



27th Earl of Crawford & 10th Earl of Balcaress (1871-1940)

“Far from it, I enjoy no privilege not accorded to others of my own rank, and take my share of work just as anybody else – let that be recorded for those who seem to fancy that I am a free agent.”

Lord Crawford had every opportunity not to see front line duty during World War One. He was 43, above the conscription age limit of 41, father to 8 young children and ran a hugely successful business¹, contributing greatly to the local economy and employing thousands of workers. He became the first Lord to enlist as a private and the only Cabinet Minister to serve in the ranks. In 1915 he was recalled to London and offered a Ministerial post and in 1916 was proposed as the Viceroy of India. However, as stated in his war diaries during the conflict, "Supposing I went home, what could I do? Awaken the public? I have no histrionic devices, the House of Lords has been eviscerated and I am disqualified from sitting in the Commons. I am able-bodied with twelve months behind me in France. I don't quite see where my sphere would lie."²

By April 1915, despite his influence and contacts in the political sphere, he had volunteered for the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC)³. He was to be at the front line for the next 18 months working in the casualty clearing stations dealing with endless operations and soldiers injured in battle. His day to day duties included assessing the wounded, recording their details, treating them if possible and scrubbing and cleaning the operating theatres. He could attend up to 11 operations in a day and even found himself treating soldiers on Christmas Day and dealing with one soldier aged 60.

His diaries throughout his time in the RAMC echoed many of the tensions and concerns from front line soldiers. For the 15 months that he penned his diary in the RAMC a particular theme of frustration and anger emerges towards the Officer Class. He pulled no punches and by January 1916 was clear to why the British forces were struggling and losing so many men:

"I have come across scores, I might say hundreds, who are utterly incompetent to lead men, to inspire confidence or respect, to enforce discipline, to behave even as gentlemen. This war is going to be won by the NCO and men, not by the commissioned ranks."⁴

However, his most scathing attack was aimed at Military High Command, who he stated were ill-prepared and failed to capitalise on technological and military changes like the Germans. He noted that there had been no interest in the emergence of aviation as a military weapon and one British General even described it as a fad. Similarly he felt the German military were far quicker to introduce and utilise machine guns, leading to an inevitable slaughter of British troops attacking German positions. He also detailed how the advent of the tank was given little consideration. Overall he believed it was the complete lack of both political and military leadership that meant supplies, strategy and military tactics led British soldiers into a bloody and costly stalemate:

"What we want are generals with the faces of tigers or vultures or alligators - something that can fight."

The nurses he worked alongside were also not saved from his strident views and he saw them as uncooperative, making it unnecessarily difficult for the medics to carry out their work. Upon a new batch of nurses arriving he commented with dismay that, "Among their luggage were vermilion

¹ Wigan Coal & Iron Company

² P.165, Private Lord Crawford's War Diaries, From Medical Orderly to Cabinet Minister, edited by Christopher Arnander (Pen & Sword Military)

³ Established 1898 it was to deal with 5.5 million casualties on the Western Front

⁴ P.116, Private Lord Crawford's War Diaries, From Medical Orderly to Cabinet Minister, edited by Christopher Arnander (Pen & Sword Military)

parasols and tennis racquets. What do they expect to find here?"⁵ More importantly though he felt they risked the safety of patients and cleanliness of medical facilities:

"Nurses rather overpowering – they ate chocolate all over the operating table and dropped cherry stones on the floor. I always thought it an unpardonable offence to bring food into a theatre. The place is a club room, a cloak room, a serving room and now an estaminet!"⁶

Lord Crawford was in a prime position to witness first-hand the advances in medical equipment and knowledge during the conflict. The big advancements came in the operating theatre with the introduction of effective sterilisation methods and antiseptics to increase the survival rate of troops wounded in action. Shrapnel wounds to the abdominal area were frequent injuries received by soldiers and such advances increased the chances of successful operations and ultimately survival rates.

However, the horrendous conditions in the trenches and demands on the medics meant that there was only so much that they could offer to the soldiers.⁷ The cold and resulting frost bite were a permanent feature during the winter months, as was trench foot. Trench fever was also prominent, a product of the water, mud and prevalence of body lice that led to soldiers suffering severe headaches, pain on moving their eyes and extreme soreness of leg and back muscles. Other noticeable effects were shell shock or as termed at the time GOK (God Only Knows). The long-term mental effects of fighting at the front would only be understood decades later and officially recognised in 1980. Today it would be diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder but at this time army high command and medics dismissed the effects (often a cause of desertion)⁸ as cowardice or malingering. Lord Crawford's understanding⁹ and sympathy were also very much lacking:

"Among other things in this routine order sheet of April 13 is the news that three men have been tried by Field General Court martial on the charge of 'when, on active service, deserting HM service.' In each case the sentences were carried on the March 20 and 26. It is harsh, but necessary and just to inflict the supreme penalty, and I doubt not the offenders received careful and sympathetic trial."¹⁰

What is interesting during the final months of his time at the front is his critical view of politicians flirting between Parliament and the battlefield. In Crawford's opinion you were either a soldier or a Parliamentarian but could not be both¹¹:

"How does it come about that these frauds are allowed to retain their commissions? They must be drawing salaries and costing the country money, but their military value is nil."¹²

⁵ P.18, Ibid

⁶ French for a small café, bar or bistro, especially a shabby one

⁷ Crawford talked about the constant cycle of operations without relief. In On the 7 June 1916 he cited the fact that during that week they had lost two admirals, three generals and 5,000-6,000 men.

⁸ 10% of those British soldiers who deserted were shot by the military.

⁹ He also attributed to some of the cases to nicotine poisoning, p. 133 Private Lord Crawford's War Diaries, From Medical Orderly to Cabinet Minister, edited by Christopher Arnander (Pen & Sword Military)

¹⁰ P.159, Ibid

¹¹ He later cited Winston Churchill as an example of this, pp.140, 141 Ibid

¹² P.104, Private Lord Crawford's War Diaries, From Medical Orderly to Cabinet Minister, edited by Christopher Arnander (Pen & Sword Military)

It was also his strong opinion that many Members had received elevated roles in the Armed Forces due to their political connections and standing. His list cited Lieutenant-Colonel Churchill, Brigadier-General J.E.B Seely, Lieutenant-Colonel John Ward and Hamar Greenwood who had made best use of their influence to achieve senior positions.¹³

Running parallel was his constant belief that the German army had embraced advancements in military technology and equipment far more quickly than British Military HQ, especially in the field of aerial combat. He noted with concern and fascination in February 1916 the accuracy of German bombing raids and “imperturbability” of the German aircraft.

“They are so much prettier than our aircraft, these Taubes, though why they should be called after doves I know not. They closely resemble kestrel hawks. We imagine that they were out hunting for our 12in howitzers which passed through the town today.”

Crawford in fact began to foresee that this new industrial mechanised warfare was going to mean that future conflicts were likely to result in even greater destruction, casualties and deaths¹⁴. His comparison to the Boer War and developments since then, led him to conclude:

“Today is the anniversary of the day when I realised the terrific failure of Neuve Chapelle and the inevitable prolongation of the war...I shall never forget the horror of that week – there was a similar time early in the South African war, when we had a casualty list about the scale of one hour at Neuve Chapelle. How the standard of slaughter has mounted since the winter of 1900, how the engines of destruction have been developed, and a spring offensive, which last year caused us a casualty list of 35,000, may in 1916 entail the loss of 200,000 killed and wounded.”

Lord Crawford’s posting in the RAMC finally came to an end in July 1916 having treated hundreds of casualties and saved the lives of soldiers involved in the Battles of Ypres, Verdun, Hazelbrook and Loss-Artois. He briefly took up a role in the Army Intelligence Corps, which meant he witnessed first-hand the slaughter and destruction of the Battle of the Somme.

“What a scene of desolation is this area of battle. One stumbles across a corpse distended by gangrene, half ridden by luxuriant flowers, and then a few yards further on a patch of land which every vestige of vegetation has been completely burned. What is marked on the map as a wood is in reality a seared row of skeleton trees. This is the most violent and wasteful of all the invasions of nature which a bombardment involves.”

He stayed in the role for three months and finally felt the time was right to return to politics and dedicate his energies as a Minister.

His involvement and experience in World War One greatly affected his thinking, decision making and ultimately his policy as a politician. He was quickly appointed the Minister of Agriculture in November 1916 working in the Coalition Government. His position enabled him to be the Chairman of the Royal Commission on wheat supplies and it was his experience of WW1 that led him to push for the creation of a ‘standard loaf of bread’, high in nutritional content for workers and families. Crawford was also very much aware of Britain’s dependency on wheat production to feed the army. During WW1, merchant shipping losses and agricultural workers fighting at the front had placed

¹³ P.141, Ibid

¹⁴ He was still to witness the devastation and casualties of the Battle of Somme.

enormous strain on these supplies. Under his chairmanship he was to expand the organisation into the largest wheat and cereal importing body in the world, which controlled all buying and selling in Europe.

Notable achievements in the political sphere included chairing the Broadcasting Inquiry that led to the creation and establishment of the BBC. Throughout his life, Lord Crawford was heavily involved and passionate about the arts and believed in its wider cultural and social benefits. David Lindsay was born in 1871, son of the 26th Earl of Crawford and 9th Earl of Balcarres. The Lindsays' heritage and roots were in Fife, Scotland and they were among a group of Earls and landowners who signed the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) asking the Pope to support them in their bid for Scottish Independence. Educated at Eton College, he went on to read History at Magdalen College, Oxford. After university he became involved in social work in Bethnal Green, East London.

In 1895, following his family's history of involvement in politics, he stood as a Conservative MP in Chorley, Lancashire. It was a fairly safe seat especially as his father owned the neighbouring Wigan and Steel Company, employing 10,000 workers. He held the seat until 1913, when his father died, inheriting the title of 27th Earl of Crawford and 10th Earl of Balcarres and being elevated to the Lords. Crawford married Emily Florence and had two sons and six daughters. He noted in his diary, that it was during these short periods of leave with his family that kept him going through the dark days of the war.

With the fall of Lloyd George and the Coalition Government in 1922, he effectively retired from front line politics. He focused his remaining life on his family and passion for art and museums. In 1939 as another World War approached, Crawford's view on Churchill had very much changed. Describing him in March 1916 as a man who was "always a sneak" and "whose diplomacy is Teutonic in clumsiness and ineptitude"¹⁵, he had now come to the firm opinion that Churchill was the only man who could save Britain from the Nazi menace.

Lord Crawford died at his family home, Haigh Hall, on 8 March 1940. He was survived by 7 of his children.

¹⁵ 10 March 1916, pp.140,141, Private Lord Crawford's War Diaries, From Medical Orderly to Cabinet Minister, edited by Christopher Arnander (Pen & Sword Military)