

Private Stereoviews of the Furnes Field Hospital, Belgium, 1914

by
Robert S. Boyd

Overview

A British volunteer ambulance worker took several stereographs of medical operations during the Battles of the Yser and First Ypres in Fall 1914. His identity is not known. The ambulances were associated with the Furnes Field Hospital, which was only in operation for a few months, starting on 21 Oct 1914,¹ and moving to Dunkirk as a result of heavy German shelling in the second week of January 1915.² Memoirs by a doctor, a nurse, and a war correspondent assigned to Furnes, all of whom were no doubt known to the photographer, afford these stereoviews an unusually complete context despite sparse titles.³

The field hospital was a group of civilian volunteers organized by Madame Sindici and its Director, Dr. Beavis. The head surgeon was Mr. Souttar of the London Hospital and author of the memoir about his service in Belgium. The staff left England in mid-September 1914, and set up a 150-bed hospital in Antwerp. The staff was about 50, including eight doctors and 20 nurses.⁴ The hospital was located in a large house and began operating at full capacity almost immediately. The Siege of Antwerp began in earnest on 27 September. By 1 October, two forts had fallen and the city incurred considerable damage. The Belgian government decided to leave, and the British Consul-General ordered evacuation of Britons, including the hospital. That order was countermanded due to the impending arrival of the Royal Marines, but it only delayed departure by a few days. Shelling became heavy on 7 and 8 October, and that night the hospital staff left for Ostend via Ghent and Bruges. They arrived at Ostend on 10 October, the same day the last Antwerp fort surrendered. German pressure intensified, and the hospital left Ostend by ship at midnight on 13 October and was in London the morning of the 15th.

Dr. Hector Munro, a director of a London clinic, decided to equip an ambulance unit for the Belgian front shortly after the war began. He placed another director, Miss May Sinclair, in charge of raising funds while he went to Belgium to make

¹ *The British Field Hospital in Furnes*, Henry Sessions Souttar, 1915, http://www.greatwardifferent.com/Great_War/Surgeon_in_Belgium/Surgeon_Furnes_01.htm, 4. Souttar says the hospital arrived at Furnes on Tuesday following its departure from London, which was 20 Oct, and began operation the next day. Subsequently referred to as "Souttar, *Furnes*."

² *A War Nurse's Diary. Sketches from a Belgian Field Hospital (1918). Part Two*, author unnamed, 1918, <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/memoir/warnurse/wn2.html>, 12.

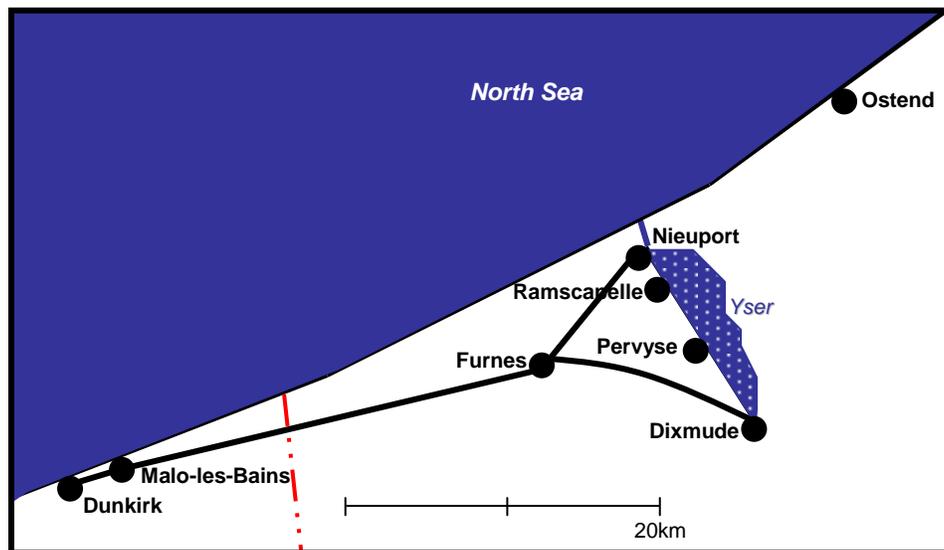
³ The author has arranged the stereoviews in topical order. The person who took them and titled them arranged them in a sequence which does not appear chronological and may be arbitrary. The original sequence is provided as an appendix.

⁴ *A Surgeon in Belgium*, Souttar, http://www.greatwardifferent.com/Great_War/Surgeon_in_Belgium/Surgeon_in_Belgium_00.htm, 8.

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arrangements.⁵ Munro recruited a number of women to serve, despite official discouragement. The cadre of the ambulance corps was five women and five men, a few doctors, and two ambulances⁶ when it left for Belgium on 25 September. The little party arrived in Ostend and drove to Ghent, arriving the next day.⁷ The Munro Ambulance Corps, under the auspices of the Belgian Red Cross, made trips to the battlefield to pick up wounded. Dr. Munro occasionally visited the Field Hospital in Antwerp and discussed cooperation. The ambulances withdrew from Ghent on 12 October just ahead of the German Army. After Antwerp fell, the Belgian War Minister put his son, Lt de Broqueville, in military command of the unit. Munro pulled his unit back to Ostend. While there, Munro and Souttar decided to join forces and establish a field hospital at Furnes, a town about 15 miles east of Dunkirk. Souttar and his hospital staff left Ostend by boat for England, but Munro pulled his ambulances back by road to Malo-les-Bains, a suburb of Dunkirk.

The hospital staff left England on 19 October and arrived at Dunkirk at ten o'clock the next morning. There they linked up with Munro and proceeded to Furnes where they took over a Catholic school to set up the hospital. The Battle of the Yser had begun two days earlier, so there was no shortage of wounded. On 20 October, the Belgians' grasp on their lines began to slip. On the 22nd, the Germans crossed the Yser. Fighting was intense at Nieuport, Pervyse, and Dixmude. Casualties and a shortage of ammunition forced the Belgians to consider desperate measures despite receiving some French reinforcements. On the 28th, 29th, and 30th the Belgians flooded the land between Nieuport and Dixmude, inflicting heavy casualties upon the Germans and causing them to halt their offensive.



Map. Field Hospital and Ambulance Corps Operating Area.

⁵ *May Sinclair and the First World War*, Suzanne Raitt, 1999, <http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/ideasv62/raitt.htm>, 4.

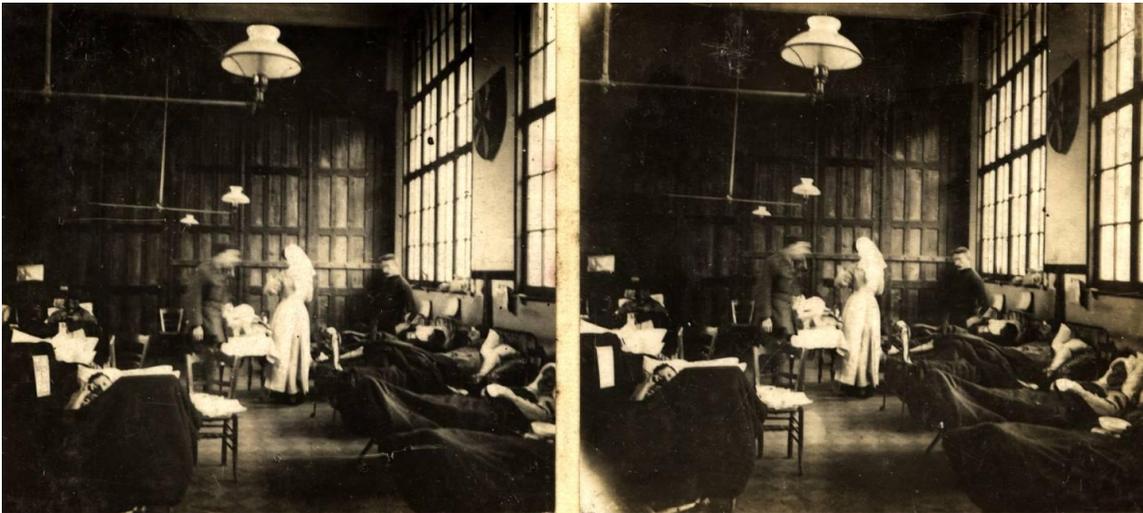
⁶ Souttar, *Furnes*, 33.

⁷ Raitt, 5.

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Furnes

Furnes, now spelled Veurne, is a small Belgian town about 30 kilometers east of Dunkirk. It was ideally situated to afford access to the wounded from the Yser battlefields between Nieuport and Dixmude. While the front could be reached easily, all supplies had to come from Dunkirk and the hospital made daily supply runs. The hospital was located in a large Catholic school still occupied by some of the professors. The rambling grounds included two large courtyards, one of which was used as the motor pool. The medical staff was eight doctors and 20-26 nurses. The Munro Ambulance Corps by now had over twenty ambulances and cars, so their strength was comparable. With orderlies, some of whom were the professors of the former school, and refugees who took over kitchen duties, the total staff must have been about 80. The hospital as a rule accepted only wounded who could not travel via Red Cross train to Calais from the Furnes station, but still the number of wounded usually exceeded the little hospital's capabilities. Souttar said "in [the first] four days we admitted three hundred and fifty patients, all of them with injuries of the most terrible nature."⁸ Conditions were grim, with many patients on straw mattresses, but the nurses tried to maintain standards. One stereoview shows a crowded ward, but at least the patients were on cots and the windows let in plenty of sun. Despite the presence of gas lamps, the gas supply had ceased, resulting in nighttime operations by candlelight.



1. Field Hospital, Furnes.

The ambulance personnel made a number of hair-raising trips under fire to pick up wounded. The stereoviews of the ambulance corps at Furnes do not convey a sense of danger, but one of an ambulance riddled with shrapnel holes makes that point.

⁸ Souttar, *Furnes*, 5.

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2. D Sector Munro Ambulance Corps, Motor Pool.



3. Furnes Motor Pool.



4. Car Showing Shrapnel Holes (Furnes Courtyard).

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Souttar relates an incident that may be shown by the above photo:

We went [to Pervyse] one afternoon to see what was going on, and found a party of the Corps at lunch. They seemed to be in particularly good spirits, and they told us that the house had just been struck by a shell, that the big Daimler ambulance had been standing outside, and that its bonnet had been riddled by the shrapnel bullets....The big six-cylinder Daimler had been moved into a shed, and there it stood with twenty or more holes in its bonnet, but otherwise uninjured. By a stroke of luck the driver had gone inside the house for a moment or he would undoubtedly have been killed. It is fortunate that the Corps is possessed of such a keen sense of humour.⁹

Close examination of the stereoview shows damage mainly to a probable Daimler bonnet and chalk rings placed around each hole. The building in the background is part of the Furnes hospital, so its trip from Pervyse to Furnes would be consistent with the ambulance being “otherwise uninjured.”

Furnes was no longer a sleepy little town of 6,000. With little of Belgium left free of the invaders and the nearby city of Ypres virtually wrecked by artillery, the King and the Belgian Army moved their headquarters to Furnes. Souttar gave an excellent description of the Grand Place, which is reflected in the stereoviews below.



5. Northwestern Grand Place, Furnes, Showing The Hôtel de Ville and Palais de Justice.

The northwest corner of the Grand Place has two 16th Century buildings, the Hôtel de Ville on the left and the Palais de Justice on the right. “The Hôtel de Ville is an elaborately decorated building, with two exquisite gables and a steep roof surmounted by a little octagonal tower” and a loggia with a balcony above. The pillars and the narrow windows of the Palais de Justice “form a striking contrast” with the Hôtel de Ville. “Behind the Palais de Justice rises the tall belfry, a big square tower from which springs an octagonal turret carrying an elaborate campanile.” These architectural features are apparent on the stereoview. Behind the Palais de Justice is the church of St. Walburga, named for the Irish monk who founded Furnes in 772, “with the delicate tracery of her

⁹ Souttar, *Furnes*, 39.

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flying buttresses and her spire fine as a needle.” This was the opposite of the other church visible from the Grand Place. “Behind the line of red roofs on the east of the square rises the rugged tower of St. Nicholas, a great square mass of old and weather-beaten brick, unfinished like so many of the Belgian towers, but rough, massive, and grand, like some rude giant.”



6. East Side of Furnes Grand Place Showing Church of St. Nicholas.

At this time, the Belgian Army General Headquarters was in Furnes, and the Hôtel de Ville was King Albert’s Army Quarters. In her memoir, the nurse describes the Grand Place as being a buzz of activity. “The old-world market square was filled with every sort of war vehicle; officers occupied the inns and soldiers swarmed everywhere, sleeping at night in the Cathedral [probably referring to the Catholic Church of St. Walburga] and another great church where straw was spread on the floor for them. Our stereographer recorded both of these observations.



7. Grand Place, Furnes, At A Busy Time.

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8. Belgian Soldiers Billeted In Church At Furnes.

The window at center has not changed since 1914 and identifies the location as the Church of St. Walburga. Other wartime images included German prisoners marching through town under guard and the evacuation of Belgian children from the destroyed village of St George to safety in Calais.



9. Prisoners, Furnes.

The mounted guard at center appears to be wearing a cloak and may belong to the Algerian Spahi unit that was a frequent subject of our stereographer.

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10. Belgian Children From St. George Being Taken To Calais.

According to the nurse, things died down after the conclusion of the Battle of the Yser at the end of October and the hospital could devote more time nursing to convalescence. The Battle of First Ypres began on 19 October and continued through 22 November, gaining in intensity as the Germans gave up any idea of breaking through the flooded lands of the Yser. According to Souttar, he and Munro left one morning early in December in response to a message from Ypres to help remove children and wounded from the heavy shelling. He described the day as dismal, with a cold, steady drizzle. The stereoviews below show wounded being brought from Ypres, perhaps from the incident described by Souttar. The nurse said the winter turned cold late in November and in December there was thick snow everywhere. Since none of the stereoviews show snow, they date from late October to early December.



11. Wounded Brought from Ypres (Note Stretcher in Top Position).

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12. Wounded Brought from Ypres (Note Stretcher in Lower Position).

Pervyse

“At Furnes the nearest point to us of the fighting was Pervyse, and as the Ambulance Corps had a dressing-station there, we often went out to see them and the soldiers in the trenches close by.”¹⁰ The dressing-station was the subject of much publicity in the early years of the war, as it was run by two Englishwomen, the Baroness T’Serclaes and Mairie Chisholm. They set up a station in the sandbagged cellar of a destroyed house. The cellar doubled as quarters for the ladies. The Baroness, known as Mrs. Knocker before her marriage to a titled Belgian officer, was one of the original members of the Munro Ambulance Corps, but had a falling-out with Munro and set up her own operation¹¹ in Pervyse (commonly spelled now as Pervijze). Because of the flooding, trenches were “an impossibility.” A thick embankment on which the railroad



13. 1st Line Trenches, Pervyse.

¹⁰ Souttar, *Furnes*, 37.

¹¹ Raitt, 6.

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ran was only a few feet above the fields, so the Belgian positions had to be on or behind the embankment. This stereoview shows the rails and a position atop the embankment. The picture must have been taken during a lull in the fighting, as the machine gun is not sited tactically and the soldiers are not concerned about cover.

A contemporary aerial photo of Pervyse shows the entire village was virtually leveled. Souttar wrote “most of the houses in the little town were absolutely destroyed.” The Pervyse church was wrecked by artillery fire early in the battle and “was destroyed beyond any possibility of repair. The roof was gone entirely, and large portions of the walls; a great piece of the tower had been blown clean out, and the tower itself was leaning dangerously.”¹²



14. Pervyse Church and Graveyard.



15. Pervyse Church Tower.

¹² Souttar, *Furnes*, 38.

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16. Pervyse Church Altar.

“Of the altar only the solid stones remained, surrounded by fragments of what had once been the stained glass of the apse, and the twisted remains of the great brass candlesticks which had stood beside the altar.”¹³ The stereoviews document precisely the destruction of the church; in this image even the twisted candlesticks by the altar can be discerned.

Ramscapelle

After the Belgians opened the sluices to flood the Yser plain, the Germans were threatened with drowning and attempted to break the Belgian lines to reach dry land. They succeeded briefly by capturing the village of Ramscapelle, now commonly spelled Ramskapelle, before it was retaken by the Belgians and French. Only one stereograph in the set was taken here, but it is of considerable interest. It shows the heavily damaged Ramscapelle church and camera motion is obvious. The title explains that the stereoview was taken under shell fire, so the motion was probably due to the ground shaking.



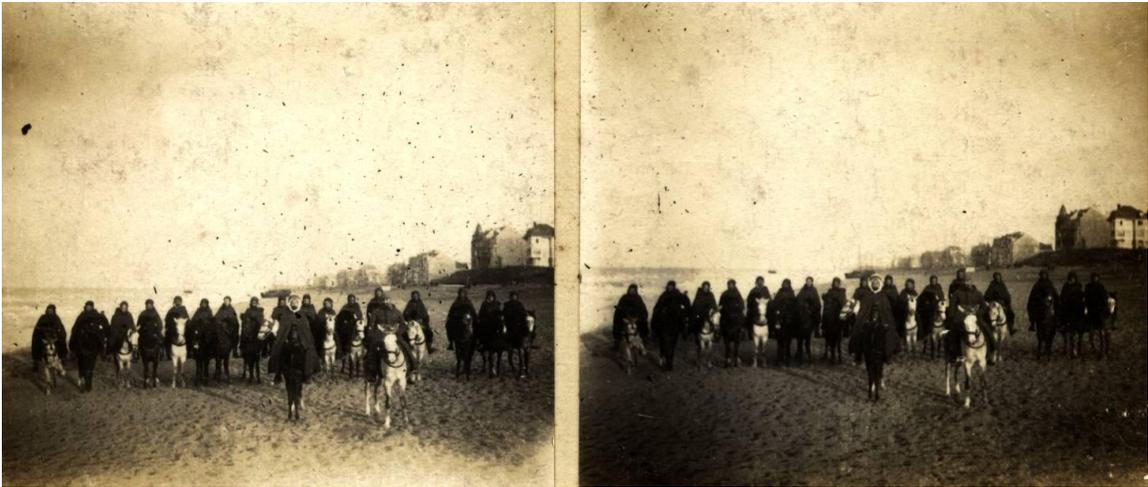
17. Ramscapelle Church (Taken Under Shell Fire & In Heavy Rain).

¹³ Souttar, *Furnes*, 38.

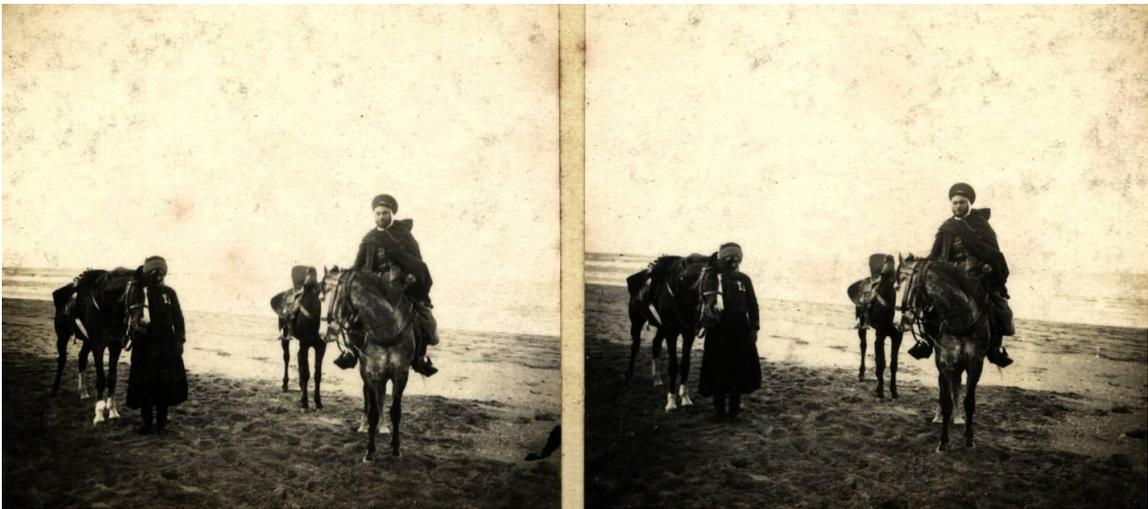
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Algerian Spahis

Of the 32 stereographs in the set, five show a type of French territorial light cavalry known as Spahis. There were Moroccan and Sudanese Spahis as well, but three of the five stereoviews specifically identify this unit as Algerian. There were six regiments of Spahis in the French cavalry; the specific identification of this unit is unknown. The Spahis wore large turbans and heavy cloaks, which are evident in the photos. Most of the images show the unit on a beach, so it may have been located at the seaside resort of La Panne, a few miles north of Furnes. Alternatively, the shots could have been taken at Malo-les-Bains while the ambulance corps was there before moving to Furnes. Both Souttar and the nurse describe French territorial units fitting the description of Spahis operating in the area.



18. Algerian Spahis, Ocean In The Distance.



19. Algerian Spahis On A Beach.

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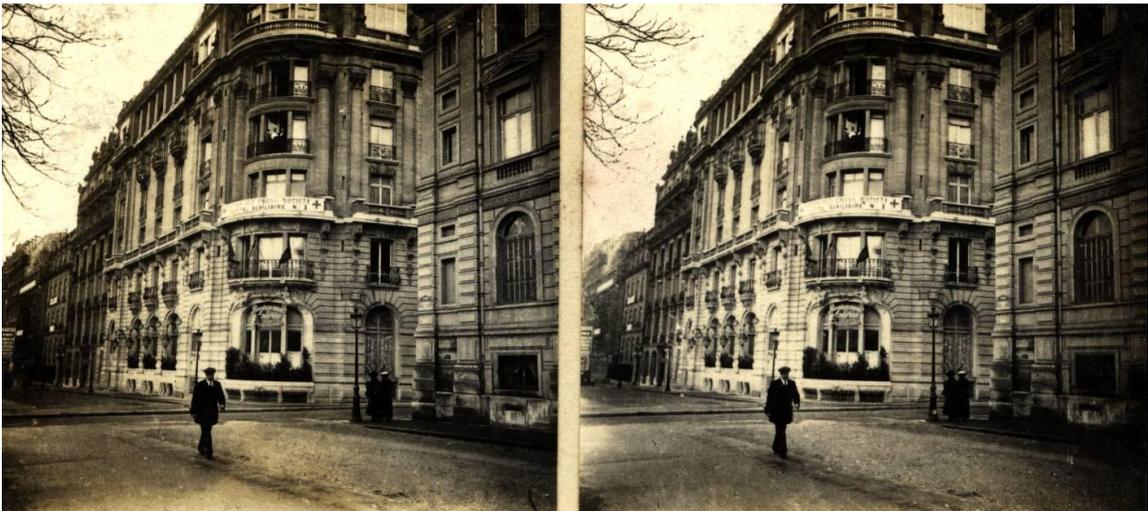


20. French Officer With Spahis.

Like the French Foreign Legion, the officers in Spahi formations were French, and the title of this stereoview notes the French officer. Unlike the rest of the unit, the officers wore European-style uniforms.

Paris

The person who took these photos had occasion to go to Paris, probably to take patients to the British Red Cross Auxiliary Hospital. This is the only stereoview in the set positively identified as being taken in Paris.



21. British Red Cross Auxiliary Hospital No. 1, Paris.

The stereographer took several stereoviews of French boys and young men drilling. Four showed the same parade field; since a building near by bears a sign “Paris-Taxis,” so these were probably taken in Paris.



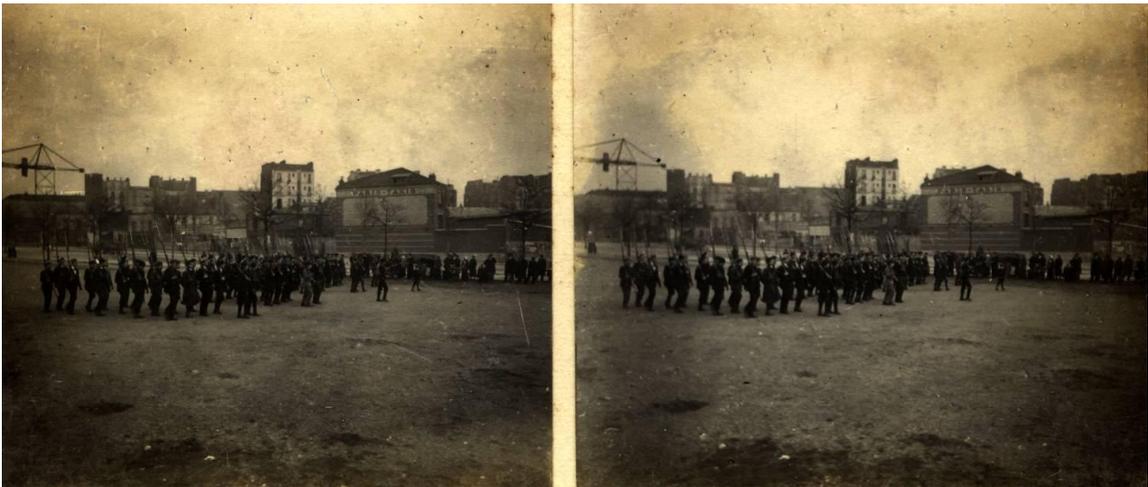
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22. French Boys Drilling, Paris.



23. French Boys Drilling, Paris.



24. French Boys Drilling, Paris ("Paris-Taxis" Building at Right Center).

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APPENDIX – List of Stereoviews By Original Number and Title

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Illustration Nr.</u>
1	French School Boys training (1914)	22
2	French School boys drilling	Not used
3	Algerian Spahis	Not used
3A	Algerian Spahis	Not used
4	Algerian Spahis	Not used
5	D Sector Munro Ambulance Corps	2
6	1 st line Trenches Pervyse	13
7	Spahis	19
8	Spahis French Officer	20
9	Ramscapelle Taken under Shell Fire & in heavy rain	17
10	Grand Place Furnes	5
11	Grand Place Furnes	7
12	<i>Untitled</i> (same place and time as 17 & 21)	Not used
13	Furnes	6
14	Young French recruits drilling	Not used
15	Prisoners, Furnes	9
16	<i>Untitled</i>	18
17	<i>Untitled</i> (same place and time as 12 & 21)	23
18	Car shewing Shrapnel holes	4
19	Pervyse	14
20	Pervyse	16
21	<i>Untitled</i> (same place and time as 12 & 17)	24
22	Church at Pervyse	15
23	Wounded from Ypres	11
23A	Wounded brought from Ypres (<i>23A written over 28</i>)	12
24	Soldiers wounded with Explosive bullets	Not used
25	British Auxiliary Hospital (Paris)	21
26	Belgian Children being taken to Calais (from St. George)	10
27	Belgian Soldiers billeted in Church at Furnes	8
28	<i>See 23A</i>	N/A
29	Furnes	3
30	Field Hospital Furnes	Not used
30A	Field Hospital Furnes	1