

Sermon preached by Dom Tancred Ambrose Agius OSB
at Radstock on February 5th 1923

*“Being made perfect in a short space he fulfilled a long time;
for his soul pleased God” . Wisdom: iv, 13*

My brother was one of that vast number whose names and achievements were lost in the magnitude of the enterprise in which they were engaged, and remain known only to those about them, and to their intimate friends. It was often mere accident that individual deeds were perceived and recorded. More often the deed was done in isolation, away from the applauding onlookers, and the memory of it perishes with the doer.

My tale tonight, however, is not so much one of stirring deeds, as the account of a soul, naturally shy, sensitive, retiring and deeply religious, shaping out its course anew amid the circumstances to which Duty and a fiery Patriotism led it.

When the War broke out my brother, who was still three months short of eighteen, was spending his last term at this school. He was known here for his almost passionate energy in training his section of the Officers Training Corps and in the ensuing competition his House won the Cup. It was a presage of later days when the men of the company under his command used almost to complain of his unsparing devotion to duty. With him duty was not merely something to be done, to be got through; rather it was something almost sacramental, into the accomplishing of which he threw all his energies with an uncontrollable vehemence.

He was still too young, when he left school, for a Commission. But the time of waiting was not wasted. His three brothers had already, months before, responded to the great Call. And, he, the youngest felt that the call of duty beckoned him along the same road, and his immediate task was to prepare himself to fulfil it. Long before, he had purposed in his own mind (and had revealed it as his intention) to join the Religious Order which had watched over his own education. But he felt that God called him to another duty first, and the call was too clear to be postponed. Though nervous by nature, for years afraid even of the dark, yet he refused to shelter himself beneath his ultimate Vocation and remain safe under the shadow of the monastery. If he had, no one could have blamed him. But in his obedience to duty, self had not only second place, but rather no place at all.

Quickly the intervening months passed by. They were spent in drilling volunteers in plain clothes in the Park, and in digging trenches in the garden and working out operations at his desk.

At last the Commission arrived and was received with a mingled enthusiasm and pride. It came as a clarion call. To others, his relatives, it seemed as a warrant for separation, for danger, perhaps for disaster. But to him it came personally from His King with the Divine sanction behind it; it came as a responsibility put upon his shoulders because they were believed worthy and able to bear it; it came as a summons to personal endeavour in a Sacred Cause.

Events moved quickly now. Christmas saw him on the high seas en route for Malta whence his two brothers had preceded him to France.

From Malta he went to Alexandria, and we hear of him trying, amid the busy confusion of disembarking, to secure a chaplain to hear the confessions of his Catholic men. Thence he passed up river to Khartoum. His letters home shine with the love of home and the sense of elation born of the personal participation in a great Crusade.

Then came the famous and heroic though disastrous attempt to relieve Gallipoli by the diversion at Suvla Bay. I want to recall one incident. The trench, in which my brother's men were posted, ran down the side of a slight hill and across the valley. One night, not feeling very well, he lay in his dug-out in the trench. He awoke to a strange sound, struck a light, and saw a foot of water in the dug-out. As he watched, it rose steadily. A tremendous thunderstorm was raging. Amid the blinding rain, he saw in the frequent flashes of lightning, water running down the trench at ten miles an hour, sweeping with it accoutrements, bodies, and wreckage of all kinds. He got his men on to the fire step. Then as shooting was impossible in that inferno, on to the parapet. There they sat, wet through, all night, seeing their Turkish enemies in similar plight across the few yards of Norman's Land. All night they sat there, unfed, unwarmed, exposed. One of my brother's men was elderly, a prey to rheumatism. Himself he had a waterproof coat, well lined and warm. But he did not hesitate. He gave up his coat. Next day the wind changed to North and frost set in. Numbed, but still vigilant the young officer organised the defences as best he might. At last they were relieved. But his feet were frozen and it was many days before he could walk again.

There followed some months of rest in hospital at Mudros. Then with broken health, the summer months of 1916 at home. That August I spent with him at Painswick in Gloucestershire. We used to go out for long walks together. As ever he had his compass and field-glasses with him, studying the country, making calculations, perfecting his practical knowledge. No wonder it was said of him that he was "too keen for the men".

In the Autumn he returned to duty. That was the last I saw of him till June 13th of the next year, 1917, when I met him in France. For some time his Division, and mine had been within six miles of each other, unbeknown to me. Then I learned his whereabouts I set off to find him. Long I searched in vain; at last in despair of finding him I called on the nearest R.C. Padre. As we conversed a runner brought a message from my brother asking for a Chaplain for his men who were shortly going into an attack. I went with this guide and found not one brother but two. The R.C.s were paraded, received the Sacraments, and then we three spent together one of the happiest evenings of my life.

Soon after there was the battle.

Five days after our first meeting I returned to the Camp, not knowing if either of my brothers lived. I found both. One had not been in action, but had been missed by an unexploded shell by inches only. The other had been through a disastrous battle; of the two infantry companies, himself and another young public school boy, had been the only officers left. He had taken charge of the situation and acquitted himself well.

Together we sat and read letters from home. And it was my privilege to give my brothers Holy Communion before we parted.

That Autumn began the Passchendaele battle and we were there. There was too much to do each day in that eventful and calamitous time to think of much else but after a while I noticed no reference to Dickie in letters from home. Then came anxious enquiries, and I guessed what the reason was.

It so happened that I had recently returned from sick leave and on October 26th, as I went as usual around, talking to the men, a vast battle extending over miles, was in progress. Some German prisoners were coming back and a few hundred yards of ground had been won. It was on this day that my brother fell.

Not till November 6th did I hear the news. As I returned to Camp after a long day among the guns, my Captain met me at the gate. "Have you seen the news?" he said. "No" I replied, but I guessed. He hesitated, not knowing how to begin. "My brother?" I suggested. He nodded. "God rest his soul" he said, and raised his military cap and turned away. In the tent I found a copy of the Times. Heading the Casualty list was my brother's name.

Next day I found his regiment, not many miles away, and spoke with his brother officers and the only sergeant that had come back. There was little to tell. He had been very keen, as always. The ground was heavy and as he led his men on, with his face to the foe, a sniper's bullet had pierced his helmet and so he died. His body was never recovered. As a soldier he died, and his was a soldier's burial; keeping the field of honour he had tried, with his life, to win.

Some months after Peace had been signed I was looking over the letters of condolence my parents had received, and I found one of more vital interest than them all. It was the letter written by my brother before going into action for the last time.

I had four brothers in the Army, and it was their habit, when they were about to go into battle to write a letter and leave it in safe hands in case they never returned. I well remember an elder brother who was in the same Battalion as my youngest brother telling me of an incident shortly before the latter was killed. It was his own turn, he told me, to go into action. He had written his letter and given it to the younger brother to keep. He passed through the action unscathed. And as he came back with the rest of his men to their billets, my youngest brother had come out to meet them, and stood there waiting for them to come up, tearing into little pieces the letter he now happily required no longer. Soon afterwards the positions were reversed. It was the youngest brother's turn to write a letter to be kept till he should return to claim it before going on leave, for his leave was due.

He never came. The letter was duly forwarded. Richard read it to you at the beginning of this mass. Now before I close, I want to quote two sentences that take away the sting from death.

“What a truly wonderful thing our religion is and how easy it makes things for us however hard and difficult they may be.... The one thing I am sorry for is that I haven't had much chance of showing how grateful I am to you all for what you have done for me.... ”

There are other things in the letter also, a thought for the grandchildren, his nephews and nieces for whom he had always shown a special affection.

There is the indomitable pride in the tradition of the family with which the letter closes “I could go on writing for ever, but just remember how proud I am to do my bit and keep up the traditions of the family”.

I have said enough. Do you wonder if, with such a letter in our possession, I look on him, not as untimely dead, but as crowned with immortality in the supreme moment of his achievement?