

## CHAPTER VII

### FRANCE

#### THE SOMME AGAIN

#### ST. QUENTIN

WE emerged after a ten hours' journey into an undulating and relatively smiling down country, which contrasted favourably with the bleak, bare and devastated north. This was the region over which the enemy had retired early in 1917, and on all sides was apparent his characteristic thoroughness and ruthlessness. No houses were left to accommodate man or beast, and if the land immediately around us was otherwise unscarred, behind us lay the vast desolation left by the battle of the Somme of 1916.

We reached Mericourt-Miramont at 9.30 a.m. on January 25th, and marched from there over this latter waste to billets at Suzanne, about 15 miles away.

The Brigade Commander inspected the Battalion on the line of march, and expressed his satisfaction at the fine soldierly bearing and good march discipline of the men. In no small measure the latter quality was due to the new band, which played on this occasion for the first time on the line of march, and was much congratulated on its progress.

Our billets at Suzanne were composed of French Army huts and semi-ruined houses, both in need of repairs, which were rapidly effected by our pioneers. Unfortunately, we were not able to enjoy the fruits of their labours for long, for on the 29th we moved from Carnoy to Peronne, and from there by train to

Moislains, where, after one night, we "proceeded" by the usual combination of trains and marches to Railway Camp, Heaudecourt, where we took over billets from the 12th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers. Here we were bombed during the night by enemy aircraft, and suffered casualties—other ranks, 1 killed and 5 wounded—with the result that for the next three days we devoted ourselves to making protection for the camp against attacks by bombs and shells.

The 39th Division had meanwhile been transferred to the VII Corps, Fifth Army (General Sir Hubert Gough, K.C.B.).

On the 30th we lost Lieut. and Quartermaster A. P. Lunam, M.C., who was transferred to the 14th Convalescent Camp as Quartermaster and Adjutant. Lieut. Lunam had been with us almost since our inception, and his genial and robust personality had won for him the regard of all. We sadly missed his kindly care of our creature comforts.

He was succeeded as Quartermaster by Second Lieut. T. Powell.

#### VAUCELETTE FARM, GOUZOUCOURT

On February 3rd we took over the Line.

It was many months since we had been in a sector with such respectable trenches as those in which we now found ourselves. It was officially designated as the "Vaucelette Farm Sector, Gouzoucourt Right Sector, Right Sub-sector." It formed part of the line which had been recently taken over from the French Army, and presented a great contrast to the systems with which we were familiar in the Salient. The trenches, in open undulating country, were good and in a very fair state of preservation, and moreover were furnished with good strong points. They required but little work upon them to render them complete cover from all observation of movement.

Furthermore they were adequate as protection from artillery, and were served by a road so situated that

transport could come up within 200 yards of the front line. It was therefore possible to give all a hot meal at any time. "No Man's Land" was something like 2,000 yards wide, and so bombing and the discharge of rifle grenades were out of the question. Scattered over this neutral zone were dead horses left after the battle of Cambrai.

Familiar names like Racket, Fives and Football Trench, Chapel Crossing, Revelon Farm, Box Dump and Methuen Trench will be remembered by all who were with us at this time.

It was a very quiet tour of duty in the militant sense, and revolutionarily active in the administrative.

*Militant.*—Our time was spent in improving the trenches, which repaid work on them. A direct hit on one of the "D" Company posts was the one disaster, three other ranks being killed and two wounded.

*Administrative.*—To meet the shortage of men and officers, a scheme had just been introduced throughout the Expeditionary Force whereby each Brigade was to consist of three Battalions only. One Battalion in the 117th Infantry Brigade had accordingly to be broken up, and as there were two Battalions of the Sherwood Foresters, it was inevitable that one of these should be the victim of the reorganisation. As we were the Senior Battalion of the two, it was decided to disband the 17th Battalion, and we found ourselves, on a sort of principle of cannibalism, called on to absorb our old friends and rivals. It was a sad day for this fine Battalion, which had so much in common with ourselves, both in origin and experience. It was almost a twin brother to us, having been born in Nottingham a few weeks after our own birth in Derby—the two chief towns of the Shires which give the territorial names to the 45th and 95th Foot. We had worked and fought by their side, had opposed them in innumerable contests, sporting and athletic, had given them their Commanding Officer, as they had given us ours, and if they had to lose their

identity it is probable that they would have chosen to be absorbed by us rather than any other fate.

Henceforth, therefore, this history becomes the story of both the 16th and 17th Battalions Sherwood Foresters. The addition to our numbers constituted a revivifying process which in medical circles might be compared with inoculating the glands with the virus of youth—though as no reflection on the 17th Battalion is intended the analogy should not be pressed to the usual origin of the accretion.

The disbandment took place on the 8th February, and though some of the officers and men were posted to other Battalions of the Regiment, the majority, comprising the following officers and 200 other ranks, joined us:—

Captain A. Kerr.

Captain J. W. J. Millar, D.S.O., D.C.M.

Lieut. M. A. Ellissen, M.C.

Lieut. G. Reece.

Lieut. N. L. Dexter, M.C.

Second Lieut. W. E. Boswell.

Second Lieut. C. H. Rollason.

Second Lieut. G. Powell.

Second Lieut. L. Surridge.

In the reorganisation which necessarily followed, our old "A" Company was disbanded, and with its officers, and 60 Other Ranks from the 17th Battalion, was detailed to fill up the ranks of "B" "C" and "D" Companies. A new "A" Company was formed of officers and 150 other ranks of the 17th Battalion.

This arrangement took place while we were in the line, and on the 12th, relieved by the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles, we moved to huts at Heaucourt, one and a half miles from the Front.

During our three days here we supplied our quota of working parties and defeated the 13th Battalion Gloucester Regiment at football, 6—0.

On the 16th we relieved the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade in the Gouzoucourt Right Sector, Left Sub-sector, and thus escaped an attention of the enemy, whose air-

craft during the night were actively engaged in dropping bombs on the transport lines.

The trenches in our new sector were in much the same condition as those at Vaucelette Farm and likewise repaid work upon them. A considerable amount was required and put in—raising parapets, laying duck-boards and making general improvements. Three Companies held the front line and one was in support. The tour was quiet but for machine gun fire, and there was not very much of that.

On the 21st the Battalions on our right were bombarded and the S.O.S. went up. We stood to arms, but no attack or raid developed.

On the 24th we were relieved by the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade and moved back to Heaudecourt, where again working parties, interspersed with Platoon football, were the order of the day.

#### DESSERT WOOD

The 28th of the month saw us in Dessart Wood Camp, where we took over from the 1/6th Battalion Cheshire Regiment.

We were accommodated in huts in a rolling, chalk-down countryside, near a wood which gave the only trees to the locality for miles around. Fins village was not far behind us, but there were no civil inhabitants left in it then. Our camp was surrounded by batteries of artillery, and we were thus situated, like the Light Brigade, with "cannon to right of us—cannon to left of us—and cannon in front of us." Moreover, they, also, "volleyed and thundered."

The great German attack was expected, and we were in due course allotted our battle positions.

In this camp we spent the last three weeks before our disintegration as a Battalion. It was veritably the calm before the storm and our programme came under three headings—working parties, training and sports. Working parties were employed almost daily in digging rear lines of defence and the map was covered as a result

of their labours with an intricate system of "green lines," "brown lines" and "yellow lines." We dug the "yellow" system in front of Queen's Cross and buried cable backward from this point. The chief feature of the training was a very thorough practice by the whole Battalion at firing on the range, there being one situated not far from the camp. The working parties were exacting, but recreational training relieved their monotony.

The results of the matches at football were :—

"B" Company played the Rest, and defeated them, 1—0.

Our First team defeated the 5th Battalion Cameronians, 1—0.

In the semi-final of the Inter-Company Divisional Football Competition, "B" Company defeated the winning Company of the 4/5th Battalion Black Watch, 1—0, and a return match some days after ended with the same result.

Besides the matches there were other pick-up games, Boxing and Tug-of-War contests and an Inter-Company Shooting competition, in which the following was the order of merit :—

- 1st.—"C" Company.
- 2nd.—"H.Q." Company.
- 3rd.—"A" Company.
- 4th.—"D" Company.
- 5th.—"B" Company.

On March 15th we learnt that, owing to ill-health, Captain and Adjutant S. F. Lilley, M.C., had been struck off the strength of the Battalion, and was not to return to us. Captain Lilley was among the first officers to join the Battalion and had been appointed Adjutant a few weeks after our formation. An unremitting sense of duty and almost continuous service up till a few weeks before this date had undermined his health to such an extent that he was not fit again for many months. We thus lost another valued original officer, who has afforded the historian ungrudging help in the preparation of this history.



## "THE GREAT RETREAT OF 1918"

The historian has had occasion to ask for indulgence from time to time in this narrative owing to the difficulty he finds in describing a modern battle. If, however, it is difficult to give an intelligible account of an operation in which one's own side is the aggressor, for which careful plans have been issued, and for which arrangements have been made to meet all probable eventualities—how much more difficult must it be to describe an operation in which the enemy has made the plans—necessarily very imperfectly known to us—in which *he* has the initiative, in which on one's own side expedience from hour to hour generates the tactics and in which new schemes are hastily improvised from day to day under the stern call of necessity? The historian therefore asks for an extra allowance of indulgence for his account of the Great Retreat of 1918.

In the early morning of the 21st March, the enemy began his last great offensive—General Ludendorff's final and desperate cast for victory—and the historian now embarks on an account of ten days' continuous engagement and of a series of rearguard actions, withdrawals, hasty entrenchments, and counter-attacks, more exhausting and exacting than anything in which we had hitherto taken part.

In all the circumstances it seemed advisable to continue on the principle already adopted and to confine the account within the limits the historian has imposed on himself in his descriptions of previous operations; that is, to tell the story of our own fighting from hour to hour, and not to attempt to explain the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of the tactical situation which rendered each individual activity necessary.

The modern popular journalist would probably call the story of this ten days "an epic," and for once he would not be wrong.

The 39th Division General Staff afterwards issued a



LIEUT.-COL. J. R. WEBSTER, D.S.O., M.C.

wonderfully clear account of the Divisional operations, and Captain Brown, 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles, has written a vivid narrative from the point of view of the 117th Infantry Brigade—both of which lie before the historian as he writes and on both of which he has levied tribute—but in a history of one of the contending battalions on the scale already adopted in this book, it is not possible to utilise their clear appreciation, stage by stage, of the general—or, at least, the divisional—situation except as a frame work.

One or two general propositions should, however, be borne in mind:—

- (1) The official policy of the Army was "fight rearguard actions and delay enemy."
- (2) General Ludendorff's infiltration tactics were novel and original, almost unorthodox, and we do not seem to have entirely understood the principle on which he pressed home his attacks on weak places with relatively small bodies of storm troops and picked machine gunners, and thereby turned the stronger positions. His frontal attacks appear to have been comparatively unsuccessful, and certainly disastrously costly to him, but our withdrawals were rendered necessary by the infiltration of small bodies into our flanks, making the main positions we held untenable.
- (3) The ten days' operations comprehended almost exclusively "open fighting," and rearguard actions. The new armies had had no experience of either.

#### MARCH 21ST

On the night of the 20th–21st March we were comfortably settled in the Dessart Wood Camp (which we shared with a Battalion of the Royal Scots) on the Fins-Gouzoucourt Road, contentedly enjoying three weeks

in which recreational training had dominated the tedium of working parties. We were, moreover, not a little sceptical of the warnings about a big enemy offensive. When we had last met him at close quarters in September the enemy had given us the impression that he was getting "past it," and moreover "Wolf!" had been cried very often. Furthermore, our minds were full of football and sports, which seemed to be encouraged by high authority, while the Commanders of the Division and the Brigade were both on leave.

At 4.30 a.m. a heavy gas and high explosive bombardment opened on the front; a few shells dropped innocuously into our camp and took the place of "Réveillé." The noise in the forward area, however, sounded impressive enough to make us think it might develop into something serious. We got up to find there was a heavy mist, and in the gloom had breakfast and prepared for action. At 6 a.m., when we were "standing to," the code word which put the local Defence Scheme into operation was received by wire, and we prepared to move to our assembly position in Sorrel Wood, to be in readiness there to support the troops in the line. Sorrel Wood was between one and two miles away on our right front. Our departure was somewhat delayed owing to the tardy arrival of our transport, which had been caught by shell fire on leaving their lines in Fins. We started from camp at 7 a.m., Nature combining with the Germans to asphyxiate us, in that the dense mist was by now heavily impregnated with gas. This latter was no doubt meant rather for our neighbours in camp—the gunners—than for ourselves but, unfortunately, gas, like rain, falls on the just and the unjust. Through this we struggled wearing our gas-masks, but even so suffered over twenty gas casualties, while more were seized with sickness. It was soon found impossible to grope our way across country with this handicap to visibility in addition to the mist itself, and a certain number of officers had to remove their masks and guide our wheezy footsteps by

the flash of guns with the nose clip and mouth-piece as their only protection.

When, after considerable delay, we reached Sorrel Wood we found that, in vulgar parlance, "it was no place for us," as it was reeking with gas and being steadily shelled. We accordingly settled down among the hills between Sorrel and Nurlu, where we could at least remove our respirators, but from where we were again induced a little later to shift back on the suggestion of the German high explosive. The mist cleared about noon, and here it may be mentioned that the same meteorological conditions were reproduced daily, an important factor, as it enabled the enemy every morning to assemble for his attacks without our knowledge. We waited in the latter situation till nightfall—a trying period of suspense and inactivity—and had no idea how things were going, though the bombardment drew ever nearer. At 8 p.m. Echelon "B," consisting of Major H. R. Stevens, Captain J. W. J. Millar, and 110 Other Ranks, moved off to Haut Allaines to form in themselves a small reserve of reinforcements.

At 9 p.m., owing to the retirement of the 21st Division, then in front of us, we received orders to proceed to Langavesnes and dig a switch line from Tincourt Wood, near there, to Saulcourt for the protection of the flank of that division. We moved off, reached Langavesnes three miles off at 10 p.m., and dug all night.

#### MARCH 22ND

The line had been taped out, but was not very easy to follow in the dark and mist, which was again rising. Even so, by dawn we had made a fairly serviceable trench 800 yards long, with some wire entanglements to protect it. We took up our position here, with the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles on our left, and the 1/1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment on our right.

We were at this time 4,000 yards from the front.

We had not long to wait, for under pressure of superior



numbers, troops from every sector began to fall back. About 10 a.m. we received information that the enemy was violently attacking all along the front, and though the situation was obscure, it was clear he had got through in some places. At the same time the heavy bombardment which we could hear was being carried out in the battle zone, enlarged its orbit and soon included Saulcourt; and from 1 p.m. onwards Langavesnes and the valley behind our camp were added to the area under shell-fire. At 11.30 a.m. large numbers of men and wounded began to come back through our lines as the troops engaged with the enemy withdrew, and at 1.30 p.m., on the retirement of the 16th Division through us, we found ourselves in the front line, while the steady trickle of returning men and wounded had swelled to a stream. An hour later we were actually in touch with the oncoming enemy's forward snipers, and machine gun fire swept the crest of the ridge behind our trenches. This latter became very intense, and was fortified with 4.2's, though the latter fortunately did not do much damage.

The enemy by now was understood to be in Saulcourt.

For the next two hours we were engaged with the enemy advance guard and snipers and with our rifle and Lewis gun fire undoubtedly made his attack on us extremely costly. Our artillery had presumably taken up their next position, for we had only one 18-pounder battery to support us. This remained until we ourselves withdrew, and it seems clear from the Divisional Report that these tenacious gunners stuck to us too long to save their guns. Our situation at this time was rendered more precarious by twelve large red-nosed enemy aeroplanes, which hovered above us like great birds of prey, and squirted lead from their machine guns on to our backs, while, judging by results, they were apparently also directing the German artillery fire. As in this position the 117th Brigade was acting as a defensive flank to the 21st Division, it is not surprising that the Battalions on our right and left were seriously pressed by 3 p.m.

They put up a fine resistance against heavy odds, and we covered them as far as possible, but about 4.30 p.m. we found ourselves in a very exposed situation—a promontory projecting into the invader's lines.

The Commanding Officer and the acting Adjutant, Lieut. C. E. Garland, had made a careful survey of our position in the early afternoon, and had reported the result to Brigade Headquarters.

In the meantime some men of the Sussex Regiment withdrawing from forward positions reported that vast masses of the enemy were pouring over the ridge in front.

About 4 p.m. the Commanding Officer had received instructions to retire when he thought it desirable and at 4.30 p.m. Lieut.-Colonel Webster gave the order for us to move back by companies. He then personally organised the covering party and returned to Battalion Headquarters.

The historian is indebted to Lieut. Gosling for an account of the next tragic hour. We were then on the side of a small ridge, which gave us a fairly dominant position. We there formed a defensive flank, under cover of which the other Battalions of the Brigade withdrew to the "Green Line" near Bois de Buire. On their departure our own companies also withdrew under orders from the commanding officer, leaving a small band of about twenty men and a machine gun detachment to cover their retirement. This small party, under Lieut. Gosling, had the disquieting vision of the main body of the enemy steadily advancing. Three tanks came up to their aid, but were put out of action in a very short time by the German guns. The forward parties of the enemy were getting quite near, but were eventually held by the rifle and machine gun fire of this little rearguard. To circumvent this arrest of their progress the Germans employed their infiltration tactics and started to work round the flank. Meanwhile the relentless advance of the main force, still a good way

behind, continued, and our party could observe the guns being brought up less than a thousand yards away and unlimbered before their eyes. These were reinforced by three or four machine gun detachments, which moved forward at intervals of about 150 yards. Our desperate fire, however, succeeded in holding up these latter and the forward parties, except on our left flank, where they were slowly working round.

At this moment Lieut.-Colonel Webster came up to see if all was proceeding satisfactorily, and to ensure an orderly withdrawal. He had instructed the acting Adjutant, Lieut. C. E. Garland, to accompany the rest of the Battalion, which he said he himself would join later. Lieut.-Colonel Webster, it is thought, found the situation much worse than he expected, and feared the rearguard was not large enough for the duty it had to perform. Evidently he felt that every additional rifle would make some material difference to the defence, and seizing one himself, took command of the detachment in the trench.

The party continued to hold the enemy for some ten more minutes, when a machine gun at long range found them with great accuracy. Lieut.-Colonel Webster then ordered a withdrawal over the ridge, a retirement which involved a run up its open face before, at least, cover from view could be reached behind it. Once this gauntlet had been run, the Commanding Officer and Lieut. Gosling rallied their men and took up a position in a deserted trench just behind the sky line. During their short stay there—between 5 and 10 minutes—the pitiless hail of machine gun bullets continued to take their toll. Moreover, the situation was getting every minute more perilous, as, though the enemy in front were still being held up, those on the left flank were getting further round.

Lieut.-Colonel Webster accordingly ordered a further retirement. Lieut. Gosling had moved some 20 or 30 yards, when he looked back and saw the Commanding Officer had fallen and that several men were gathered



VAUCLETTE FARM, GOUZOUCCURT.



round him. Lieut. Gosling left his party (which had been increased by stragglers to about 30 men by this time) to continue their move back, and returned to the small group of men surrounding Lieut.-Colonel Webster, about 20 yards from the crest of the ridge. Here he found two officers of the Royal Sussex Regiment and some men endeavouring to raise our Commanding Officer, who sank into unconsciousness after recognising Lieut. Gosling. At that moment a shrapnel shell burst over them and killed Lieut.-Colonel Webster and one of the other officers. Lieut. Gosling was wounded in both knees by the same shell, and was fetched by two men, who came back from his party (now about 250 yards away), and by their aid he maintained a precarious lead on the advancing Germans, now only 80 yards behind.

Soon after, this halting triumvirate came up with an unknown officer, who, with his platoon and a machine gun, stopped the shouting enemy till all had got away.

It was possible afterwards to obtain a few more facts. After Lieut. Gosling had moved off to direct the right wing of the retiring detachment, Lieut.-Colonel Webster went back and brought two wounded men from over the exposed side of the ridge. He then turned round to pick up his respirator and steel helmet and was shot by a bullet in the chest at very close range. He was undoubtedly seriously wounded when Lieut. Gosling returned to him, and, as has been told, was killed by the shrapnel shell a few minutes afterwards.

We had held the position to the last, and if successful achievement is the reward of those who die in battle, it should be stated that we, as a Battalion, and more especially Lieut.-Colonel Webster and his brave band, had effected what was required of them, for the Divisional account reports that all transport was enabled to get away owing to the obstruction of the German advance by successive rearguard actions.

We had meanwhile moved to Bois de Buire by platoons. This difficult manoeuvre was necessary as our Division

had been instructed to cover the 21st Division. It had been carried out under the protection of a rearguard provided by "A" and "B" Companies which, in spite of the gallant efforts of Lieut.-Colonel Webster's party, had been compelled to engage the enemy, and had fought with grim determination. By dusk we were all assembled again and later in the evening were moved into Brigade Reserve behind the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles and the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade, who were holding the "Green Line" at Tincourt Wood. We spent the night behind a Bank, under the command of Captain Harrison—in the absence of Major H. R. Stevens. The enemy marked his forward position by sending up coloured lights, and, having made this announcement, remained in it for the night.

We had lost five Officers in addition to the Commanding Officer, while Captain Hall, the Brigade Major, and Lieut. Reece, the Brigade Signal Officer, were also casualties.

Captain Lindeman, our Medical Officer, says in his diary that our casualties among other ranks were not very heavy up to this time, but it had been impossible to get all the wounded away, as there were not enough ambulances, and many had to be carried on stretchers, two and a half miles, to Templeux-la-Fosse before they could be evacuated on transport.

#### MARCH 23RD

The 23rd March dawned fine and dry, with the dismal fog we had previously experienced. We received orders in the early morning to move from the "Green Line" forthwith and to leave one Company behind under the Officer Commanding 1/1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment. We left "A" Company, under Lieut. Drynan, for this duty.

We marched off through the 116th Brigade, which covered our retirement to Bussy, where we took up what was called the Corps Line—Bussy to Nurlu-Peronne

Main Road. We were instructed to delay the enemy in order that the congested roads might be cleared. Much might perhaps have been expected from a line bearing this august designation, but there were in fact no trenches. The Corps Line was a geographical expression; it only existed on paper. We proceeded to make it materialise.

About 10.30 a.m. we found ourselves working with the remains of the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade, which had been badly cut up the day before, and about noon we were joined by the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles and some troops of the 16th Division, who had fallen back fighting from the "Green Line." Later still the 116th Infantry Brigade reached us, and took up a position on our right. We were thus again more or less organised and ready to receive the Germans, though by 1 p.m. we were very anxious as to what was happening on our flanks, as the sounds of firing seemed to indicate that the enemy were getting round our right in the direction of Peronne.

Major H. R. Stevens rejoined us in the course of the morning and assumed command of the Battalion.

About 2.30 p.m. the enemy reached us and made a most determined attack on our position. Masses of them, in columns of six dotted all over the countryside, advanced from the front and right. They suffered heavy casualties from machine gun fire and field guns with open sights. (It may be mentioned here that the guns were each firing on an average 3,000 rounds a day during the ten days' retreat.) But this did not hold up the inexhaustible masses and soon they were quite round the flank of the 116th Brigade on our right. Accordingly, acting as rearguard to our own Brigade, we retired through marshy ground to Mont St. Quentin, a good defensive position with partially wired trenches on the Peronne-Haut Allaines Road. Furthermore we found ourselves here on high ground, which gave us an opportunity of seeing something of what was going on in our area—a wonderful

and profoundly discouraging sight. On the right we could see Peronne in flames, undergoing a heavy bombardment, while endeavours were being made to get away trains full of ammunition and other war material. On our front and on the left we were able to discern the enemy swarming down the Haut Allaines Road through Moislains and along the Somme Canal, the while being engaged by 18-pounder batteries over open sights, the gunners remaining until it was almost too late to save their guns. One Brigade in fact succeeded in getting away six of its guns only.

Behind us we obtained a view of a great army in retreat—lorries, limbers, guns and transport of all description retiring towards Clery, the point to which all in this region must converge for the crossing of the Somme. The enemy were shelling the roads at intervals.

Our own position on a plateau about 200 yards square, as has been shown, was good, but it had one weak point—on our immediate right was a hill just in front of our line, and from this the enemy could observe our approaches up to within 60 yards of the trench.

About 4 p.m. the Germans massed behind this hill and suddenly launched an attack in enormous numbers. He drove in our flank and turned the position, whilst further off he had worked round and was actually in Peronne. Our position was more than untenable—it was well nigh hopeless. The enemy were all round us—they were within thirty yards of some—and we only kept them off by almost superhuman efforts with rapid rifle and Lewis gun fire, just extricating ourselves before the pincers closed on us, and again falling back, fighting that most difficult of all forms of battle, a rearguard action, to cover the withdrawal of the rest of the Brigade. We struggled, scattered, formless and exhausted, into Clery. The Divisional Report puts it crudely, "Platoon organisation had temporarily ceased to exist."

At Clery, finding that the enemy were outflanking us on the left, the greater part of the Brigade, including part



COMPANY HEADQUARTERS, VAUCELETTE FARM, GOUZOU-COURT.



of the Battalion, crossed the Somme Canal and, passing along the Peronne-Clery Road, took up a strong position parallel to its banks on what was officially called the La Maisonette Line, with Headquarters at Feuillères, while Major Stevens, Capt. T. C. O. Williams, Lieuts. Garland and Moore with 60 men garrisoned a line behind the ridge in front of Clery, and were under the command of the G.O.C. 21st Brigade, though that General Officer would probably not have realised this responsibility at the time. This redoubtable party collected every straggler they could find, and with a mixed force held on as a defensive flank and resolutely repulsed an attack the enemy made on them about 7 p.m., harassed though they were by Baron von Richthoven's famous "circus"—the Red Squadron of the German Air Force. The party spent the night actively engaged in recruiting stragglers as reinforcements to their attenuated ranks.

The Battalion medical equipment, which had been conserved so far, was lost in this retirement, and the hurried departure of Divisional Headquarters which had been established in Clery, was evidenced by the piles of kit and stores of all kinds which were left dumped on the side of the road.

It may also be mentioned, as it affected our subsequent history, that the 16th Division had during the afternoon been "squeezed out" of the line by enemy pressure, and their shifting front had to be taken over by the 118th Infantry Brigade.

The roads were in indescribable confusion—choked with all sorts of transport—rendering it impossible to re-form units satisfactorily.

The difficulty of evacuating wounded was increased, and returning transport of all sorts was requisitioned by our resourceful Medical Officer, to take his charges, as well as their normal freight, back to the railhead.

Before midnight all Bridges, except one, on the Divisional Front, had been demolished.

We lost two more Officers during this day.

## MARCH 24TH

The 24th was quiet on our front, and this breathing space gave us an opportunity to reorganise, though there were but few to undergo the process—5 Officers and 168 Other Ranks being our strength return to the Brigade. The Battalion was commanded by Captain Harrison. As has been indicated, our position was a strong one, with the Somme between us and the enemy, and it was hoped a stand might successfully be made here. In the early morning the Divisional Commander personally inspected the whole Divisional Front and returned to breakfast well satisfied with the situation.

However, we were not able to stand in this, the first really strong position we had so far occupied, as during the day the north flank of the Corps was turned, and early on the morrow we had to retire in conformity with the line.

During the night of the 24th, therefore, those that had not already crossed the river now moved over the Bridge at Feuillères. The enemy were pressing on the other side, and at 8 p.m. a patrol attempted to rush the bridge, which was immediately blown up. The enemy party was dispersed by machine gun fire and several were observed to fall.

When we were all re-assembled and able to count the cost of the day's activity we found that we had lost three more Officers, including our Commanding Officer, Major H. R. Stevens, M.C. (who was wounded in his valiant defence of the West Bank of the River), and Captain T. C. O. Williams, M.C., who, while crawling along the edge of a road to ascertain our exact position (now very difficult to appreciate, as we were "off" our maps), received a wound in the leg, from which he died shortly after. During the day Brig.-General Armytage returned and assumed command of the Brigade and Captain Harrison once more took the place of Major H. R. Stevens as our Commanding Officer.

## MARCH 25TH

The Diary begins by saying that the 25th was a quiet day, but it ended in anything but that atmosphere. We had a good view of the roads on the ridge in front of Maricourt and directed our Lewis guns on to these excellent targets, along which the enemy moved ceaselessly eastward. One sergeant, who seemed to regard the Lewis gun as a sniper's weapon, claimed a motor-car and a dispatch rider. After we had made the further withdrawal along the Canal Bank referred to above, the enemy made a very heavy attack on our flanks and pressed them back so quickly that we were nearly surrounded again. However, about midnight we extricated ourselves in the darkness, and were ordered to fall back as far as Herbecourt-Presne. The enemy had now reached La Maisonnette Ridge; we dug in and in some cases occupied the old trenches of 1916.

We lost one more Officer.

## MARCH 26TH

The remainder of the night was quiet, but the enemy again attacked the right of the Divisional Front very heavily at dawn on the 26th and drove in the 118th Brigade, which rendered yet another retreat inevitable. Covered by the 116th Brigade we took up a position further in the rear for a short while, but were unable to hold it.

Our backs were to the wall; we fell back fighting into the front of the 16th Division, quite out of the line of retreat we were ordered to follow—towards Cappy. We now covered our own retiring Division (being assisted very materially by artillery firing over open sights) by a further resolute rearguard action, eventually joining the new main line which was being established from Framerville to Proyart, near the main Amiens Road. "They are mingled together, they are confused," said Napoleon of the Old Guard, at Waterloo, and Brig.-General

Armistage might well have said the same thing of his Brigade, for in this retirement, all units were mixed up in inextricable confusion.

In our new position we were heavily shelled, but our depleted number of Officers was not reduced during this day.

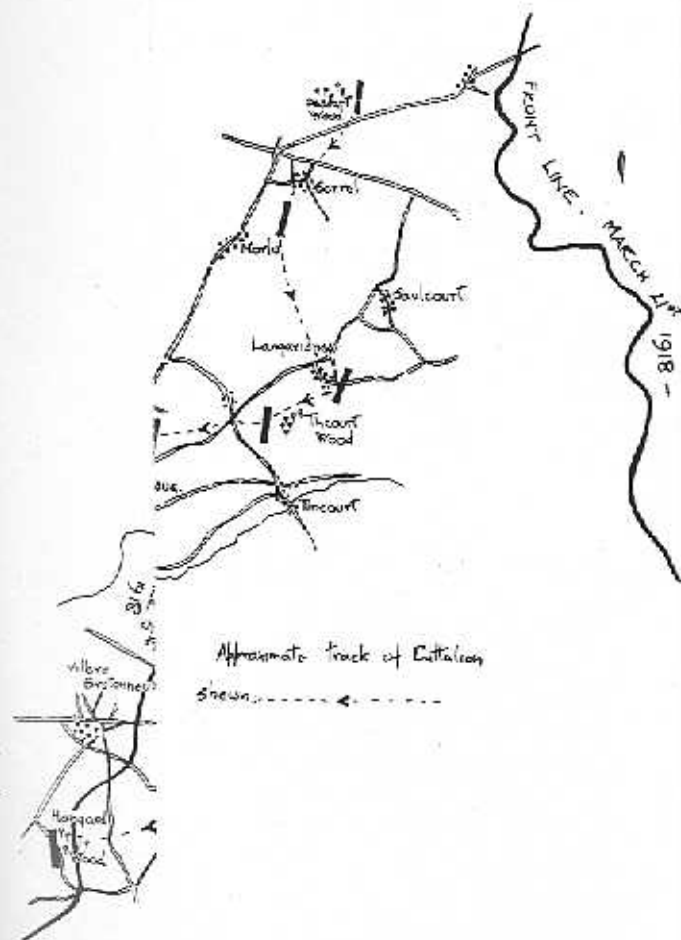
#### MARCH 27TH

The disastrous retrogression continued on the 27th.

After another quiet night spent wrapped in the blankets and quilts of the good people of Proyart, the enemy delivered heavy counter-attacks on us at daybreak. We were exhausted, but more bellicose than usual, and determined that if defeat was inevitable, victory should not be very agreeable. We inflicted enormous losses on the oncoming Germans; so many, in fact, that, though we had again given ground, he desisted his onslaughts and arrested his advance for a while. However, he broke through the 16th Division on our left and at 11.30 a.m. our Brigade had once more to form a defensive flank.

We were driven back a little from our position, but the 118th Brigade made a most successful counter-attack, and once more the line was established.

By 2 p.m. the situation had again become serious, as the enemy were now behind us in Maricourt, having crossed the Somme at Choisy. The 16th Division had had to retire further. Two Battalions of Durhams and Devons were rushed up and counter-attacked, and though they relieved the pressure for a while, they were not very successful. At 4 p.m. the Divisional Commander, Major-General Feetham, personally organised two counter-attacks with mixed troops of the Division, but these gallantly improvised onslaughts could not alter the main facts. The whole Division, now near La Motte en Santerre, was surrounded on three sides, and, furthermore, for the first time during these disastrous days the marvellous resources of the supply service could not cope with the situation. How could they? The enemy were





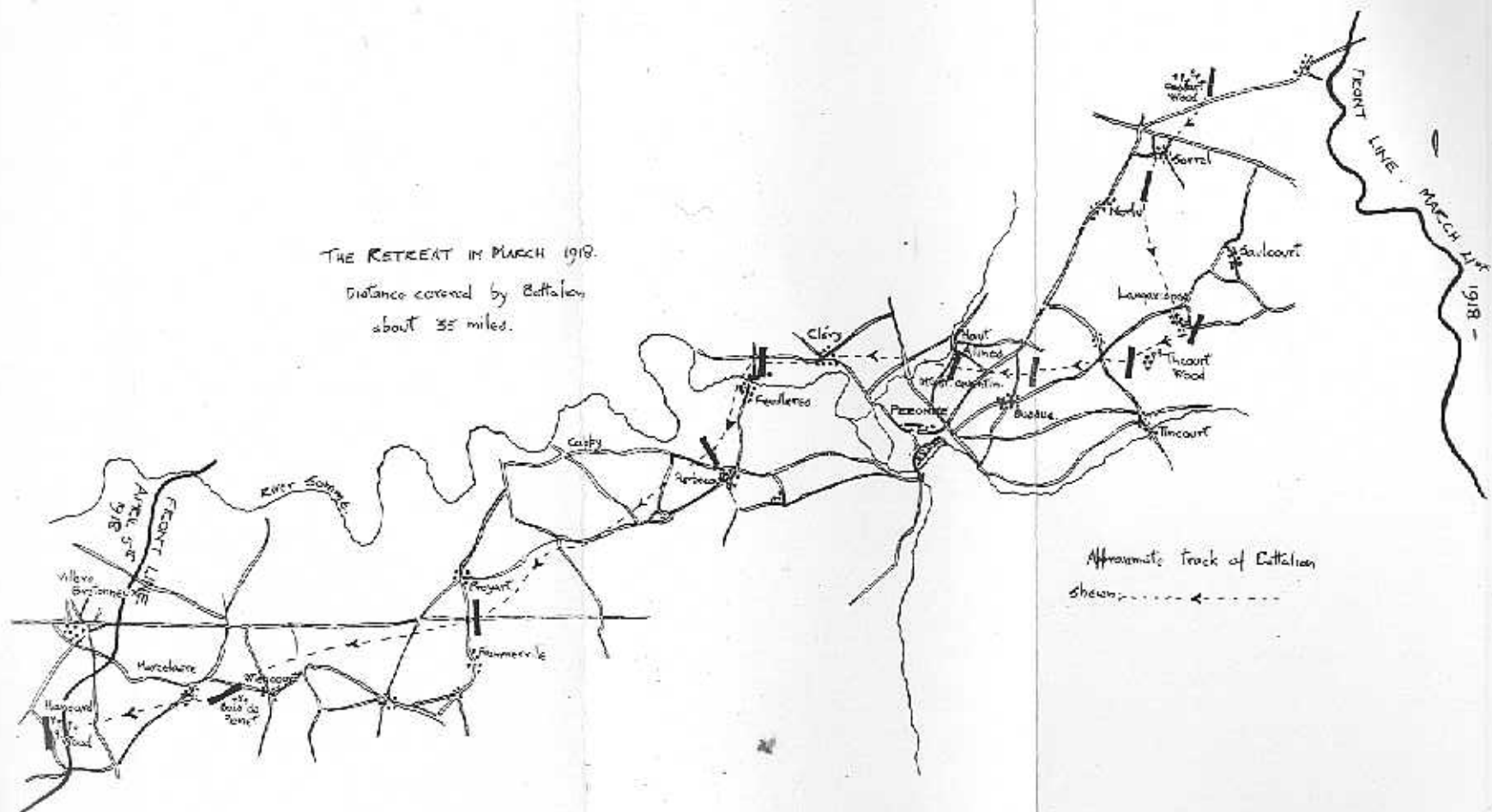
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THE RETREAT IN MARCH 1918.  
Distance covered by Battalion  
about 35 miles.



AREA OF GREAT RETREAT, 1918.

between us and our railhead. We had no rations that night.

In this situation the Brigade Commanders decided to retire, but a delayed message arriving from Divisional Headquarters prohibited this course. We were told to hold on at all costs, though "all costs" presumably did not include being surrounded!

At all events, we remained where we were, with the enemy behind us the whole night.

We had lost two more Officers, including the Officer Commanding the Battalion, Captain Harrison.

#### MARCH 28TH

The 28th, so to speak, began early, for at 1 a.m. we received information that the enemy had crossed the Somme further south, had captured La Motte in our rear, and were still advancing.

Some hours later we were ordered by *Corps* Headquarters to withdraw to Cayeux, but the order was too late for some of the Division and for the rest the withdrawal was more difficult than it would have been earlier under cover of darkness. So late was it that Brig.-General Bellingham, G.O.C. 118th Infantry Brigade, was captured, with his Brigade Major.

We started at 7 a.m. under intense and well-directed shell fire and reached a wood—Bois de Pienet—where we formed a defensive flank on the Marcelcave-Wiencourt line. After some hours, the Germans attacked and were repulsed by ourselves and Carey's Force with heavy losses, leaving four prisoners in our hands.

Later that day, as the enemy had advanced further in our rear, we were ordered to move back to high ground near Aubercourt. The German artillery was continuously shelling us the while. The Division was now organised into two Brigades, each 350 strong. Rations came up again, and darkness descended, bringing quiet and obscurity both to the landscape and the situation.

No casualties among the Officers occurred on the 28th.

## MARCH 29TH

The 29th saw no infantry action, but a barrage was put down on the new line we were assiduously making, and the bombardment continued throughout the day. As is known, the enemy had put his last ounce into this attack, and though his casualties must have been appalling the swarms continually being brought into action were astounding. His numbers were ever reinforced; we were a dwindling handful. Each Brigade of the Division numbered under 100 men per battalion.

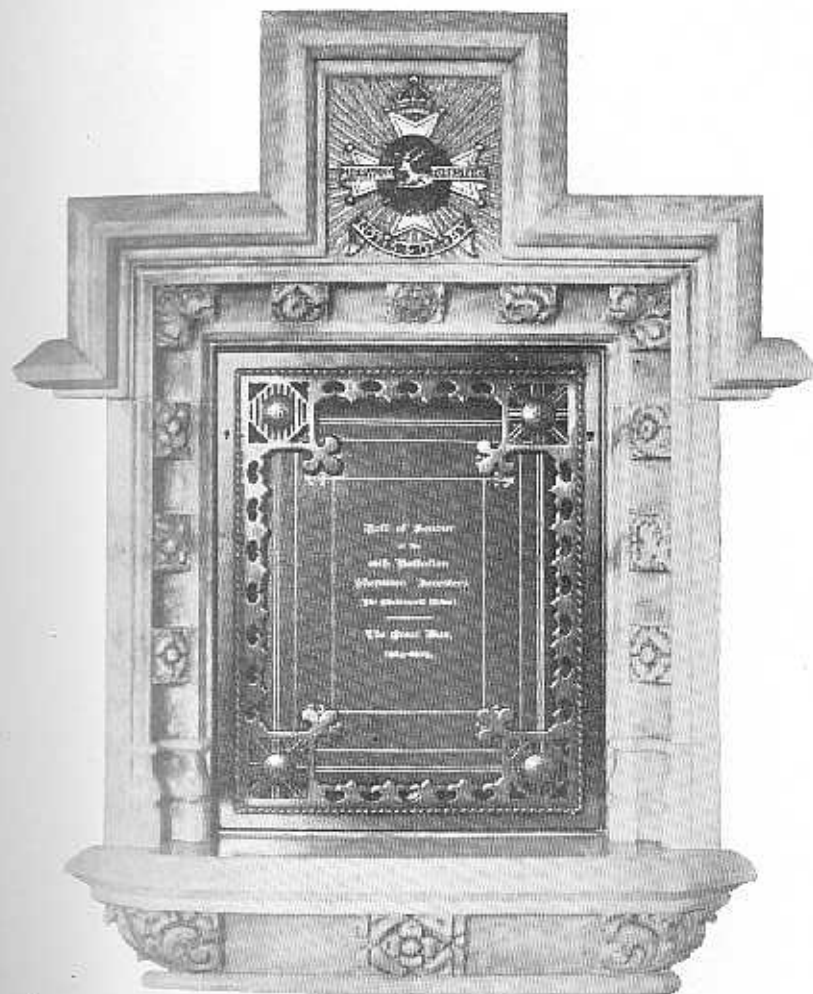
In the afternoon of this day the G.O.C. 39th Division, Major-General Feetham, was killed.

The retreat had been a crescendo of magnificent rear-guard actions. The next day saw the consummation.

## MARCH 30TH

We started by withdrawing to Hangard Wood, where we rested, but not for long, as the enemy had soon advanced as far as Hangard on the other side of the river. Orders were received to concentrate and prepare for a counter-attack, and half an hour later we moved forward and attacked the ridge north of Hangard Wood. We drove the enemy back and once more inflicted heavy casualties. Here we "dug in" with our entrenching tools under the lash of his high explosive and machine gun fire. There followed a counter-attack at 11 a.m., which turned our position. We were compelled to form ourselves into a defensive flank, and later to withdraw rapidly to Hangard Wood, where we reassembled and made a hurried reorganisation.

The senior Officer left was Second-Lieut. G. Powell, who led an attack in which we regained the position on the ridge we had lost a few hours before. We captured an enemy machine gun and turned it on its owners. On our right once more the enemy counter-attacked, and again we had to retire, but our dauntless commander was not to be denied his captures. Again he re-formed his dwindling companies and led a final attack, which once



AUMBRY, CONTAINING MEMORIAL ROLL OF THE 10TH SHERWOOD FORESTERS,  
PRESENTED BY THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE.



more swept us into our former position on the ridge—500 yards ahead. In popular parlance, the enemy then "gave us best," and we were able to hand over our hardly won position to the Anzac troops who relieved us in the course of the night.

During this last day the Battalion had suffered terribly heavy casualties, including two more Officers.

Second-Lieut. Powell led out the remnant—two Officers and 60 other ranks—though the stragglers who came in during that day and the next brought our establishment up to 150.

So ended our second visit to the Somme. On the first occasion we had spent in the melting pot as long a period as any other unit. On the second occasion, it may be confidently asserted no other Battalion spent longer. The Commander-in-Chief's famous Order of the Day that every position must be held to the last, had been faithfully and devotedly carried out. There were not enough of us left to do more. This, our last action, though a losing one, had ended with a victory so far as we were concerned, and, moreover, the ten days' battle had been fought in a manner worthy of our own past, of our traditions and of the great and famous regiment of which we formed a part. Once more we reach the end of a chapter—a sad, a tragic—but a far from inglorious one.

Before closing it, however, the historian would mention the awards conferred for gallantry by His Majesty the King, as well as the casualties—those awards no less distinguished which were given by our enemies.

These latter were :—

#### OFFICERS

\*Lieut.-Colonel J. R. Webster, D.S.O., M.C.,  
killed, 22/3/18.

Major H. R. Stevens, M.C., wounded, 24/3/18.

Captain L. J. B. Harrison, killed, 27/3/18.

Captain T. C. O. Williams, M.C., died of wounds,  
27/3/18.

Lieut. F. H. Gosling, M.C., wounded, 22/3/18.

Lieut. C. E. Garland, wounded, 23/3/18.  
 Lieut. R. C. Davies, M.C., wounded, 31/3/18.  
 Lieut. G. Reece, wounded, 22/3/18.  
 Lieut. R. M. Dryan, wounded, 31/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. E. E. Wilson, wounded, 22/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. T. Powell, wounded, 22/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. R. W. Barker, wounded, 23/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. C. E. Allen, wounded, 22/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. W. H. Foxon, wounded, 31/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. H. Drabble, wounded, 24/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. C. E. Robinson, wounded, 31/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. G. E. Wood, wounded, 27/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. C. H. Rollason, wounded, 30/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. A. G. Holloway, killed, 24/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. N. S. Dye, wounded and missing,  
 25/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. H. B. Buswell, wounded and missing,  
 31/3/18.  
 Second-Lieut. F. Nurse, missing, 30/3/18.

\*Lieut.-Colonel J. R. Webster had been our Commanding Officer for six months, and by his kindly, considerate and exceptionally gallant personality had earned the respect and affection of all ranks. The historian has not felt it falls within his province to write appreciations of individual Officers, but he cannot refrain from paying a very high tribute to Colonel Webster's character and his very remarkable qualities of leadership. He died as he had lived, courageously, intrepidly and conscientiously doing his duty.

#### OTHER RANKS.

Killed, 14; wounded, 181; missing, 104; total all ranks, 321.

#### DECORATIONS.

*D.S.O.* Major R. L. Illingworth, M.C., attached to 39th Division.  
 Second-Lieut. G. Powell.  
*Bar to M.M.* C.S.M. B. Walker.  
 Sgt. J. Page.

The following received from the Divisional Commander cards of appreciation of their courage and devotion to duty during these operations:—

Major R. L. Illingworth, D.S.O., M.C.  
 Second-Lieut. G. Powell, D.S.O.  
 C.S.M. Iliffe, J.  
 C.S.M. Walker, B.  
 Sgt. Adams, A.  
 Sgt. Morley, T.  
 Cpl. Reynolds, T.  
 L/cpl. Foster, J. S.  
 L/cpl. Hewitt, L.  
 L/cpl. Lees, W.  
 Pte. Baines, F.  
 Pte. Martin, W. W.  
 Pte. Moore, A. G.  
 Pte. Rayment, W.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BELGIUM

#### YPRES AGAIN

#### THE LAST FIGHT

WE begin another—a very short—chapter. The War was not over, but as a Battalion we were.

The 39th Division, with several others, whose units had suffered something like annihilation in the Great Retreat, was never reinforced. However, as in our last fight, we still existed as an entity, though we fought but as two Companies, this history would be incomplete without some account of our final encounter with the enemy.

There were two factors in the situation at the time which must be borne in mind, as both influenced our subsequent devolution.

The first was that, owing to pressure from the enemy on the dangerous salient in our front caused by the Portuguese retirement on April 9th, and owing also to the fact that the Second Army consisting of 14 Divisions had been depleted by 8, General Sir Herbert Plumer found himself towards the end of the month compelled to evacuate all the ground won in 1917 and to shorten his line round Ypres.

The second was that the American Expeditionary Force was beginning to arrive in France.

With these two new conditions in our minds the story may be resumed from the point we left it on March 30th.

#### REORGANISATION

During the night of March 30th we marched through Villers Brettonneux to billets at Longeau, a suburb of Amiens, where we arrived about 6 a.m.

At 4 p.m. on that afternoon motor lorries conveyed the

survivors to Bovilles, where the next day 70 details and stragglers were warmly welcomed back to the fold.

After twenty-four hours spent in rest, in reorganisation and in re-equipping ourselves, we marched to Metigny, and the following day to Forceville. We were inspected on the line of march by the new G.O.C. 39th Division, Major-General Blacklock, C.M.G., D.S.O.

There followed two or three days of rest, and then on April 7th our march was resumed to Flequières, where again a much-appreciated halt was called.

On the 8th "A" and "D" Companies, detailed as Brigade detraining party, moved by train to St. Omer, and were followed by the remainder of us on the 9th.

From St. Omer we marched to Mouille, and took over billets in a world which knew not the war, and in a locality with which we were already familiar.

From this point the stream of our activities is split into three tributaries, and for the sake of clarity we will follow the fortunes of each separately for the next month.

(1) The situation on the front of the Second Army, to which we were now transferred, was so serious that even our shattered, battered, war-worn remnant could not be given rest. It was necessary for us to fill a gap in General Plumer's line, and not only to fill it, but to hold it.

The 39th Division had therefore been ordered to organise out of its survivors a composite Brigade (denominated the "39th Divisional Composite Brigade") of 4 Battalions, numerically named 1, 2, 3 and 4. In accordance with these instructions the 117th Infantry Brigade was instructed to form a composite Battalion from its three units.

By now our strength had increased through the arrival of more stragglers, the recall of all details and the return of the sick, minor casualties and the slightly gassed, and we were thus enabled to supply two Companies (for what was to be known as No. 3 Composite Battalion), made up of 15 Officers and 446 Other Ranks, 8 Lewis guns, and the First Line Transport. The Battalion was under



the command of Lieut.-Colonel the Hon. E. Coke, D.S.O., 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade, with Captain J. W. J. Millar, D.S.O., D.C.M., as Second-in-Command, and Captain G. V. Taylor, D.S.O., M.C., 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade, as Adjutant.

(2) The remainder of us moved on the 11th to the Recques area, where we were instructed to supply further details to form another—No. 5—Composite Battalion, for service at Borre, where its duty was to protect Hazebroucke, which it was feared the enemy would try and take.

This party left us on the 13th, under the command of Lieut.-Colonel C. H. N. Seymour, D.S.O., 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles.

(3) Those of us who stayed behind in the Recques area, were organised as a Cadre Battalion, for affiliation to units of the 77th American Division, which was shortly to arrive in the Recques area. Our numbers were 2 Officers and 34 Other Ranks.

#### WYTSCHAETE

(1) We will follow the first tributary, No. 3 Composite Battalion, of which the Chatsworth Rifles constituted "A" and "B" Companies. Among the officers who accompanied it were Second Lieut. Smalley, Transport Officer, Captain S. J. L. Lindeman, Medical Officer, Major Collins, Captains Wright and Clayton, Lieut. Smith, Second Lieuts. Moore, Powell, Smith and Edwards. Each company was 194 strong. After an inspection by the new Divisional Commander, Major-General Blacklock, earlier in the evening, these paraded in Mouille Square at 2 a.m. on April 11th, and moved off to St. Omer Station, where they entrained. They arrived at Vlamertinghe at 11 a.m. and marched to Alberta Camp, Reninghelst, where they remained till 5 a.m. the next morning, with the somewhat sinister instructions to be ready to move at half-an-hour's notice.

The historian has throughout this narrative complained

with the frequency and regularity of a Wagnerian *leit motif* of the difficulty he experiences in describing a battle. At this stage in our history it is not perhaps desirable that descriptions should be so full as heretofore, but whether desirable or not it is certainly impossible, because the records are so few and scanty. There is no Brigade account by which to check facts. The Diary has been very laconically kept. The survivors are few and not within reach, while—a far more serious handicap—the organisation was temporary and ephemeral, and was changed from day to day as actual exigencies or future policy dictated. However, an aspiration towards completeness and a desire to do justice to the exceptional gallantry shown during those last few days, combine to impel the historian to make an attempt to give some account of the operations which then took place.

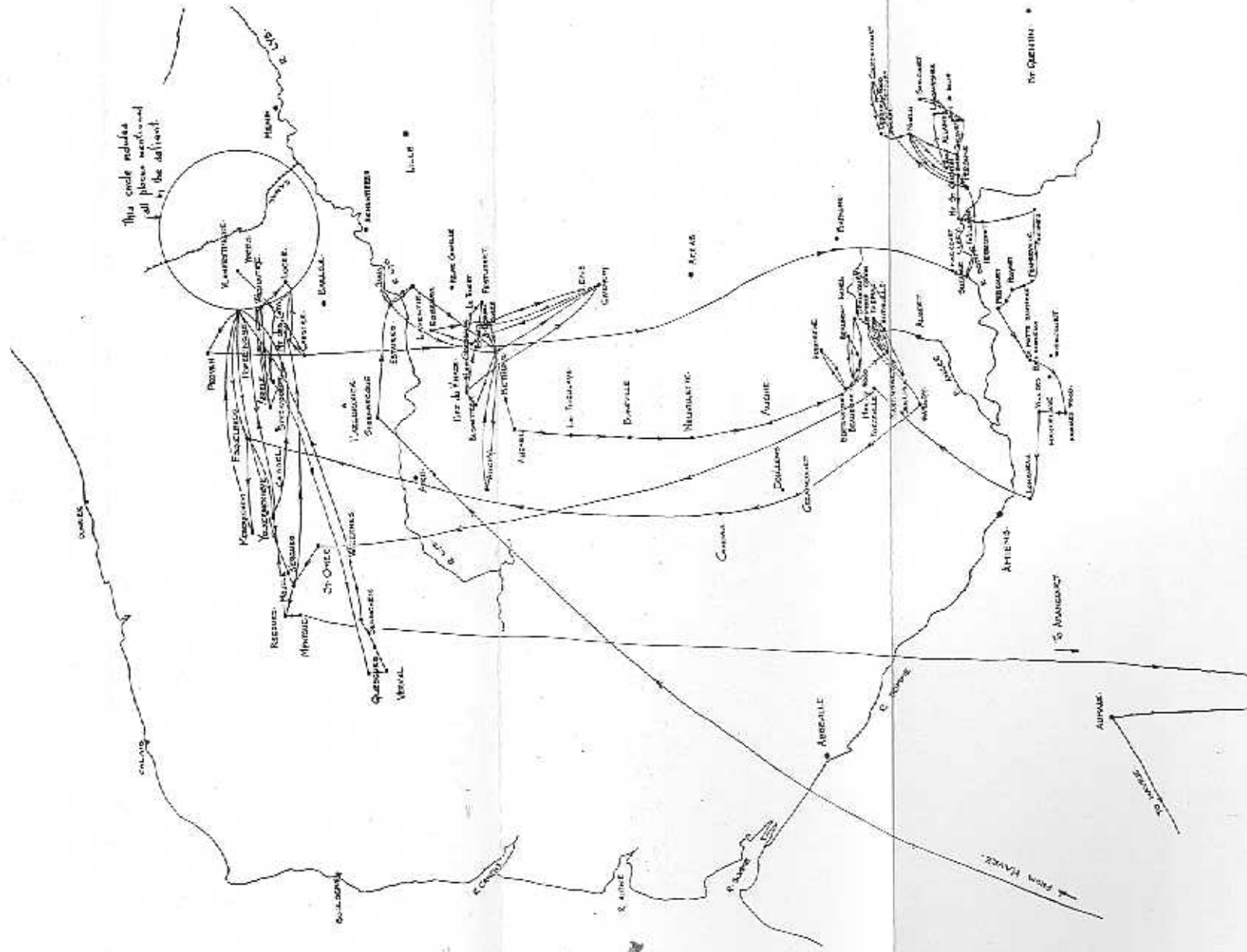
Having explained the proportion of the Composite Battalion supplied by the Chatsworth Rifles, it will be convenient to resume the use of the first person plural.

It was a far from encouraging prospect that met our eyes when we found ourselves once more in the Salient. Camps, woods and roads, which in the previous July had been relatively salubrious, and which, after July 31st, had become as safe as Salisbury Plain, were now in the battle zone. The change in conditions was very soon emphasised.

At 5 a.m. on April 12th we moved by light railway from Ouderdom to Jellicoe Sidings, near Zevecoten, and were billeted in Forester's Camp on the Ypres-Kemmel Road, where we came under the orders of the 21st Division.

On the 13th we moved to familiar haunts in Ridge Wood, which we soon found was not the quiet sylvan retreat we had known it on former visits, as in the early morning of the 15th, for one and a half hours, it was so heavily shelled with 5.9's and 4.2's that we had to scatter in all directions. Several huts were demolished, 2 other





FRANCE V. BELGIUM—SHOWING THE BATTALION'S MOVEMENTS OVERSEAS.



After our attack we suffered several more casualties from enemy snipers, whose shooting was very accurate, but the shelling was more or less confined to the back areas. The former, however, rendered the evacuation of casualties extremely difficult, as they fired on all stretcher parties, and many wounded had to be left on the field till darkness fell. In this situation of discomfort and insecurity, and with dangerously depleted ranks, we held on, with "C" and "D" Companies now in support of us, till the night of the 17th-18th, when we were relieved by the South Africans (whose attempt on the Ridge at 5 a.m. on the 17th had been repulsed with heavy casualties), and returned to Scottish Wood Camp to rest.

Rest! From midnight on the 19th till 3 a.m. the next day a crescendo of shelling was maintained. We were eventually driven out of the camp and sought refuge in dug-outs in English Wood, one Officer having been killed and one wounded, in addition to 11 Other Ranks. Many huts were destroyed, including the Headquarters Mess; fifteen 5.9 holes were counted within 20 yards of the latter.

At 7.30 p.m. on the 19th "A" and "B" Companies, now reorganised as one Company, 189 strong, under the command of Captain Clayton, were sent up to relieve the Rifle Companies "C" and "D" at Wytschaete.

While passing Seddon Camp at Confusion Corner, a shell wounded Captain Clayton and Second Lieut. Moore (the latter died a few hours later), and the only officers left were Second Lieut. G. Powell and Lieut. A. H. Strutt. We remained in the line at Wytschaete till relief the following evening, and suffered six more casualties.

We moved to Awapunt Lines Camp at 4 a.m. on the 21st, and remained there for four days, under shell fire, as reserve Battalion to our Composite Brigade, suffering two more casualties to our diminishing platoons. At 2.45 a.m. on the 25th we were roused by such heavy shell fire and thick gas that we had once more to evacuate our quarters. Lieut.-Colonel the Hon. E. Coke was

gassed and became a casualty, the command of the Battalion passing to Captain G. V. Taylor. Later in the morning we were ordered to the G.H.Q. Second Line, running from Ridge Wood to Kruisstraathoek.

We marched there still under heavy shell fire and were in position by midday, only to find ourselves in conditions similar to those we had experienced on several occasions during the Retreat in the South, as the enemy were already advancing round our flanks.

They had broken through at Vierstraat Cross Roads in the neighbourhood of Kemmel, and in consequence we were immediately ordered to withdraw and form a right defensive flank from Vierstraat Cross Roads through Confusion Corner to the southern edge of Dickebusch Lake, near Hallebast Corner—our Company being echeloned behind the Companies of the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles and the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade, where all proceeded to dig themselves in. We suffered only two casualties in this manoeuvre, though streams of wounded of all Divisions passed through Captain Lindeman's Aid Post at Vielhoek Chateau. The next day, however, grimly holding our ground, cost us another heavy casualty list:—*Killed*, 6 Other Ranks; *Wounded*, 5 Other Ranks; *Missing*, 21 Other Ranks.

An eyewitness who had served in the Brigade since we came out, has informed the historian that this was one of the hardest day's fighting we experienced in the whole war. We were reinforced by 2 sections of the Machine Gun Company and a Company of a Scottish Regiment. The machine guns were pushed well forward and with the Lewis guns made tremendous havoc among the oncoming Germans. The enemy attacked again and again, but we held our ground and did not give way a foot—a fine example of dogged grit and determination, which caused enormous casualties to the enemy.

The severity of the conditions in which we had spent the previous week is reflected in our numbers. The Composite Battalion, whose strength had a few days

before been 800, consisted on the 26th of 2 Companies, 190 each, and Battalion Headquarters, 40.

On the 26th our Company was withdrawn to the G.H.Q. line at Voormezele, where we came temporarily under the orders of No. 1 Composite Battalion.

In this position we again renewed our recent experiences on the Somme, for by the 27th Ridge Wood and Voormezele were part of the front line, and we fought what amounted to a rearguard action all day. It may, however, be added that at the end of it we had again not lost ground.

This was our final day in the trenches, as we were relieved that night, and withdrew to Dominion Camp, next Busschoom. It is therefore with the more regret that the historian records the last casualty among our original officers. During the relief, while leading the remnant of us forever out of the firing line, Lieut. A. H. Strutt was mortally wounded.

Five other ranks died of wounds and 26 were wounded during the last stand.

Thus again Second Lieut. G. Powell, D.S.O., the only Officer left, led out the survivors of the Battalion. They numbered ten.

On the 28th Nos. 2 and 3 Composite Battalions, whose ranks had been, to some extent, increased by stragglers and details, were amalgamated under Lieut.-Colonel Wilkinson, Officer Commanding 1/1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment, and his first duty was to direct our withdrawal from Dominion Camp, which the enemy was making too hot for us. Twelve other ranks were wounded and one died of wounds.

We remained in the Salient until May 5th, when the Composite Battalion was disbanded, and, with our transport, we rejoined the training cadre in the Recques area.

Our total casualties had been:—

			Officers.	Other Ranks.
<i>Killed</i>	..	..	2	20
<i>Wounded</i>	..	..	5	114
<i>Missing</i>	..	..	—	29

The following subsequently received, from the Divisional Commander, Cards of Appreciation of their gallantry and devotion to duty during these operations in the Salient :—

Captain C. Clayton.

Sgt. Shaw, W.

Pte. Parker, A. E.

A congratulatory message was received later from Major-General D. G. M. Campbell, C.B., G.O.C. 21st Division, referring to the splendid work done by the 39th Divisional Composite Brigade, and on May 6th the G.O.C. XXII Corps visited the Recques area in order personally to express his congratulations to those who had served under him in that temporary formation.

#### HAZEBROUCK

(2) The fortunes of the second tributary may be very briefly narrated. As has been stated, they had been sent to take up a position outside Hazebrouck, where they had been temporarily attached to one of the Guards Brigades in reserve to an Australian Division. The threatened danger to Hazebrouck did not materialise, and the contingent, having suffered few casualties, rejoined us at Recques on the last day of April.

The first two tributaries had now rejoined the third, whose activities we will follow in the next chapter until they are once more merged in an account of the main stream.

## CHAPTER IX

### FRANCE

#### THE AMERICANS—DISSOLUTION

#### RECQUES

IF we had no more fighting to do, we had one more important duty to perform. The Americans had begun to arrive in France in large numbers, fresh, keen, sanguine, and in some cases not a little depreciatory of ourselves, who, in their opinion, had taken so long over, and had not yet succeeded in finishing, the war. It was to be our duty to train them for active service conditions with which we were only too familiar, and of which they were completely ignorant. Accordingly, as has been stated, we were instructed to form a cadre, or skeleton, battalion for training certain of the American units.

(3) The training cadre moved in the second week in April from Moule to the Recques area, and the "polishing up" of the instructors for their work then proceeded for the next few days.

Our contingent, under Lieut.-Colonel Cassy, M.C., who assumed command of us on the 14th, consisted of 2 Officers and 34 Other Ranks.

The historian is indebted to Captain F. L. Brown, 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles, for the following account :—

"Preparations were in the meantime being made for the arrival of the 154th Brigade of the 77th American Division, to which our Brigade was to be affiliated. Training facilities were reconnoitred and arrangements made for the detraining of the American troops at Andrecy. From the 18th onwards they began to arrive



in the area, and the Infantry Regiments—the 307th and the 308th—were billeted in the Zouafques-Tournehem-Louches area and the Zutkerque-Bayenghem-Hellebroucq area respectively. On April 24th training began in earnest.

"This was carried out in accordance with a weekly programme based on what was known as 'The Pershing Schedule,' a graded system issued by American G.H.Q. In this training, officers and N.C.O.'s of the Brigade details co-operated with advice, supervision and lectures, and to each American battalion was attached an instructional staff for specialist instruction in musketry, gas, bombing, Lewis gun and physical exercises. For this latter purpose, a number of A.G.S. instructors were attached to the Brigade. Two demonstration platoons from the H.A.C. also reported, to teach by example each American regiment. A central Cookery School was established in Recques, and in addition, the 302nd Engineer Regiment, A.E.F., the 305th Machine Gun Battalion, and the 302nd American Signal Company received practical hints in their respective branches of warfare. The Americans were also introduced to the lighter side of military life, for two performances were given by the 39th Divisional 'Follies.'

"So far as was possible each American Officer and N.C.O. who took part in the training had with him a British Officer or N.C.O. of corresponding rank, who was responsible for his guidance. The training was practically the same as that carried out by the British Army. They were taught musketry, and fired on the ranges which had been specially made for them before their arrival; they learnt battle formations and trench digging, and were shown how to work with the artillery and what a 'barrage' meant.

"The system worked well, and in a very short time the Americans seemed to be quite at home and on the best of terms with their English instructors. The 77th Division came from New York City, and was very

cosmopolitan. It seemed to include men of every white nationality; its members were reported to have spoken eighteen languages—and some could only speak German!

"At first their little superficial peculiarities appeared strange. Their 'pleased to meet you' as an invariable formula of introduction, their continual hand-shaking and constant references to 'skedules' made the Englishman soon realise that he had to adapt himself to a new point of view. But it was not long before everyone had become accustomed to each other, and after a while if an officer was stopped on the road by a 'dough-boy,' who said, 'Say, guy! Can you tell me the name of this 'ere garden city?' he understood that no disrespect was intended, and that the 'dough-boy' was merely making polite inquiry as to his whereabouts."

The sight of the officers and men drawn up together in queues to fill their billy cans at dinner time seemed to give a practical example of democratic principles for which we were not quite prepared, but privilege seemed curiously in the ascendant when we came on a body of men being drilled by sergeants, while the officers sat by smoking. Such inconsistencies could only be harmonised by recognising that the American troops had no idea of military discipline in our sense of the term.

"However, what really mattered was that they were keen, these Americans—keen to learn all that they could; to get first-hand information of active operations, and to apply it in their training. Whatever may have been said, or may have happened subsequently, there is no doubt that the first American troops came to France in no spirit of Jingoism, but fully appreciated what was due to their Allies, who had been fighting since the beginning, and, realising their own lack of experience, were out to remedy it as soon as possible, so that they could take their place in the line.

"On May 8th Lieut.-General the Hon. Sir. H. A. Lawrence, K.C.B., Chief of the General Staff, visited units of the American 154th Brigade, and on May 13th and

14th—little more than three weeks since they had arrived at Audricq—the 307th and 308th Infantry Regiments were moved away to the Third Army area."

In the meantime, as has been shown, the survivors of the Composite Battalion had rejoined us during the first week in May and, though terribly reduced in numbers, we could call ourselves a Battalion once more. For a brief spell all three tributaries were combined into one stream and large numbers of us were employed as working parties for improving the training grounds. The final process of disintegration soon began in earnest, and day by day drafts and individuals left us to reinforce other units. This last week or so was brightened by a football match against the 10th Depot Army Ordnance Department (in which we drew with them, one goal each), Battalion sports, a concert and a Brigade Horse Show.

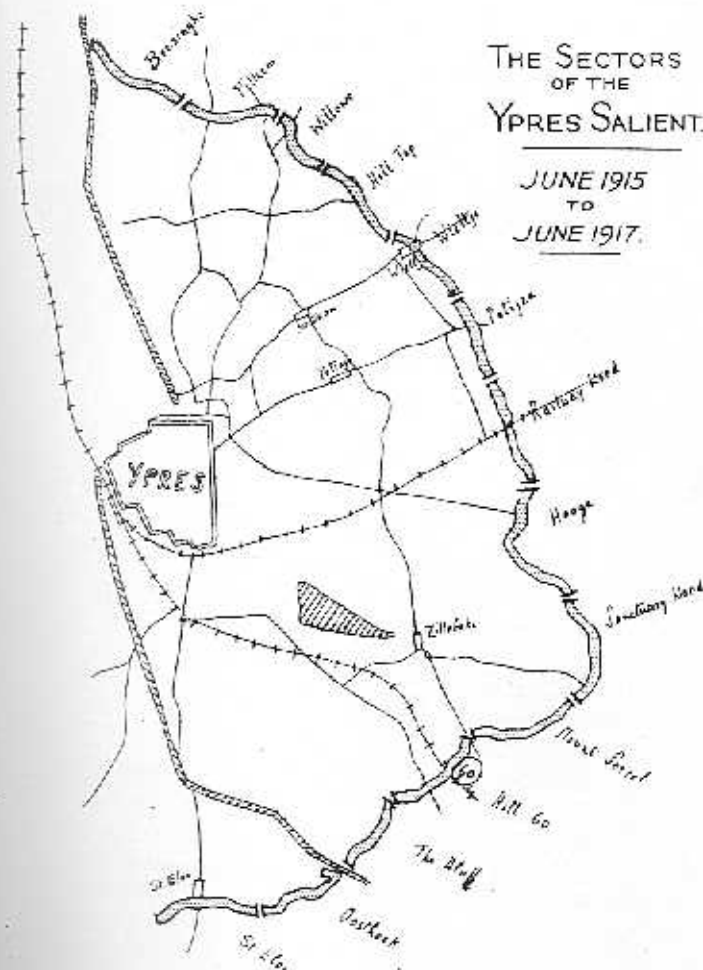
Frequent orders for drafts to be sent to other battalions of the Regiment carried on the war of attrition against our numbers, which the Great Retreat had begun and the battle of Wytschaete Ridge had continued. The process was completed on May 16th, when all personnel surplus to the cadre were sent down to the base and were lost to us for good, though many were killed and wounded later, fighting in other battalions of the famous Regiment to which we all belonged.

We were now once more reduced to a cadre, and our final dissolution may well appear to be near at hand, but, like Charles II., we were an unconscionable long time dying, and the historian finds he has still over a year's minor activities to record.

#### MENIQUE

As a training staff, we moved on the 24th to Mentque, where we settled into comfortable billets in open country. Here we supplied 15 other ranks as a Grenade Section 19th Divisional Demonstration Platoon.

On the 26th we arranged for the billeting of fresh units—the 30th Division, American Ex-



peditionary Force—which arrived on the 27th. The 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 117th Regiment were affiliated to us, the former being billeted at Mentque, and the latter at Tuglingham.

For the next five weeks we trained them in the way they should go, and once more the historian falls back on Captain Brown's account :—

"The training of this Division proceeded in much the same way as that of the former one, and as can be imagined, the small cadres of the 117th Brigade were fully occupied.

"The 30th Division as a whole was perhaps not quite so eager to learn as the 77th had been. They were men of a very different stamp, and mostly came from the Southern States. Many of them had splendid physique, and some of them had already had experience of active service in Mexico. For this reason no doubt the training was not so new and interesting as it had been to the men from New York.

"On June 12th the heads of the British Missions with the Belgian Army, and General Sir Herbert Plumer, inspected the training of units of the 117th and 118th American Infantry Regiments.

"Another Demonstration Platoon of the H.A.C. arrived at Recques on June 13th, was attached to the Brigade and billeted at Zouaïques, and on the following day, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig visited the units of the American 59th Infantry Brigade."

On June 26th Brig.-General Armytage and the Staff of the 117th Infantry Brigade took over the training of the 80th American Division at Samer, and Lieut.-Colonel C. H. N. Seymour, D.S.O., Commanding the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles, assumed command of the Brigade.

"On June 29th H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught visited Fassurne and there inspected the 59th Infantry Brigade of the American Expeditionary Force. On July 4th the 80th American Division was moved into the



Third Army area, and the 30th American Division also left Reques within a few days." It may be added that some of us continued our tutorial duties a little longer and accompanied the Americans into the line for their first tour of duty there.

We must pass briefly over our own domestic affairs during this period, and it is pleasant at the outset to record that our Pioneer Sergeant, Sergeant Slack, who had been with us since we were at Buxton in May, 1915, conscientious, efficient and quite imperturbable, was mentioned in the Despatches published on the King's Birthday.

Early in May, Captain S. J. L. Lindeman, R.A.M.C., M.C., left us for attachment to another Division. He had been our Medical Officer for nearly two years, and the news of his departure was received with great regret. He had earned the regard and affection of all ranks by his kindly sympathy, his quiet efficiency, his dry directness and his equanimity in all circumstances.

On July 10th we lost Captain R. L. Illingworth, D.S.O., M.C., another of our original officers, and one, moreover, who had served continuously throughout with us or in the 39th Division, and had been conspicuously engaged in some of our most distinguished successes.

A cross-country run and several shooting competitions (some domestic and some against other Battalions), were held in July. In the latter:—

Against the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles we scored 931 to their 842 out of a possible 1,260.

Against the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade we scored 1,143 against their 869 out of a possible 1,320.

On July 25th we moved from Mentque to Nordasques, and on the 26th Brig.-General Armytage and the 117th Brigade Staff rejoined us for a brief spell.

There followed a fortnight's recreational training, during which we were defeated by Brigade Headquarters in the 39th Divisional Cricket Tournament by 72 runs to

36. We showed our independence of the seasons by defeating the 39th Divisional Signal Company in the Final of the Divisional Football Competition, 4—0, after which match our team was presented with a Cup and Medals by Brig.-General A. B. Hubback, C.M.G., commanding the 118th Infantry Brigade. It is interesting to record the names of our Team—

Pte. E. N. Morley.

C.S.M. B. Walker.

Pte. W. E. Roper.

Sgt. E. Gillatt.

C.Q.M.S. A. G. Hildreth.

Pte. B. Carson.

Captain G. Powell.

Pte. F. Baines.

Pte. P. Felstead.

Sgt. Cavill.

Pte. A. E. Goodwin.

from which it may be noted that that valiant veteran C.Q.M.S. Hildreth was still a force to be reckoned with.

A further shooting match against the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles resulted in an easy win, 1,674—1,387, and in a return Football match against the Army Ordnance Department we drew, 2—2.

#### ABANCOURT

On August 15th the Brigade was transferred to the Lines of Communication, and we moved by train from Nordasque to Abancourt, which we reached the next day. Here we were affiliated to the 198th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brig.-General A. J. Hunter, D.S.O., M.C., and came under the orders of Major-General H. K. Bethell, C.M.G., D.S.O., G.O.C. 66th Division. Our own Brigade Headquarters left us for duty at Rouen, and the historian, sticking to his brief, resists the temptation to pay a valedictory tribute.

On August 28th we moved by route march to Quesne Camp, Heaudecourt, in which we lived under canvas, but in the meantime we had bade another farewell, for on the 18th our Padre, the Rev. J. F. Bloxam, M.C., left us for duty with the 33rd Division. His warm hearted, kindly sympathy, combined with a firm and unflinching sense of duty, his gentleness allied to a dauntless courage

and to that wisdom which is the synonym for "an understanding heart," had endeared him to all. In battle or at a football match, in the trenches or at a concert, our Padre was always the same. In the transient world at the Front he was the one factor which was constant.\*

At Heaudecourt we played the 7th Battalion Suffolk Regiment, and defeated them, 5—3; a return match a few days later considerably increasing our margin of victory, 4—1. This triumph was neutralised by a match against the 18th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers, which we lost, 1—0.

On September 1st R.S.M. Pepper, M.C., retired from the active list on reaching the age limit. He was among the first to join the Battalion, and had served us continuously ever since. His familiar figure, his great experience and his loyal and efficient service had seemed an essential part of our being, and his departure left a gap which made us feel we must be very near our dissolution.

On September 4th His Majesty the King awarded the Meritorious Service Medal to:—

C.Q.M.S. S. Parsons.

Sgt. A. Cobb.

Sgt. J. Rowan.

On the 21st we came under the orders of the 197th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brig.-General L. L. Wheatley, C.M.G., D.S.O., who was succeeded on October 6th by Brig.-General A. H. Hall.

One further not unimportant duty was allotted to us. During the next few weeks large drafts (about a thousand at a time) of so-called "Malarial" Troops from other regiments were attached to us for training, pending their allocation to various units as reinforcements. These had come from Palestine and Salonika. Our rôle was much

\* By a sad coincidence, the very week that the historian is engaged in correcting the proofs of these pages, he has read with great sorrow and regret that our Padre has passed away. He had been Vicar of Hoxton for several years, and in peace, as in war, had not spared himself in his unselfish devotion to duty.

the same as it had been in the case of the Americans, as these troops had had no experience of trench warfare. Quite a varied and elaborate programme was arranged. The instructional scheme included, besides military exercises and lectures, much physical drill and a great deal of recreational training.

The intervals were occupied in building a camp, quarrying for stone and making paths and roads with the material thus acquired. Two Association Football Leagues were formed and the matches which followed were interspersed with a Cross-Country race, a Boxing tournament, as well as some Rugby Football.

The following brief summary gives the results:—

#### RUGBY

10th Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment Draw: 8-8.

13th Battalion Gloucester Regiment Lost: 8-0.

13th Battalion Gloucester Regiment Won: 13-0.

13th Battalion Gloucester Regiment Won: 6-5.

We were defeated in the Final of the Rugby Championship by the 10th Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment.

#### ASSOCIATION

18th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers Won: 2-0.

23rd Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers Won: 6-1.

13th Battalion Gloucester Regiment .. Won: 4-1.

16th Battalion Rifle Brigade .. .. Draw: 1-1.

10th Battalion Lincolnshire Regiment Won: 3-1.

14th Battalion Highland Light Infantry Won: 3-1.

14th Battalion Highland Light Infantry Lost: 1-0.

25th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers Won: 5-0.

18th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers Lost: 3-2.

23rd Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers Lost: 6-0.

23rd Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers Won: 1-0.

13th Battalion Gloucester Regiment .. Draw: 2-2.

In the Cadre Association League we won the Brigade Championship. We also won the Brigade Cross-country Race with 91 points.

Armistice Day was duly celebrated on November 12th by a Commemoration Service, followed by Sports and a Boxing Tournament. The latter were rendered quite festive events by the performance of the Battalion Band.

The month closed with two more Boxing Tournaments, Brigade Sports, and a Tug-of-war contest, while in the Brigade Championship of "C" League the "Malarials" attached to us were victorious. The "Malarials" acquired a remarkable robustness under this regime, but some merit should be accorded to the effects of two unusual parades which were held daily. Each morning a "Quinine" and each afternoon a "Stout" Parade took place. Attendance at the former was neither punctual nor enthusiastic, but Whitbread and Guinness can have had in their long and honourable history few testimonials more valuable than the daily "all present" at the latter.

And so we reached another Christmas Day, which was celebrated as before by a special dinner, followed by a Concert given by the Battalion Band.

#### HAVRE

On New Year's Day we moved to billets in Aumale. Almost daily, drafts of "Malarial" Troops left us for other Divisions or for demobilisation. On January 15th we moved to Havre to administer the General Reinforcement Base Depot, and soon after Lieut.-Colonel Cassy returned to England to be demobilised. Major H. R. Stevens, M.C., who had returned recently to us, assumed command of the Battalion on February 4th, to be followed in this position a few days later by Captain W. E. Wright, M.C., on the former being evacuated to hospital.

Major H. R. Stevens was the last of our original Officers to leave. Except for a brief period during which he was recovering from wounds, he had served throughout the war either with us or as O.C. 117th Trench Mortar Battery, in such close association with us as to make him always one of us.

Our duty in Rouen was to administer the Depot

established for reinforcements of the Guards and Royal Engineers, who stayed in the camp on arrival from England or from other formations until detailed to join Divisions at the front. Drafts of 80 or 100 left us daily for the Rhine.

Captain W. E. Wright, M.C., left us on April 26th for Cologne for duty with another battalion of the Regiment and on April 3rd, 1919, the Diary comes to an end.

We thus, as Fate would have it, completed our service in France on the same spot on which we had begun it three years before.

#### ENGLAND

During the subsequent weeks, the Cadre was constantly reduced in numbers as individuals received their demobilization papers, and the historian concludes his labours by following the last small contingent, which eventually arrived home on 9th June still as a formed body representing the 16th Battalion Sherwood Foresters.

The following account is taken from *The Derby Daily Express*.

#### "SOLDIERS' HOME COMING

##### "DERBY'S WELCOME TO CHATSWORTH RIFLES

"Despite short notice, Derby gave a hearty welcome to a colour party of the 16th Sherwood Foresters (Chatsworth Rifles), which arrived at the Midland Station on Monday evening. The news of the home-coming, though late and at first indefinite, spread quickly, with the result that ere the train steamed in a crowd of large dimensions had assembled. So large in fact was the crowd and so small the party of soldiers that people on the outskirts of the throng were inclined to be 'a little dubious' about the arrival of the little band, notwithstanding the enthusiasm with which the boys in khaki were greeted at first sight. Bearing the King's Colour, the detachment, consisting of Lieut. Rumsey, R.Q.M.S. Brindley, Serpts. Barks, Askew and Carson, were welcomed at the station



by the Mayor and Mayoress (Ald. and Mrs. W. Blews Robotham). Ald. Lord Roe, Lieut.-Colonel Herbert-Stepney, Mrs. Boden, Dr. Moon, and others. Though the party in itself was small in numbers, the significance lay in what the men symbolised, for all of them were among the first to join the ranks of the Battalion when it was raised by Lieut.-Colonel Herbert-Stepney. It was fitting then that the Colour party should be met by their old and respected commander, who had fought with them in many of the stiff engagements in which they had taken part since they had first crossed the water in 1916. Symbolical of a fighting unit of the famous fighting Foresters, they were worthy of the enthusiasm with which they were welcomed home.

"Taken by motor to the Market Place, they were addressed by the Mayor who referred to the raising of the 16th at a time when men were urgently needed. On the Somme, at Ypres, and in various parts of the far-flung battle line, they had performed gallant deeds and, while the loss of many brave officers and men was deplored, Derby was grateful to them all.

"Expressing the greatest pleasure at witnessing the return of his own men, Lieut.-Colonel Herbert-Stepney said the happiest three years of his life were those spent with his Battalion.

"As the first man to join the Battalion after the Commander himself, R.Q.M.S. Brindley acknowledged the welcome accorded them, after which the party were entertained by their old leader to dinner at the Royal, proceeding thence to Normanton Barracks."

The tiny trickle of Sherwood Foresters, which was then absorbed into the vast pool of civil life, seems fittingly to correspond to the tiny trickle which had sprung four years before from the same town, and which had swelled to the great stream that had made so memorable a name for themselves and the Regiment on the Plains of Flanders and Picardy.

## EPILOGUE

AT the end of January, 1922, the Memorial Roll and the Regimental Colours of the 16th Battalion Sherwood Foresters were deposited in the Church of Edensor, which is situated in Chatsworth Park, the demesne of our Founder, the Duke of Devonshire, and on the same occasion His Grace unveiled the Memorial erected to the memory of those from the district who fell in the war.

There was something even more appropriate in placing our Memorial Roll in Chatsworth Park than might be realised at first sight, for our name—the Chatsworth Rifles—it will be remembered, was the original designation of one of the two former Militia Regiments which were recruited by the Lord Lieutenant from the Chatsworth District, and which in 1882 had become the 3rd Battalion of the Sherwood Foresters. The old name had been very happily bestowed on us, as we had at least two points in common with our predecessors—we were recruited from the Chatsworth District, and had been raised by the Lord Lieutenant of the County.

On the occasion referred to a special memorial service was held, of which the following account is taken from the local Press:—

"During the singing of the first hymn Lieut.-Colonel C. Herbert-Stepney, D.S.O., Commanding Officer of the Battalion, with a Colour Party consisting of Major H. R. Stevens, M.C., R.S.M. J. Pepper, M.C., and Sergeant Egerton, V.C., advanced with the Colours to the steps of the chancel.

"After the hymn and prayers, the Vicar of Edensor accepted the Colours, declaring his responsibility for their safe custody, and, accompanied by the Colour Party, proceeded to the Sanctuary, where the Bishop of Southwell received the Flag, and placed it upon the altar with the Memorial Roll handed to him by Lieut.-Colonel

Herbert-Stepney. The Memorial Roll contains the names of the 600 members of the Battalion who fell in action."

The Duke of Devonshire then unveiled the War Memorial, which was dedicated by the Bishop of Southwell.

"After the service, Officers, N.C.O.'s and men of the 16th Battalion paraded and were addressed by the Duke. He thanked them for the ready response which they had made when he, as Lord Lieutenant of the County, was asked by the King to form a Battalion, and for their fine record of service during the war, appealing to them to do everything possible to bring into civil life that spirit of determination which had done so much to win the war, and which would ensure that the sacrifice made had not been in vain. In concluding, he called for three cheers for the King. Cheers for the Duke and the Colonel followed. Among representatives of the Battalion present were Lieut.-Colonel C. Herbert-Stepney, Major H. R. Stevens, Captains Cholerton, Lord, and Wright, Lieut. Blake, R.S.M. Pepper, C.S.M. Parsons, Sergeants Askew, Bramwell, Dunncliffe, Egerton, Hyde, Sheldon and Slack."

The Chatsworth Rifles have laid down their arms and in a military sense have ceased to exist, but the spirit of self-sacrifice which called them into being, lives on to-day in a hundred homes in the hills and dales of Nottingham and Derby, and the spirit of brotherhood which actuated them during those four great years is called into articulate life as often as, at the periodical reunions, we rise to drink the health of our first Commanding Officer.

## APPENDICES

### COMMANDING OFFICERS

Lieut.-Colonel C. C. Herbert-Stepney, D.S.O.	April 29, 1915, to Aug. 15, 1917.
Lieut.-Colonel N. Houghton - - -	Aug. 16, 1917, to Sept. 13, 1917.
Lieut.-Colonel J. R. Webster, D.S.O., M.C.	Sept. 14, 1917, to March 22, 1918.
Lieut.-Colonel J. S. Cassy, M.C. - -	April 14, 1918, to Feb. 26, 1919.
Captain W. E. Wright, M.C. - -	Feb. 27, 1919, to April 26, 1919.