

Rachel Susannah Townsend [5D32]

A Tribute to Sergeant Frederick Keeling MM

Dear Mrs Keeling

You will, I expect, have learnt by this time that Keeling has been killed in action. All of us in the regiment are most awfully distressed about it. Though many good fellows went on the day of the battle (18 August), none left behind him more wide-spread regrets.

He was killed out along a German trench up which our bombers were working. I understand that there was a risk of our bombers bombing our own men in this trench. Keeling jumped up on the parapet to make sure that the Germans were ahead, and he was caught by a bullet and died at once. The officer with the party took his papers off him.

It is a very sad business. He did magnificently in the fight, and the party he was leading did particularly valiant work, protecting at a ticklish moment our own flank and the flank of the battalion on our right. We were unable to hold, at the time, the position we had taken, and the vigorous 'bombing' offensive which Keeling's party undertook saved us and ensured the success of the battalion on our right.

I need not expound Keeling's merits to you. I think, however, you may be interested to know how he was appreciated as a soldier by the rest of us.

He was always a great disciplinarian and certainly began as a somewhat unpopular N.C.O. His keenness and efficiency and military attention to detail did not conciliate the enemies he had at first, enemies because as a (forgive the word) "gentleman soldier" he was suspect, suspect also because he knew German! This was in the earliest days. As time wore on Keeling's extraordinary kindness to the men (coupled often with most horrific language!) and his unfailing energy in securing their comfort and seeing that they got their due, also his keenness on the regiment and everything regimental sports cross-country, etc. gave him a very different place in the eyes of the men. It was thanks to Keeling and this strong regimental spirit that the Red Feather our best regimental effort had such a great and continued success. He became an institution and (I am not exaggerating) a regular pillar of the battalion, whose absence at any time was strongly noticeable. This is a rare thing to say of anyone in a battalion. We shall be hard put to it to rearrange ourselves without him.

He became sergeant-major of the Grenadier Company a fifth and officially unrecognized organization which drew, as such things always will, a good deal of enmity from the four established companies, and needed, in consequence, extra energy and watchfulness in administration. Keeling was always anxious to have his bombers thus separate in the interests of their efficiency, and he undertook to make a success of it. This he most certainly did. He was always a shield and buckler to "the bombers" in real or fancied slights and injustices, indefatigable in looking after them and in seeing that he got the right men. As a consequence he had them all in the

hollow of his hand. The pains he took reaped for us a rich result in the splendid way the bombers fought the other day Sergeant- Major Keeling at their head.

All of us who knew him, and that includes all the brigade, and a large part, in fact, of the Division keenly hoped he might come through all right. I like to think at all events that he was killed well ahead of the line out in the enemy trenches and among his own men. I feel sure he would have wished for no other end.

The Red Feather is especially closely connected with Keeling. He and I were projecting another number shortly, and I should like to complete one in a week or two. The magazine becomes two things now a history of the doings and the moods of the regiment, and now, in addition, a memorial to one of the most remarkable men in the Army.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) R. BARRINGTON-WARD,
Captain,
6th Battalion D.C.L.I., B.E.F.,

30 August, 1916.