition of 62 watercolours commissioned by Lieutenant-General Theodor von Wundt from Albert Heim, at Abbott and Holder, London WCI, Jan 26 to Feb 28 abbottandholder.co.uk

News in brief

Navy helicopter rescues four
Four sailors were plucked to safety this week from a fishing boat on fire in the Firth of Clyde by a naval search and rescue helicopter. At 3.05 pm on Wednesday, Belfast coastguard received a mayday call, reporting that the *Amy Harris* was on fire three miles south of Kilmory on the Isle of Arran. At Prestwick, HMS *Gannet's* Sea King was airborne in nine minutes, arriving over the stricken boat just as her four-man crew were about to abandon her. A rough sea rendered a winch transfer tricky. In addition the two pilots had no visual references to work with, so they handed over the flying of the Sea King to their observer (navigator), Lieutenant-Commander Andy Drodge (who is also HMS *Gannet's* CO) and he was able to manoeuvre the aircraft into position, before handing control back to the pilots. Winchman Petty Officer Taff Ashman was lowered and winched the crew members off two-at-a-time. The whole rescue was completed in just 22 minutes after the Sea King's arrival.

Professor's service to military healthcare

Professor Sir Simon Wessely, knighted in the New Year honours for his services to psychological medicine, received his honour in part for his academic work which has led to a better understanding of Gulf War Illness and to more effective psychological support for the Armed Services. In 2003 his team at King's College London was asked to investigate whether personnel returning from Iraq had any of the symptoms associated with what had been dubbed "Gulf War Syndrome". Results showed they did not, but, as operations in Afghanistan began, the Ministry of Defence asked him to continue tracking the sample of 10,000 troops. Research into what had happened to troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2005 and 2009, as well as to those who had not deployed, showed rates of post-traumatic stress disorder were stable among regular Armed Forces personnel at between 3 and 4 per cent.

HMS Somerset sails after major refit

The Type 23 frigate *Somerset* has returned to sea for the first time since last spring following a nine-month revamp carried out in her home port of Devonport. The refit included enhancement of her close-range Sea Wolf air defence missile system; installation of advanced electronic communications; and improvements to operations room functions. Her main machinery, a combined diesel-electric and gas system, has been improved and overhauled, and a new coat of paint on the hull increases streamlined efficiency and speed.

More ground attack missiles for RAF

A new £14 million contract with missile manufacturers MBDA (UK) will deliver welcome replenishment of the RAF stocks of Brimstone air-to-ground missiles depleted by their use by Tornado tactical strike aircraft, in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Originally intended for "fire-and-forget" use against large formations of enemy armoured vehicles, the Brimstone has been refined by laser guidance for greater precision use.

Welsh Guards parade in six cities

Soldiers from Prince of Wales' Company, 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, paraded through Carmarthen and Swansea town centres this week after a demanding six months tour of Afghanistan. The parades are part of a series of six marches by the Welsh Guards in towns and cities across Wales this month. Further parades will take place in Bangor (Jan 23), Caernarfon (Jan 24), Aberystwyth (Jan 30) and Ystradgynlais (Jan 31).