

PERCY LAY — A MODERN D'ARTAGNAN

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(1) By Frank Green

IN the National War Memorial at Canberra is a portrait by the late W. B. McInnes of Percy Lay, M.C., D.C.M., M.M., C. de G., one of the personalities of the 1st A.I.F., who died on 28th August, 1955.

If forty years ago there was an Australian type of "digger," long and lean, with great physical strength and eyes made for laughter, it was this man. In his day McInnes was our most famous portrait painter; he won the Archibald prize on several occasions and produced portraits of many notable personages, and I think he must have enjoyed putting on canvas such a colourful personality as that of Percy Lay.

Over the year I have often stood in front of that portrait and then walked away feeling all the better for the fact that I knew him and admired him, and that he reflected the best that was in the Australian soldier of 1914-18. I have called him "A Modern D'Artagnan," not completely because of his fighting skill and his adventures, but because I found in my personal post-war association with him the pleasure that Stevenson found in the D'Artagnan of *The Vicomte of Bragelonne* when he "had mellowed into a man so witty, rough, kind and upright that he takes the heart by storm." To encourage myself in this fancy I took a copy of Gustave Dore's conception of D'Artagnan and held it beside the portrait of Lay; that satisfied me.

Percy Lay enlisted from Ballarat, an original member of the 8th Battalion. From the time he left school at the age of fourteen he had earned his own living working in the country from Melbourne to the Riverina.

He was in the heavy fighting at the Gallipoli landing, and a fortnight later was in the Australian-New Zealand-French attack on the Turkish positions at Krithia, when the Australian 2nd Brigade lost over a thousand men in one hour. Lay survived this action without a wound. He had gone to Gallipoli as a private soldier and was still a private when the A.I.F. withdrew to Egypt after the Evacuation, but it was obvious that he was a natural leader, and had two stripes when the 8th Battalion reached France in April, 1916. He was through the heavy Somme campaign of that year, and at the Battle of Bullecourt in May, 1917, where he was promoted to platoon sergeant. It was in the Bullecourt fighting in May, 1917, that he won his first decoration, the Military Medal. He was wounded but remained with his men to hold off enemy counter-attacks under a heavy artillery barrage. He then led a counter-attack against the Germans, in which he captured 200 yards of enemy trench and a number of prisoners. The official citation concludes with this statement: "He is an original member of the Battalion and has never been away from it. His courage is an example to all ranks."

Percy won the D.C.M. in the Battle of the Menin

Road on the 20th September, 1917. Because of casualties among the officers the responsibility fell on him as a sergeant to get his company to the final objective, and he got it there by gallantry and leadership. The words "gallantry" and "leadership" are not mine; they are the words of his colonel. A few days later he was given a commission in the field, and went into the attack on the Broodseinde Ridge on October 4th as an officer. In this attack, the hardest of the whole battle, he again found himself in command of a company when every other officer was a casualty. The opposition from the Germans in their concrete redoubts along the ridge was intense, and made the final assault a tough assignment. Lay and his men were confronted with a redoubt from which devastating fire was coming. He halted his men under cover from this fire in front, while he with two others worked round from shell-hole to shell-hole to the rear of the redoubt, which they attacked with bombs and captured. In the words of the G.O.C. 1st Australian Division "this gallant officer saved many a critical situation."

In 1918 he was selected for service with the Dunsterforce, a handful of officers and N.C.O.'s from the British and dominion forces sent to organise any Russian forces in Trans-Caucasia, and any Christian inhabitants, Georgians, Armenians or Assyrians, who had been with the Russian forces and who had good reason for keeping the Turks out of these countries. This force included from the A.I.F. 22 officers and 25 sergeants. They were all picked personnel of outstanding quality.

The story of the Dunsterforce is contained in Dr. Bean's official history (Vol. V.). It is also colourfully described in *Stalky's Forlorn Hope* by the late Captain S. G. Savige, D.S.O., M.C., who in the Second War was Lieut.-General Savige, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C. It is an absorbing story of high adventure and of varying frustration and success against almost impossible odds. Some of the more detailed adventures were described in *Reveille* of August, 1932, by Captain (now Colonel) E. W. Latchford.

(2) By E. W. Latchford

With the passing of Percy Lay, the old A.I.F. lost one of its most colourful members, and all Australia is the poorer. He typified all that was best in the A.I.F. Good-hearted, good natured, big in every way, a bit of a "dag" and very much of a "wag." He may possibly have got one into trouble but no one could have been more certain to get you out of it again. He could not have had a mean streak in his make-up. They don't make many of Percy's type these days, worse luck.

Percy Lay was frankness itself. Early in World War II, he ran into General Blamey at a race meeting. After the usual cheery greeting, he said: "What

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about a job for me in this business, Tom?" The G.O.C. A.I.F. said: "It's a young man's war, Perce," to which my irrepressible pal replied, "Then what the Hell are you and Stan Savige doing in it?" "Tom" could only laugh and pass on. Quite a lot of his old pals considered that something could have been done to fit Percy into the 2nd A.I.F. Positions were found for persons of much lesser worth.

During the latter part of the Second War period Perce was in charge of a troop-train between Melbourne and Sydney, and it was my good luck to travel by it on one occasion in his company. A most pleasurable trip, with everything "laid on" by my old comrade.

Shortly after we left Albury a naval officer strolled past the O.C. Train's compartment, obviously bent on exploring a prohibited area of the train (*femmes only*). Percy looked up and very quietly said: "You have been told that this part of the train is out of bounds, go back to your own section." The navy "type" hesitated for a second or so and then decided to do what he had been told. I said, "What would you have one, old boy, if he had not gone back?" "Thrown him off the bloody train, Latch," was his reply, accompanied by the usual Lay grin, and I feel certain that is exactly what he would have done, and by himself too, if need be. He was essentially a man of action and an officer that men would respect and follow.

He and I were together in "Dunsterforce" on the long march up from railhead in Mesopotamia to N.W. Persia, and we enjoyed some amusing and interesting experiences. He was a staunch "cobber" and I am only one of the many old comrades who will miss him and treasure his memory. His epitaph could be: "He was a good bloke."

JOHN L. DAVIES

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