What were the conditions on the Macedonian Front in World War One like for a soldier, and why is the army’s work there largely forgotten?

This year is the Centenary of the Great War and we have been remembering the horrors our ancestors had to go through. Currently there is an extremely high awareness of WWI and those who died fighting in it. In fact, this awareness seems to stretch to every point of our lives, even the adverts we see on television. But is that all there is to it, or are we missing something out? I’m sure you have seen the Sainsbury’s advert which has captivated many people. It shows the 1914 Christmas Truce, which took place on the Western Front. In fact, all our remembrance is associated with the Western Front, perhaps because that’s where all the action happens in the films and books we read. Moreover, the generals at the time were focussing all their interests on the Western Front and ignoring an almost entirely different war playing out in the East. This is a forgotten war. *The* forgotten war.

I am going to base this around my Great-Grandfather’s experience in Macedonia. He was a Scotsman (Maurice Smith Bryce) serving as a doctor with the RAMC and gaining two military crosses along the way. Firstly, I must explain the circumstances that my grandfather came in to.

**Introduction**

When you hear of the Macedonian Front you probably don’t have the slightest inkling what it is about. Here’s an answer: the Macedonian Front was one of WWI’s eastern European fronts and it was the Allies’ first victory as well as playing a part in bringing about the defeat of Germany. But why has this front been forgotten? These are three reasons:

1. The government favoured the Western Front.
2. They favoured it because it was further away.
3. There were not a huge number of deaths.

Even so, the conditions were pretty bad with freezing winters and malaria-ridden summers not to mention boredom as well. I have one extra reason why it is forgotten and the following text explains it - this reason is Gallipoli.
Gallipoli

Somehow though, all we have remembered of the Eastern Fronts is the terrible Gallipoli disaster but Gallipoli is the exact reason that we have forgotten the rest of this mysterious war.

Twenty thousand people were lost at Gallipoli, thanks to politicians at that time having embarrassingly bad judgement. Here’s a map to explain things:

The generals were deeply embarrassed, so it was no surprise when they tried to blot it out and focus all their powers on Egypt instead. In fact, they refused for a while at least to have anything to do with the East, apart from Egypt. Any connected with Gallipoli tried their hardest to wipe any memories of the East from anyone. That, in my opinion is a reason why we have forgotten the Eastern War; the generals covered up to hide their incompetence.

Firstly, we should take a step back. What was the Macedonian Front’s significance? The main reason is the fact that the opposition on the Macedonian Front were the first to surrender and, even the German leader at the time admitted it: once Macedonia had gone, the allies had won.

Who was Fighting whom?

Even before the war started, things were getting pretty heated where Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia meet. These three countries were in an alliance with each other until Greece and Serbia, worried about an attack from a Turkey growing in power, made an additional, secret, alliance with each other. Perhaps this was an unwise decision because when Bulgaria found out they inevitably were not very pleased to be left out from the newly forged alliance. They were so very displeased that they declared war on Serbia and Greece.

Things were not going well for the Bulgarians – they had already lost land – when Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated and the Great War began. Bulgaria were up to the neck in trouble – they needed friends, and fast! Then, just in time for a seemingly doomed Bulgaria, Austria-Hungary formed an alliance with the Germans. Bulgaria weren’t to miss
out, here were the friends they had been hoping for, and even more importantly, these weren’t just any friends – these were two of the most powerful countries in the whole of Europe.

An on-looking Britain watched with an ashen face, and decided to concentrate on the Western Front. In fact, the generals tried to completely ignore their two eastern allies – Greece and Serbia.

“What we need for our troops is the trenches, France! Do we really want our men diverted to the east? No, of course we don’t. Whoever would?” That was the bigwig Brits’ attitude to the Macedonian Front. When the government finally decided to send in soldiers, it was too late – Serbia had already fallen and Bulgaria was at full strength with Austria-Hungary on their side. By the time the late British reinforcements arrived, the determined Serbians were fighting on the front against the very prepared Bulgarians who had dug themselves deep in to the local mountains.

**Grandpa’s viewpoint**

My great-grandpa was working in a hospital in Liverpool when the war started and he signed up with the RAMC: the Royal Army Medical Corps. He joined the 7th Royal Berkshire Regiment, 26th Division, which was posted to France in late 1915. But to his surprise, they stayed only a few weeks. The 7th Royal Berkshires were one of the few regiments being sent down to the ‘uneventful’, ‘easy option’ of Macedonia. On arrival in November 1915, my slightly confused grandpa joined an army of largely French and British regiments surrounding Lake Doiran. Malaria was not yet a problem but the harsh Macedonian winter was, with inadequate winter clothing supplies and poor shelter.

Not much happened at first. The Bulgarians - who were embedded in the hills and ridges with concrete forts across Lake Doiran - just waited for the Allies to make a move. Of course, the Allies didn’t budge for the simple reason that they couldn’t. Imbecilic generals back in Britain seemed to have the aim to utterly destroy the Eastern Front’s chances of survival. Frustratingly, they had decided to send all the supplies via Egypt where the Allied forces there took all they wanted and left hardly anything for the poor Brits at Doiran. This choice of action infuriates my grandpa, who sees the top brass as if almost enemies.

However, the Serbs and Brits did survive and, as the months went on, they learnt more and more about the intricate ridges and peaks surrounding the lake. Eventually, the allied forces in Macedonia began to push for a point west of the lake called Petit Couronné. This would be a tricky business though because just east of Petit Couronné was the Bulgarian army, hidden in the hills. In these hills and ridges were ravines and valleys that the British had to cross. That would be extremely dangerous, as the leaders in England had failed to send enough proper tin helmets and it would be all too easy for the Bulgarians to shoot the soldiers down from the edges of the ravines. It was a forebodingly tricky business that seemed to become less and less feasible. One reason for this was that there weren’t enough heavy guns and too few shells, so the barrage couldn’t cut the wire before an attack.
The fact that every time the Britons attacked they failed because of their lack of supplies gave the politicians in England a chance to mock them. This is what my Grandpa thought: ‘...thus the efforts of the Army of the East are described by Churchill (main Gallipoli chap) as a wasted three years of fatuous and feeble campaigning.’ Grandpa Bryce goes on to describe the raids and attacks and how they were unsuccessful, then adds afterwards: ‘But the campaign on the Western Front could be described in the same way.’ A reason why the generals in Britain mocked them so much may well have been that they were embarrassed at their failure to control the conflict. They failed to control it to such an extent that the soldiers like my grandpa fighting in Macedonia did not get any leave in the first three years that they spent there. Then, worst of all was the malaria.

Salonika malaria was not as deadly as you might imagine but it did cause the Britons a whole lot more trouble than they could realistically handle. Malaria was not extremely deadly but it could put the precious few soldiers that the army had out of action for weeks at a time. A debatably surprising fact was that the death rates for malaria lessened as the war dragged on (1%-0.3%). For the RAMC in Macedonia, a big part of their problem was the soldiers annoying reluctance to take anti-malarial powders (they tasted absolutely vile), though they were essential to survival. As they were a ‘must eat’ the doctors had to walk around the camp every night to make sure that the soldiers took the medication. More and more small jobs piled up for my Grandpa until he was exhausted and grumpy. People became bored as well as ill so they began to devise schemes to have fun like going to Salonika and the theatre. Or having a rugby tournament for instance.

Some soldiers liked to have a good chuckle and one Major Owen Rutter wrote a famous version of Hiawatha called Tiadatha (tired Arthur, who is the hero of the poem). Lots of time was spent watching wartime theatre companies resolute on taking ‘their pound of flesh’ from the War. Some soldier’s found the boredom so overwhelming that they started racing tortoises- imagine racing a tortoise! Luckier ones went to the Salonika clubs and cafés while others found space to start working on growing vegetables farms so that the army wouldn’t starve. Sometimes the regiments just gossiped about how terrible the generals were. Something that my Grandpa hated about the ‘villain’ Winston Churchill was the fact that, even though he lost 20,000 men at Gallipoli, the 1st Lord of the Admiralty still found time to pummel the Macedonian chip on his shoulder.

Anyway the war dragged on until the Britons finally attacked in the Spring of 1917. As their long term aim was to make it to Petit Couronné, they had to go through a precarious ravine, watched like hawks by the Bulgarians. My grandpa remembers the horrors that were played out in this passageway. A problem that made matters worse was that their general – General Milne – had no personal knowledge at all of the land so when they walked through the ravine, their chances lay on luck and luck alone. Unfortunately, the Bulgarians watched this like hawks, guns constantly poised at the ready.

When taking a walk in the Vladya Ravine my grandpa was sensible enough to wear his dull grey steel helmet. Other soldiers were not – they chose to wear caps emblazoned with a red stripe. ‘I always wore my steel helmet...The young officers, usually in pairs, with their staff caps, with the ‘brilliant red band’ visible a mile away...’ These officers strolled around the
plain, seeing the lie of the land. This frustrated my Grandfather: they were giving a chance for the Bulgarians to see that a large attack was being planned. There are more examples of bad organisation than just this but firstly, I must show you that these soldiers-on both sides-didn’t want to kill each other. Captain Maurice Bryce had his own experience of this during the war.

As I have explained, the allies around Lake Doiran were low on supplies and they needed every last scrap, so when the enemy deployed a patriotic not to mention determined fighter pilot to destroy the allied supplies, the camp was not very happy. The pilot kept on destroying supplies until one day, the British troops made a plan. This is it: early in the morning, before the pilot came, they would fill up the supplies crates with explosives so, when he shot them, they would explode and with them the pilot’s plane. It happened. My Grandfather was not pleased. In fact he was probably very disturbed about it all and his colleagues were probably feeling the same.

No-one wants to kill another and that’s what war forces people to do. I believe that there’s a reason for war happening though; have you ever heard the quote: ‘War is sweet to those who never have experienced it?’ Perhaps the generals didn’t understand warfare-they thought it was sweet because they’d only experienced it on smaller wars. To them soldiers were toys on a map.

So it was pretty grim in the Balkans and, if I’ve proved that point well enough, maybe you will remember that WWI was much more than just France.
Britain- 16 per 1000 serbia- 56 per 1000