

### CHAPTER III

#### FRANCE

#### THE SOMME

#### BEAUMONT HAMEL

AS has been already noted, Beaussart and its neighbourhood had given us some warning of what was ahead. The environs of the Somme battlefield were very different from the deserted country round the Tuning Fork, where the scattered units of the Division were thinly spread over a vast area. Here all was congested. The relative quiet of June was far behind us. Here were camps crowded into every bit of cover, and even straying out into the open, endless horse-lines, newly-made roads, and the troops of innumerable battalions we had never seen before.

On the evening of September 2nd we took our places in the line. Our position was in the Beaucourt Sector, with Battalion Headquarters in Knightsbridge. We marched out into the night and in due course reached the entrance to the communication trench through which the long snake wound itself endlessly along; so up to Knightsbridge, and our battle positions beyond.

The plan of operations was as follows:—

The 117th Brigade was to attack the German front line along the line G 17 B, just north of the River Ancre. On the right the attack was to be made by the 116th Brigade, and the 118th Brigade was to be in reserve. We were to advance in conjunction with two other Divisions on the south of the Ancre. The 39th Division formed the left flank of a battle front of fifteen miles.

The 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters were to attack on the right, the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade on the left, with the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles in support,

and the 16th Battalion Sherwood Foresters in reserve at Knightsbridge and Fort Jackson.

This battle order is misleading without amplification, for there was hardly anyone left of us to act as reserve to anybody or anything, because our real rôle in this operation was the trying one of conveying stores of all kinds for the attacking troops, of providing trench control posts, and of carrying supplies to forward dumps. Practically the whole Battalion was split up into parties of about twenty-five men each—some to accompany the first "waves" with bombs and ammunition, some to go over soon after with R.E. stores to enable the positions when captured to be consolidated, some to go later still with rations, water, etc., when the captured positions were established. It was disappointing that our duty did not require us to go into this, our first big attack, as a Battalion. Our part, valuable and important though it was, gave us no opportunity of expressing directly that unity, that *esprit de corps*, to the building up of which our training and experiences had contributed so greatly. Our part was useful, but not picturesque.

In this history we are not concerned with the great battle itself, which can be read of in the official "History of the War," by General Edmonds, and in the dispatches of the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief. We must confine ourselves here to a description of our share in it. This is far from easy.

The difficulty of describing a modern battle has been already noticed, but the difficulty of describing our share in this one is greater still, because we did not take a unified part in it. For this reason an account of the whole action would not be much concerned with the Chatsworth Rifles. To be intelligible it would have to be described from the point of view of the whole Brigade, since, as has been explained, we did nothing in it as a unit. In these circumstances it would be outside the scope of this history to give more than the main features.

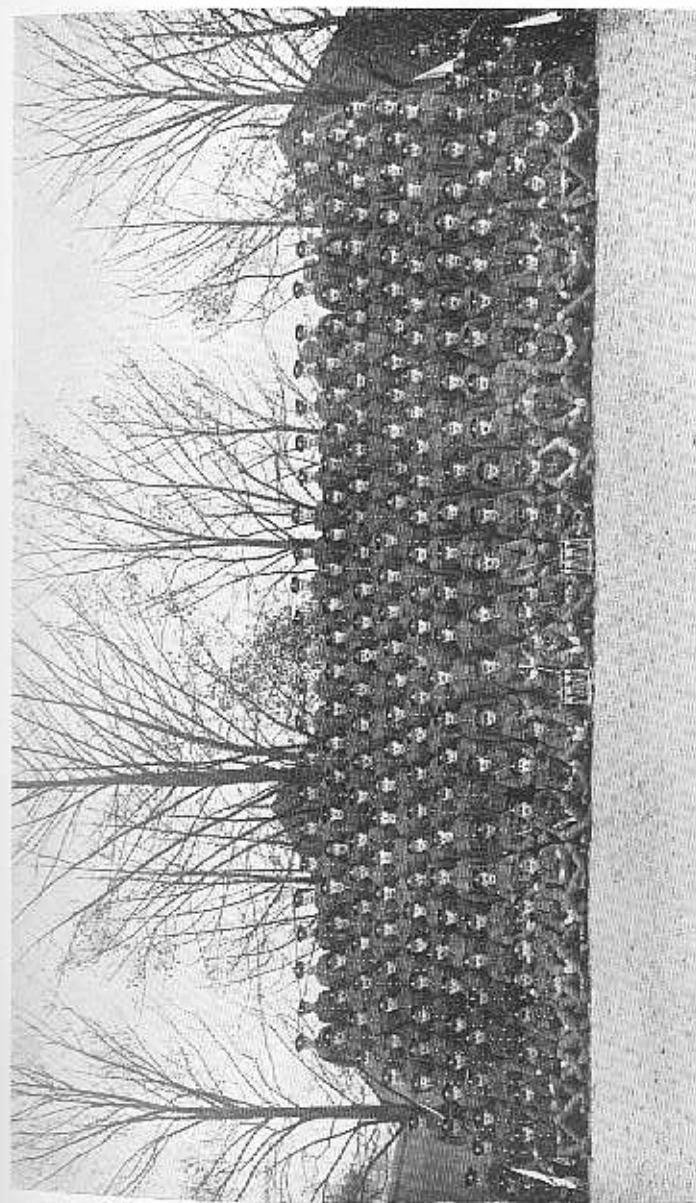
Knightsbridge proved itself to be worthy of its name—

a broad, deep trench, with massive parapets, and lined with large dug-outs with solid roofs strongly supported by tree trunks as pillars. From here the individual parties detached themselves to go to their various rendezvous—some to the front line, some to the support, some to various convenient redoubts to await their summons. About fifty remained with Battalion Headquarters at Knightsbridge.

During the night supper, or breakfast, was served out, and at 5 a.m. the British bombardment began. It was our first experience of concentrated artillery, and very awe-inspiring it was, while the enemy reply was to us even more so!

After a few minutes the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters advanced, reached their objective and occupied the first and second enemy lines. The initial attack of the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade failed as it was met with very heavy fire from artillery and machine guns, the latter being particularly destructive from strong points on the Mound. This Battalion was re-formed, and made a second attempt to gain their objective, supported by the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles. The German trenches were reached, but could not be held, as owing to heavy casualties by concentrated fire, there were not enough troops left to establish themselves. The 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters thus being left with an exposed flank, were compelled to retire. Those of our carrying parties which accompanied the assaulting Battalions reached the enemy lines and acquitted themselves gallantly; some of them journeyed time after time across "No Man's Land," conveying bombs and ammunition. Throughout the whole action a very intense hostile artillery barrage was maintained, and the casualties of the Brigade were heavy, losses in officers being particularly serious.

During this battle our Battalion Aid Post, situated at the bottom of a communication trench, passed through 650 casualties, among whom most of the units of the Division were represented, and magnificent work was



"D" COMPANY. ALDERSTROT, 1915.

done by Sergeant Trueman and our stretcher-bearers evacuating wounded from the front line.

Our casualties were :—

*Killed and died of wounds—*

Second-Lieut. F. H. Chappell.

12 Other Ranks.

*Wounded—*

Lieut. J. Brown.

Second-Lieut. W. Benner.

Second-Lieut. W. J. Hastings.

Second-Lieut. O. M. Simpson.

78 Other Ranks.

*Missing—*

6 Other Ranks.

We were relieved later that evening by the 1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment, which arrived in time to relieve us also of a heavy gas barrage put over by the enemy.

We spent the night in hutments in Mailly Wood, and on the 4th moved back to Beaussart.

The Commanding Officer recommended to the notice of the higher authorities—

Lance-Sergeant C. E. Holywell.

Private J. Annable.

Private A. Astle.

Private B. Armfield.

for gallant service in the field, and the first three were subsequently awarded the Military Medal.

If the misfortunes of others are any consolation in times of disappointment, it may be added that other units of the Division appear to have met with no larger measure of success than those of our Brigade, while the two divisions which attacked south of the Ancre failed to hold their objectives also.

So ended our first day on the Somme—a beginning which gave no augury of the triumphant culmination of our last.

After the engagement at Beaumont Hamel we settled down to what became the normal life of a



Battalion on the Somme in the autumn of 1916—the occupation of badly battered and recently captured trenches, punctuated by aggressive or defensive action on a small or large scale.

From the 6th to the 13th September we held the Long Acre Sector, Beaumont Hamel, on the immediate north of the front over which we had attacked three days before.

Here we relieved the 1/4th Battalion Gloucester Regiment. The trenches, which were deeply dug in chalk, had been badly damaged in the action, and though they had been most expeditiously repaired, they were still in a very broken condition, and quite ruined in parts. The left Company Headquarters had been demolished by a shell the night before we took over.

On the right the front trench was knee-deep in a very thick mud, which made movement extremely slow and laborious, and the historian recalls the sight of one Company Commander being pulled and passed from hand to hand by his men on the fire step as he progressed along his line.

The whole place was infested with rats, and it is related that another Company Commander was found after "stand-down" half asleep in his dug-out, with a loaded revolver in his hand. On being asked if he expected a raid, he replied, "No, only those — rats," indicating a vindictiveness which was well justified by the conditions. In fact, a contemporary letter observes that these trenches were, in every way, worse than any we had hitherto experienced. Our discomforts were accentuated by a lack of water, there being only enough to drink, and none in which to wash.

The Trench topography will be remembered by such names as Shaftesbury Avenue, Mary Redan, Piccadilly, Bond Street, Constitution Hill, Wellington Trench, St. James' Street, Long Acre, Tipperary Avenue, and the long communication trenches Withington and Gabion Avenues.

The tour was singularly uneventful, and only heavy

intermittent shelling over a wide area can be recorded. One evening—the 10th—a considerable movement of enemy transport was heard along Station Road, opposite to us. On our notification of this, our batteries opened fire, and no doubt dispersed it, for we listened afterwards in vain. Our casualties amounted to 11 other ranks wounded by the time we were relieved by the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters.

#### HEBUTERNE

We moved to a tented camp in Mailly Wood.

On the 16th our Officers, under the captaincy of the Commanding Officer, played our friends, the Officers of the 252nd Tunnelling Company, R.E. at football, and were defeated after a hard-fought match, 2—0, but as this was the first excursion the Officers had made into this field of activity, the slender margin of defeat was more surprising than the actual result.

The enemy heavy artillery somewhat disturbed our sylvan existence by putting some large calibre shells over. They wounded one of our men on duty at Brigade Headquarters.

On the 19th we marched to Bertrancourt, where we spent the night, and on the 20th took over the trenches of the Right Hebuterne Section from the 1st Battalion King's Royal Rifles (2nd Division).

There was something rather depressing about Hebuterne; perhaps it was because wet weather had set in; perhaps because the line was situated in the midst of a very bare, muddy and dreary down country; perhaps because the trenches were in such a shattered condition, or perhaps it was because there is always something very discouraging and unsatisfactory to infantry when day after day it is the target for artillery, a form of activity to which the infantry cannot directly retaliate, and from which at Hebuterne, we suffered a relatively large number of casualties. The French had been there in the past, and names like Jean Bart, Vercingetorix and St. Veorn

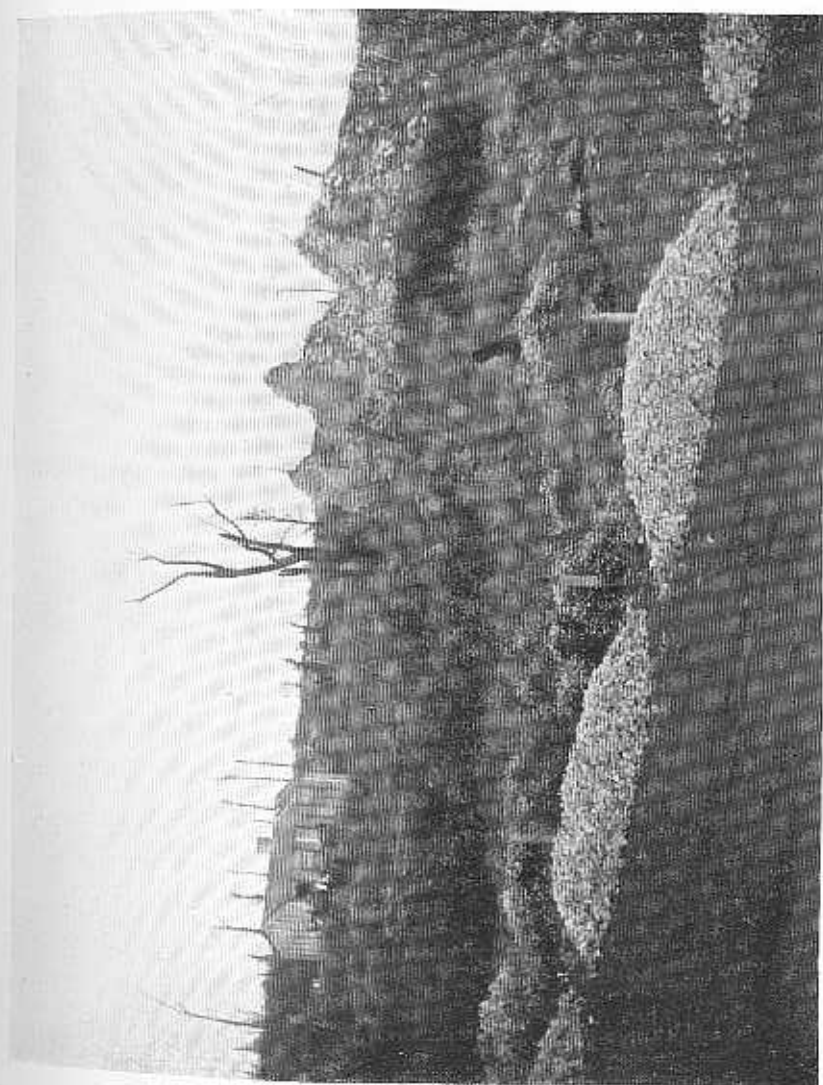
were the permanent evidences of their residence. In addition to the French names, John Street, Knox Street, Fore Street, Wrangle Street, and Naim Street will bring this sector vividly to the minds of those who ever occupied it.

On the left the line fell back considerably, and our old front line had become a deserted ditch, watched over by a sentry group at the end of a sap, where all conversation was supposed to be conducted in a whisper. The ruined village of Hebuterne, which gave its name to the sector, was a long way in our rear.

Our occupation seemed to rouse the curiosity of the enemy more than it had on any previous occasion, for we were subjected almost daily to aeroplane reconnaissances, the machines flying very low. Otherwise this tour was remarkable for artillery and trench mortar activity on both sides, and we were not subjected to the smallest calibre guns only, for we had a number of 5.9's besides 4.2's and 4.77's, shrapnel and the terrific minenwerfer or "minnie," which it will be remembered had a capricious habit of turning over and over in the air and, after shaking the ground by its weight alone, exploded with the most deafening noise just when one had decided it was a "dud."

On the 27th one of these did much damage in two fire-bays and buried five men, who were happily exhumed without serious injury. The enemy supplemented these arms with rifle grenades; while our most consciously successful retaliation took the form of dispersing two working parties with our Lewis guns. One morning the high explosive was interspersed with gas shells. We spent some time in our gas masks and suffered no casualties.

The depressing squalor in which we lived was coloured by the picturesque invention of our gunners, who devised a code for retaliation disguised in euphemisms culled from the fruit trade. Of these the historian recalls that "cherries" indicated a request for something light and



FESTUNG CHURCH.

small, "apricots" meant we required something with more body in it, and "apples" a regular barrage. Sentiments of humanity make one shudder to think of the result of a call for "melons" or "pumpkins."

We were relieved on October 1st by the 13th Battalion Essex Regiment, and marched to billets in Bertrancourt.

During the tour our casualties had been, one Officer and 11 other ranks wounded. In the meantime the 39th Division had passed into the II Corps, under the command of Lieut.-General Sir Claude W. Jacob, K.C.B.

On the 3rd we marched to huts in Martinsart Wood. These huts were far from comfortable—the age of the Nissen Hut had not dawned; moreover, it had rained much and the wood was a morass of mud. The permanent occupants of the camp were myriads of rats who resented our attempt at settlement among them. Rats were a constant source of discomfort in France, but the nuisance reached its consummation in Martinsart Wood—no one short of a Pied Piper could have hoped to deal with the situation. Captain Illingworth is reported to have killed three from his bed, and after spending a night in the special hut allotted to him, a Commanding Officer said that rather than lie there a second night he would sooner stand under a tree.

During September we lost two of our original Officers, as Captain A. P. H. Le Prevost became Second-in-Command of the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters, and Lieut. H. R. Stevens was appointed to command the 117th Trench Mortar Battery.

#### THIEPVAL

One of the finest achievements of the war was the capture of Thiepval by the 55th Brigade, 18th Division. It is perhaps permissible to mention that the British Press in reporting its fall did not seem to realise the magnitude and gallantry of the operation, probably because attention was distracted by the successful assault on Combles, further south, by combined French and British Troops,



which took place on the same day. The Germans are reported to have regarded Thiepval as impregnable, and they had a good deal to justify their opinion. The steadily rising ground was crowned by an intricate system of trenches, redoubts and strong points, including the Wonder Work and the Leipsic Redoubt, which commanded an enormous area of approach and field of fire. This fortified system contained the series of elaborately equipped dug-outs which were afterwards so well-known. The Mirror dug-out alone could hold an entire Company, and give them all beds, too. They were, moreover, so deep and strongly constructed as to be invulnerable to artillery. Of Thiepval itself it is no exaggeration to say a few stones only remained, and the contrast with the past was vividly brought home to the historian, for in that same Mirror dug-out a fellow-officer described to him what a delightful village Thiepval had been three years before, when he had stayed in a hotel just above where they were then sitting. This stronghold had been taken by the 55th Brigade on October 3rd, and on the 5th the 117th Brigade relieved it on the battlefield. The situation was precarious, as the northern half of the last strong point—Schwaben Redoubt—(a sort of rough parallelogram in shape) was still in the hands of an enemy who was thirsting to recapture his famous and comfortable stronghold, as its loss exposed his position to a devastating enfilade fire.

Our seven months in France had been spent almost entirely amid scenes of ruin and destruction. We were quite hardened to such sights, but we found the Thiepval Sector was in a class apart. A painting of it might have served to illustrate the "Abomination of Desolation" spoken of by the prophet. There was not a blade of grass, not a bush, not a trace of the original landscape, and two demolished tanks half-overturned formed the only substantial objects in this terrible landscape, while the shell-pocked ground was covered with every conceivable form of war material—rifles, equipment, tattered uniforms,

battered helmets, ammunition, bombs, boots and machine guns, all mixed up with the debris of what had been probably the finest system of trenches ever made.

The battlefield of two days before was as yet uncleared of dead, and—if gruesome details can add to realism—the half-buried bodies of two Germans constituted the "duckboard" at one angle of the trench.

There was no front line, and each man had made himself a small "funk-hole," in which he lay and awaited events. There were a few bombing blocks, with three Lewis gun positions, and these constituted our defensive arrangements—a somewhat slender backing for Companies which were practically isolated, owing to the contours, and the fact that no telephone line remained uncut for any length of time.

We took over the Centre Sector, which included Schwaben Redoubt, from the 7th Battalion the Buffs. Our Headquarters were in deep dug-outs in Thiepval Chateau, and the support Company occupied the site of what once had been Leipsic Redoubt, about a thousand yards behind.

The relief was carried out by daylight, and we came in for some heavy shelling. Progress was slow: we had to lie down in the mud till a tornado had spent itself. We found that the communication trenches had been so far destroyed that the Redoubt had to be approached from Battalion Headquarters by a line of tapes pegged in the open, amid shell-holes and mud, for nearly a mile before a serviceable communication trench—St. Martin's Lane—was reached. To realise the position we were in for the next few days, it is essential to appreciate that two factors were constant throughout, and formed a permanent background to the activities about to be described. The first was mud; the second was shell fire. It takes very little rain to make any battle area a quagmire. In this case we had had a good deal of rain, and Thiepval had had a good deal of "battle," as fighting had been in progress there with only short intervals since

July 1st. So bad was the track and tenacious the mud, that it took four men several hours to carry a stretcher case from the front line to Battalion Headquarters, and one such journey in a day was as much as a man was physically capable of.

The shelling throughout our tour of duty here was heavy, persistent and incessant, and it converged on us from four points at once, so that even that haven of refuge, Martin's Lane, when reached, was probably more perilous than the most exposed trenches we had occupied before.

The relief and first day cost us: one killed, one missing, 26 wounded. On the second day Second-Lieut. A. R. Butler was wounded.

It was always clear that the "status quo" could not last. One side or the other must have the whole of Schwaben Redoubt.

The enemy tried first.

On October 7th, preceded by flammenwerfer (a form of warfare we had only seen demonstrated peacefully behind our lines—and hoped then we should never experience), a heavy barrage on the front and over Thiepval itself, and supported by intense machine-gun and rifle fire, he made a determined attack on our front from Point 10 to Point 22, held by ourselves and the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters. Our artillery responded promptly to our needs, and the two Sherwood Foresters Battalions put up a very vigorous defence with rapid fire, Lewis guns and bombs. The enemy were beaten off everywhere, except at Point 27, where they succeeded in entering our trenches. They were given a very warm welcome there, and were driven out at the point of the bayonet, with heavy losses, leaving twenty-five prisoners in our hands.

On the 8th the enemy tried again.

They attacked the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters on our right, but were beaten back, leaving behind thirteen prisoners and many killed.

We were warmly complimented on these successes by

Lieut.-General Sir Claude W. Jacob, K.C.B., commanding the II Corps, who wrote as follows:—

"The Corps Commander wishes to express to the 16th and 17th Battalions Sherwood Foresters his congratulations on their action in dealing with the German counter-attacks on the evening of the 7th and morning of the 8th October, the results of which are as complimentary to units concerned as they must be discouraging to the enemy."

The General Officer Commanding 117th Infantry Brigade expressed his satisfaction in these terms:—

"I think the work carried out by the 16th and 17th Battalions Sherwood Foresters Regiment was very satisfactory. All worked coolly and methodically—units supported each other, liaison with the artillery was very complete and all units showed much spirit and dash."

Subsequently the following awards were made:—

M.C.	Captain P. H. Coleridge.
	Lieut. A. Stevenson.
	Rev. A. P. Daniels, C.F.
D.C.M.	Lance-Sergeant H. Hallam.
M.M.	Sergeant P. Trueman.

On the 9th we tried.

The attack was not conceived on conventional lines. It was decided to utilise the element of surprise—a factor which can seldom be employed in trench warfare, owing to the necessity of cutting the enemy's wire by artillery before there is any hope of success. In this case the wire opposite us had been so knocked about during the recent battle, and the almost uninterrupted bombardment which had continued since, that it was thought further cutting was unnecessary, more particularly as the Germans, like ourselves, had been given no opportunity of repairing any breaches. (A strong officers' patrol which had been sent out two nights before had been unable to confirm this belief owing to the darkness.) There was, therefore, to be no artillery



preparation. The attack was to be made at 4.30 a.m., under cover of darkness, but just before dawn, so that the light would be available when the initial assault had taken place. The use of bombs was strictly limited; each man carried but two. We were instructed to rely chiefly on the bayonet.

The objectives of each Company were as follow:—

- "B" Company. Captain J. G. Cooke. Point 99.
- "C" Company. Captain A. Hardy „ 69-49.
- "D" Company. Lient. P. U. Laws „ 39.
- "A" Company. Captain P. H. Coltridge, M.C.

Point d'appui.

The assembly in our front line was successfully carried out in spite of considerable shelling.

At 4.30 a.m. "B," "C," and "D" Companies (in all three hundred strong) advanced—attacking in depth.

Unhappily the factor on which the whole plan hinged—surprise—broke down at the earliest possible moment,\* since, in accordance with the invariable custom of both armies, the Germans were "standing to" in their trenches just before dawn. Our waves were therefore hardly half across "No Man's Land" before machine gun and rifle fire was opened on them. A few yards further on we were met by a perfect barrage of bombs. In other words, we came in for the force of the enemy's very spirited defence at the moment when we were most exposed, most vulnerable, and least able to check it, for the ground we were advancing over was broken with shell-holes and heavy and slippery with mud. We had, however, eight minutes' start of the German artillery, which did not open out until 4.38 a.m., but our casualties were already serious.

It will be clearer if we follow the fortunes of the individual companies from this stage, for those fortunes varied according to the state of the enemy wire each respectively encountered.

\* There is authority for saying that the surprise factor was further rendered nugatory by the premature detonation of a bomb.



THE ANCRE VALLEY FROM THIEPVAL

"B" Company, very gallantly led by Captain J. G. Cooke, after effecting a passage of the wire, reached its objective between points 99 and 69, and established themselves there, but in so doing suffered very heavy casualties. There was some particularly hard fighting round Point 99 before "B" Company drove the enemy into the dug-outs. Once this was accomplished they killed many by bombing. "B" Company was assisted in the operation by a platoon of the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters, whose support was invaluable, as but for their timely reinforcement, Captain Cooke could hardly have maintained his position for even the briefest period.

"C" Company were held up by impenetrable wire just in front of their objective—and thus were exposed to the full fury of the defenders, who were standing in their trench throwing bombs like cricket balls as hard and fast as they could. Our small ration of two bombs per man was soon exhausted. "C" Company tried again and again to reach the German trench, and sustained very serious losses in vain.

"D" Company fared no better, for, being on the flank, they caught the heavy machine gun and rifle fire directed from just south of Point 39. As the enemy were entrenched, and they were in the open, they were unable to counter this effectively, and the state of the wire prevented them rushing their objective.

If one's imagination fails to visualise the actual conditions, the inferno of noise from bursting shells, machine guns, Lewis guns, rifles, bombs—the mud, the shell-torn ground—the wounded and the dead—it is quite easy to appreciate the tactical situation—one company, in the German Line, greatly reduced in strength, with each flank uncovered, endeavouring to ward off counter-attacks during hasty attempts to consolidate their position, clinging in fact to the objective, so hardly won, until support should arrive; the centre company outside the wire in "No Man's Land," exposed to the point

blank fire of the enemy's garrison, the right company also stationary in "No Man's Land," trying to counter a defence which was decimating them, and would have annihilated them if they advanced before that defence was broken by artillery or the wire was cut in front of them.\*

It is easy to be wise after the event, but at this distance of time the tragic fact may as well be faced. The assault was doomed to failure from the outset, as the two essential conditions precedent to success were not present—the enemy were not surprised and the wire was not penetrable all along the front attacked. Moreover three hundred men were not enough to capture a position of the strength and importance of Schwaben Redoubt—the last key position dominating the Ancre Valley held by the enemy.

Eventually, after two hours, bombs and ammunition being exhausted, we were forced back to our own trenches.

All through the night the wounded crawled back into

\* Every officer who went over became a casualty, and those the Historian has been able to get in touch with were wounded so early in the action that they have been unable to give any assistance in clearing up the obscurities of this engagement.

In a letter written to the historian four days afterwards, Lieut. Laws gives the following account:—

"When we got over, had occupied the trench and closed the dug outs (there were more than we had anticipated), No. 6 obeying blindly the order to form a defensive line in "No Man's Land," streamed over into Germany, and after them No. 8 streamed also. I saw what had happened, and finding "C" Company hotly engaged behind us, turned them left and told them to rush the trench from the right rear with the bayonet. Fritz understood, and we were met with a hail of bombs—albeit harmless enough. Then the tragedy occurred, the two bewildered platoons remembering the hurried order to rely on their rifles rather than bombs, lay down and began to shoot. In vain I yelled to them to get in with the bayonet. Perhaps I might have done it had I not been an early victim."

It will be seen that Lieut. Laws uses the phrase "when we got over," which conflicts with the diary on which the Historian has based his account. The "we" either refers to "B" Company in a sense representative of the Battalion as a whole, or it implies that some at least of "D" Company followed through the "B" Company gap. The Historian, however, considers that the most probable interpretation is that Lieut. Laws, finding that his Company could not occupy the trenches by direct assault, went himself to see if he could find some other way round. Such action seems probable—it would certainly have been characteristic.

our lines, bringing tragic tales of their comrades still lying in shell holes, unable to move, pinned down by the severity of their wounds or by the vigilance of an enemy who, knowing they were there, was ready to shoot at a few yards range on the slightest movement being made. The enemy endeavoured to make assurance doubly sure in this respect by closing the gaps in our wire with machine gun fire all the night through. In spite of this it must be recorded that our stretcher bearers, slipping and sliding in the mud, intermittently exposed to the "limelight" of the Verrey pistol, effected many gallant rescues from "No Man's Land" till the dawn prevented further excursions there.

Our casualties were:—

*Missing, believed killed—*

Captain J. G. Cooke—in length of service with the Battalion the doyen of our Officers. He had been with us since the first week of our recruitment.

*Killed—*

Lieut. C. J. Hart.

Second Lieut. J. P. Teahan.

Second Lieut. L. W. Godwin.

Second Lieut. A. Bayzand.

26 Other Ranks, including C.S.M. Lilliman.

*Missing—*

64 Other Ranks.

*Died of wounds:—*

Lieut. W. R. A. Lohfeldt.

*Wounded—*

Captain A. Hardy.

Lieut. P. U. Laws.

Second Lieut. C. Darke.

Second Lieut. A. E. Cooling.

Second Lieut. C. W. Laws.

Second Lieut. V. J. Copstake.

Second Lieut. A. Scragg.

134 Other Ranks.

We lost every officer who went over.



It was estimated that this heavy casualty list had cost the enemy a very heavy one also.

Subsequently the following honours were awarded:—

- M.C.* Capt. H. R. Stevens, Commanding 117th Trench Mortar Battery.  
 Second Lieut. V. J. Copestake.  
*D.C.M.* Private J. Betts, and the Montenegrin Silver Medal for Bravery.  
*Croix de Guerre* Lance-Sergeant A. Gyte.  
 Lance-Sergeant W. H. Shaw (attached 117th Trench Mortar Battery).

It should be added that the northern face of Schwaben Redoubt was taken on the 14th by two Battalions of the 118th Brigade, namely 1/1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment and 4/5th Battalion Black Watch, assisted by two Companies of the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles. For this encounter a heavy artillery barrage was employed to support the infantry, and it is interesting to recall that in spite of this, the element of surprise greatly assisted our troops, for the attack was launched at 2 p.m., when the Germans were found asleep in their dug-outs, presumably after *mittagessen*. The British casualties suffered on this occasion amounted to double the number of men with which we had gone over. We had the satisfaction of assisting, to some extent, in this success, in that two of our officers and 100 other ranks acted as additional stretcher-bearers during the attack.

Thus the fall of the great fortified system on the rising ground North-East of Thiepval was complete within a fortnight of the initial advance of the 55th Brigade.

To return to October 9th. At 1 p.m. we were relieved by the 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles, and staggered, exhausted, to the reserve line at Wood Post, Authille, leaving one Company in support at Thiepval, where a quiet day was spent. We were caked with mud, were crawling with lice, had not shaved, washed, or removed our boots for ten days, had had no sleep for two nights, and very little for days before that. On the 10th

we were relieved by 1/1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment. Thence we marched to Senlis, a little town some five miles behind the battle zone, where the Divisional Band came and administered a tonic in the form of a most enjoyable Concert.

Here we lost another of our original officers in Major W. G. Constable, who received an appointment as Second in-Command of the 11th Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers.

Our numbers in men and officers were sorely depleted. We had lost many familiar faces, and in the next few weeks had to absorb large batches of reinforcements, but fortunately there were enough of the former battalion left to infuse our new members with the old spirit. In the coming months we were, to a great extent, a new battalion, but it had risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the old.

After five days' rest at Senlis we returned to the line and relieved the 1/6th Battalion Cheshire Regiment in the River Ancre Left Section.

We spent the next four weeks in and about this sector during one of the wettest months in the war. It was on the immediate left of Thiepval, and must have recently become much more tenable through the capture of Schwaben Redoubt. The great ridge which was crowned by that stronghold fell away very gradually towards the River Ancre on the north, until within a few hundred yards of the river, when it dipped with a rather steep gradient. The valley behind the ridge sloped gently to the river bank from the site of Thiepval itself. A glance at the map will show that after the capture of the Thiepval Ridge the British line for a considerable distance on our right faced almost due north, and consequently, lay almost at right angles to the front we were to hold.

Immediately east of the river the ridge expanded to a dome-shaped hill which was covered by what must once have been a thick wood. This was still fairly dense in October, 1916, though the place of the undergrowth was taken by the debris of trenches and battles, and was cumbered with the branches and tops of trees which had

been split off by shells. The wood was composed mostly of firs, the trunks and some limbs remaining, but very few of the green needles were left, and the hill looked like a broom with the bristles nearly worn away. We approached this by the road leading along the west bank of the Ancre, leaving Aveluy Wood, still retaining its autumn leaves, on the left hand, passing Brigade Headquarters, at Passerole de Magenta, near which we crossed the river by a narrow bridge to Paisley Dump.

An embankment on the south side of Thiepval Wood had been honeycombed with dug-outs, which formed the habitation of the main body of the Battalion—the connecting trench being named after the neighbouring Dump, Paisley Avenue.

Two Companies under one Company Commander held the front line. This was reached by one communication trench which led through the middle of the wood to the Headquarters of the Front Company, a deep and strongly-built dug-out in its centre. Judging by the accuracy with which the range had been acquired by the enemy artillery, the position of this lonely oasis in the wood must have been very well known to them. The historian has counted as many as fifty shells falling within a disagreeably small circumference of which he was the unwilling centre, with his "early morning tea." The proportion of direct hits was worthy of the highest praise, though the sappers who originally constructed the dug-out deserve even more. The line itself was held in a singular manner. After leaving Company Headquarters one passed up the communication trench through an indescribable jumble of debris and wreckage (which made us think wistfully of our tidy, well-ordered line at Richebourg), till one reached a short tunnel which accommodated a small garrison. Emerging from this a short trench led one to the front line, which lay clear of the wood on its east side.

The front line ran roughly north and south, and at irregular intervals the trench itself plunged underground

for perhaps thirty or forty yards at a time. In these tunnels, hewn through the chalk, the Companies lived, sentries with periscopes being stationed at each end and also in the middle, where a narrow entrance had been cut. At the end of the series of tunnels the land dropped down to the River Ancre, on the embankment of which our left flank rested. The tunnels were very cramping and uncomfortable—(one could not stand upright in them)—and they were so narrow that in effecting a passage of them one had to walk between the prostrate bodies of the garrison. It was ordained that no one should walk abroad until darkness fell, so that in these "Black Holes" we were doomed to remain all the daytime. We shall none of us easily forget Koyli West or Mill Post.

Our first tour lasted ten days, and was extremely quiet. The War Diary has nothing to record. It was not in fact, possible to have much history while in the tunnels unless either side attacked; "pin-pricking" the Germans would have been disastrous. Furthermore, it would seem that the policy on the Somme was to be as quiet as possible between each attack, so that preparations might go quietly forward for the next. Therefore, we lay in the tunnels all day, and visited each other all night.

From this rat-like existence we were relieved on the 25th by the 1/1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment, and moved to billets in Pioneer Road.

Our casualties had been—two killed, two wounded and one slightly gassed by a whiff from a gas shell. We spent till the 27th in Pioneer Road. It was still extremely wet, and our efforts were directed to keeping ourselves dry, warm and clean.

On the 27th we relieved the 14th Battalion Hampshire Regiment in the River Sector, Thiepval, and became Battalion in Brigade support with Headquarters at Thiepval Château. This official designation is most misleading, it implies, for instance, that Headquarters was in a house. There were no houses, as has been stated already. Thiepval was blotted off the face of the



earth, and no trace of it was left. We were, it is true, in the middle of what had been Thiepval, but it would have been a brave man who would have asserted that the Headquarter's dug-out was anywhere near where a château had been. Put in an affirmative form, it was an infinite wilderness of mud, debris and shell-holes. There seemed to be no landmarks. There were no trenches. There was no sign of the roads nor indication where the church or houses had stood. There was one curious exception to this desolation—a patch of green grass about 20 yards square, where no shells had fallen—a diminutive Land of Goshen, which served to accentuate the plague-stricken area around it. Scattered in this wilderness at considerable distances apart were four or five large dug-outs. They were extremely hard to find, and if one visited another Company Headquarters it was not easy to find one's way back to one's own. However, it was certainly well worth finding—for in each case it was one of the famous German dug-outs. Entrance was effected by two or three shafts leading to galleries opening into the wider tunnels. They were inevitably damp, and in one or two pumping was necessary to keep them from becoming waterlogged. Although some of us had occupied one or two of these before, some description may be given here. Each of these vast underground labyrinths accommodated a whole company and provided a wire bed for every man. They were about 20 feet deep. The officers' sections were beautifully fitted with dark wood, into the panelling of which mirrors had been inserted, while comfortable chairs were drawn round the fire place. They were installed with electric light and equipped with a speaking tube up to the sentry on duty. The men's sections were furnished with tables, forms and stoves. The roofs were supported by such solid timbers that these dug-outs had withstood one of the heaviest bombardments of the war. It was understood that the position had been held by the same Bavarian Regiment for two years. They had managed to combine comfort with security,

though experience showed that immunity from shell fire was purchased at the price of capture like rats in a trap.

Here we had nothing to do but keep on the alert for gas, or for an S.O.S. demanding us to reinforce the battalion in the front.

We spent two days as luxurious moles, and were relieved on the 29th by the 1/1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment, when we marched once more to the rat-ridden quarters in Martinsart Wood.

We knew by this time that another big attack, in which we were to take part, was impending; we also, perforce, knew that the weather continued most unpropitious. More than once operation orders reached us: the first edition arrived on October 23rd. More than once "X" day came, but "Y" and "Z" days were on each occasion deferred owing to the weather. It seemed that the principle operating our movements for the next three weeks was, while giving each Battalion its share of holding the line, to see that no one unit spent very long there at a time. Duties—and the chief one that of providing garrisons for the front trenches—had to be carried out, but so far as was consistent with this, it was evidently desired to tire us as little as possible during this period of waiting for a change of weather. We were to keep as fresh as possible. It was not an exhilarating life. A battle area must necessarily be a harsh place to live in—but at this juncture the wet weather rendered every camp, dug-out and tent damp and unhealthy.

On November 3rd we relieved the 4/5th Battalion Black Watch at Paisley Dump, and spent two quiet days in front of Thiepval Wood as before. On the 5th the 11th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment relieved us, and we marched to Seaxis, with the rumour that the next attack had been indefinitely postponed, owing to the weather, and that our sojourn on the Somme was over. The officers sat down to mess that night with that complacent feeling which the anticipation of a good rest is apt to give anyone who has accomplished a long and arduous task.



That particular form of complacency was not justified by events. At 3 a.m. we were roused by a despatch rider bearing orders for our immediate return whence we had come, and at dawn we were once more on our way back to Paisley Dump, where we relieved the 11th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment in a position which it had taken over from us a few hours before.

On the 8th we were out of the line again, relieved by the 1/1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment, and went into Brigade Reserve at South Bluff till the 11th, when we spent one more night among the rats of Martinsart Wood.

#### ST. PIERRE DIVION

About 10 p.m. the next night we left Martinsart Wood, and in due course reached "Causeway," a cutting in front of Paisley Dump. Here a halt of an hour was called, during which tea and rum warmed our hearts. Then silently, in single file, we crossed the narrow bridge over the Ancre, and ascended the steep, rough slopes of Speyside, between the south bank of the river and Thiepval, to our assembly positions for the attack so long deferred.

"Z" day had arrived.

The general plan of this operation was as follows:—The 118th Infantry Brigade was to advance from the Thiepval front, and take the German system of trenches to our right, north-east of Thiepval Wood, lying on the higher ground forming part of the ridge, which here sloped gradually towards the north-west until a steep embankment gave on to the river itself. The embankment was known to contain several large dug-outs, and information had been obtained that a battalion headquarters and dressing station, together with a large cellar of stores, were situated at—or under—the little village of St. Pierre Divion, some half-mile from the position in which we assembled. We had received very minute details of this village, of which the remains of

eight houses were still standing, with particulars of the tunnels, cellars, dumps and probable strength of the defence. The largest tunnel was between two and three hundred yards long and had several entrances. The 1/6th Battalion Cheshire Regiment, coming over from our right, was to capture this village, and we were to make a subsidiary attack from the south, advancing along the embankment and ultimately occupying a line running east from the Summer House to a point some distance short of St. Pierre Divion. It will, therefore, be seen that our subsidiary attack was to be at right angles to the main battle, the artillery preparation for which, it was hoped, would keep the enemy opposite us in their dug-outs. The 4/5th Battalion Black Watch was to cover the left flank of the 1/6th Battalion Cheshire Regiment, sweep over the German trenches in front of Koyli West, and join us on the banks of the Ancre. A tank was to co-operate on our right.

Our Companies assembled without incident. They were each only ninety strong. "A," "B" and "D" Companies, under Captain A. Stevenson, M.C., Lieut. R. H. Ellis, and Captain R. L. Illingworth, respectively, were to attack, and "C" Company, under Lieut. A. L. Holland, was kept in reserve.

During the hours of darkness a mist came up, and by the time dawn broke this was very thick and, incidentally, very wet.

The wire had been previously cut by our artillery, and it may here be mentioned that this essential to success had been most admirably carried out.

The main attack by the 118th Brigade started at 5.45 a.m., after an intense artillery bombardment, and, in accordance with the time schedule, we advanced at 6.13 a.m., under cover of a barrage of our own put over by the 85th Battery, 18th Division. The mist added to the difficulty, which is felt in any operation, of keeping direction. However, we pushed on through it, and the centre and left Companies successfully occupied the

German trenches without much opposition, for, as it had been anticipated, the enemy having good dug-outs, sought them as a refuge from the artillery and intense rifle fire. The right—"A"—Company, however, met with opposition from a garrison which was not so well provided for in this respect—and were held up, their difficulties being increased by the mist, which prevented them from locating exactly from where the opposition came. The Company Commander, Captain Stevenson, sent back information as to his position, and by 6.30 a.m. the reserve Company was moving up to his assistance. This reinforcement—which arrived with such timely and suspicious promptitude as to give colour to the rumour prevalent afterwards, that the two officers in charge of it had anticipated—"the wish being father to the thought"—the necessity for their immediate support—cleared the situation and the two Companies combined in driving and bombing the Germans into their dug-outs. Thus, within about half an hour of our start the Battalion had captured and was in absolute possession of its objectives and had large numbers of the enemy safely "bottled up" in their dug-outs, to be dealt with at leisure.

There was one disappointing feature in the battle up to this point. Tanks were new to us. They had been used for the first time the month before, and we were anxious to see one in action. The tank which had been allocated to assist us, however, was very unfortunate. It had arrived at the rendezvous before the scheduled time—a mistake unlikely to be made by anything but a pachydermatous animal in view of the intensity of our artillery fire—and the sight of this strange creature, looking in the mist like some prehistoric monster, cheered us on. On coming up with it, however, we found that owing to the lack of visibility it had lumbered and blundered along and had subsided into a dug-out, where it had to be left wallowing and impotently snorting.

There was no sign of the 4/5th Battalion Black Watch. Furthermore it was impossible in the mist to appreciate

the general situation. We could, however, thoroughly appreciate our own. We occupied all the German trenches in our immediate neighbourhood, and the 118th Brigade had not turned up to take those in front. Moreover, there appeared to be but a small chance that the Black Watch would find us in this game of "Hide and Seek." It was, in fact, clear that much more remained to be done, while we who were available and ready were doing nothing. In such circumstances it seemed almost an obligation to ascertain if we could not lend a hand, particularly as a situation which was not anticipated had arisen. In fact, if Nelson could base a disregard of orders on one blind eye surely we could do something on those lines when all our 600 eyes were blinded by the mist?

We therefore advanced again; indeed it would have been difficult to stop us, once the idea was mooted, so we pressed on through the mist, and in due course reached the tunnel dug-outs. Their inhabitants, who were not expecting an attack, appeared more amazed than displeased to find our men at the entrances, just as they were waking up to their daily routine. Captain Illingworth himself tackled the biggest. Revolver in hand and accompanied only by his orderly, he entered, and found no one. They were in a long deep tunnel. There was no sign of life. They passed on further and still found no one. Cautiously they advanced till they were a hundred yards from the entrance, and found no sign of anyone yet. They began to be afraid the birds had flown, or perhaps that they themselves were in a trap. Undeterred, however, by these disagreeable considerations they pressed on with increasing caution for another fifty yards, when their persistence was rewarded by coming upon a dug-out full of the enemy, extremely surprised to see them. The ceremonial of surrender was not protracted. The orderly ran to the entrance to warn the Company outside, and there followed him eighty-one prisoners, who were duly disarmed, and sent down to Battalion Headquarters under escort.



In the meantime Second Lieut. Holland and a small party had advanced further forward, and arrived at the ruins of St. Pierre Divion, where they found the German Battalion Headquarters. Before the occupants knew what was happening the whole headquarters staff was captured—60 other ranks, including several officers, the Battalion Commander, the Adjutant and the Medical Officer. Many of the prisoners seemed relieved at being taken, as they were so demoralised by our shell-fire. They said for the last few weeks they had scarcely dared move out of their dug-out, and the state of their refuges certainly bore this out, as they were in a filthy condition and full of rubbish and garbage of every description. The smell was appalling. But if there was much debris, there was plenty of booty as well, *e.g.*, revolvers, field glasses, champagne and Rhine wine, besides a fully-equipped Aid Post, with enough aspirin and other drugs to last a Battalion for six months. Breakfast was being prepared in one room, and a grim relic in the shape of a dead German was stretched on the table of the Medical Officer; his Iron Cross lay on his desk.

Lieut. Holland reduced his attenuated ranks to supply escorts for his captives, and pressed on again, but before following him further it will be well to record the capture of yet another dug-out. Sergeant Monks, the Sergeant Cook, had been with us since we were first recruited, and though an excellent cook he had always found that the culinary art gave an inadequate outlet to his Hibernian spirits. He had so far managed to relieve his feelings by advancing to the front, and discharging "five rounds rapid" at the German trenches whenever he had come up to the line with hot food for us in occupation. On this occasion this outlet was denied to him for obvious reasons, and his feelings in consequence were in spate. So, having given us our tea in the Causeway, he deserted his dixies and his cookers, and left his assistants to take them back to Paisley Dump. In the darkness he slipped unnoticed in among the members of the leading Company,

and at dawn, was aided in his sinister purpose by the mist. He was not, in fact, recognised by "authority" until soon after the first "wave" had reached the German Line, when he was observed with rifle and bayonet emerging from a German dug-out prodding six prisoners and loudly and vehemently refuting some imaginary controversialist on the question as to whether he was "any good at fifty-six." It transpired that Sergeant Monks had entered this dug-out and found its occupants in anything but the "Comrade" mood, but that in spite of his two score and sixteen years and his snowy locks, his flowery vernacular and ferocious demeanour had made them decide on conciliation rather than combat. With these six unhappy men he was like a collier with a flock of sheep—he would not trust them to anybody and refused to be parted from them. He took them himself to the Corps Cage, and having seen them safely penned returned to his own department in good time to serve us up some tea.

We must return to Lieut. Holland.

The main body of the 4/5 Battalion Black Watch had lost direction, but in the course of Lieut. Holland's advance beyond St. Pierre Divion, 2 Officers and 10 men of that Battalion loomed out of the clouds of vapour, and joined his depleted ranks. Anyone who has wandered in a mist knows how surprising are the places at which one may arrive, and in this instance Lieut. Holland, whose wonderful dash impelled him ever further, eventually reached the Hansa Line and joined up—inconceivable as it may seem—with the 1/1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment on the extreme right of the 118th Brigade front. A glance at the map will indicate the reason for this remarkable denouement. In flattening out the salient which had been caused by the projection of Thiepval into our line, the main attack of the 118th Brigade took place towards the N.N.W., and as their left wing had missed direction, their right had advanced further west than their left. On the Hansa Line



Lieut. Holland caused some temporary annoyance by capturing part of the Hertfordshire Regiment's objective before the latter had time to reach it themselves.

Lieut. Holland was running short of bombs just before 8 o'clock, and most of his men were occupied as guards to prisoners and dug-outs, so in response to a message two Companies of the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters (which had come up to take over our original front line when the reserve Company went forward) were sent to reinforce him. These gave very valuable help, both in overcoming resistance and in evacuating prisoners.

During this time other smaller dug-outs had been captured by the rest of the Battalion, and by 9 a.m. a few isolated ones only remained untaken, but from these the enemy maintained an obstinate defence by sniping and bombing. They were, however, soon rendered innocuous by White Star bombs (poison gas), which were used in this action for the first time.

At 9.15 a.m. the whole situation was cleared up, and the entire German trench system was in our hands. Battalion Headquarters moved forward and occupied the German Battalion Headquarters at St. Pierre Divion, taking with them the two other Companies of the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters.

This Battalion assisted us very materially in the only two duties remaining to us—the consolidation of the new line, and clearing the dug-outs of prisoners. The latter was soon completed, but the former, which we began at 9.30 a.m. continued all day.

It was not until after the capture of the various positions that the 1/6 Battalion Cheshire Regiment, which had lost direction, emerged from the mist and joined us.

Our casualties were relatively slight:—

*Killed—*

Lieut. S. G. Burch.

4 Other Ranks.

*Wounded—*

67 Other Ranks, including C.S.M. J. H. Robinson.



THE ANCRE VALLEY FROM THIEPVAL.

Many Officers, N.C.O.'s and men performed feats of exceptional gallantry during the day, but it has only been possible in this brief account to notice a few of the more striking incidents. It may, however, be conveniently mentioned here that the following decorations were subsequently awarded:—

<i>D.S.O.</i>	Lieut.-Colonel. C. Herbert-Stepney.
<i>M.C.</i>	Captain R. L. Illingworth, Lieut. D. W. Stevens (attached 118th Infantry Brigade), Second Lieuts. R. A. Johnson, A. L. Holland, V. Bowmer.
<i>D.C.M.</i>	Sergeants S. A. Stych, E. Freeman.
<i>M.M.</i>	Sergeants C. Monks, W. Whitehead. Lance-Sergeant E. Sheldon. Corporals E. Jaynes, A. Bush, A. Mitchell, A. Rushton. Lance-Corporal T. W. Barks. Privates H. Farnath, W. Fowkes, J. Hewitt, W. Root, W. Eakin.

At 7.15 p.m. we were relieved and proceeded to Paisley Avenue after a long, arduous and triumphant day. It was the last of our sojourn in the Somme Battle Area, and we had rung down the curtain with some distinction, for with 360 men we had captured 13 German officers, including a Battalion Commander, and 720 other ranks, besides a vast trench system and much booty.

The next day we were relieved by the 15th Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers, and marched, via Albert, to a camp at Warloy.

The Germans had the last word.

The camp was a canvas one—of new white tents—the mist had cleared and a bright moon floated in the heavens, in the light of which the tents must have been a tempting target. Enemy aircraft rattled overhead, and dropped six bombs on us. Fortunately, no serious damage was done, and the only casualty was a mule, which was wounded.

Lieut.-General Sir Claude W. Jacob, commanding the II Corps, sent the following message to the 39th Division, and as it refers to several enterprises in which we had borne an honourable part, it is reproduced in full:—

To MAJOR-GENERAL G. J. CUTHBERT, C.B., C.M.G.,  
*Commanding 39th Division.*

"Your Division is now leaving the II Corps, and I wish to thank you all for the excellent work you have done since you came into the Corps and took over the line at the Schwaben Redoubt and down to the River Ancre. You have had a good deal of hard fighting which has shown up the good qualities of your Brigades and Battalions, and the spirit and dash of the men has been most conspicuous. We shall always remember the gallant defence of the Schwaben Redoubt and the way your troops beat off counter-attack after counter-attack. The capture of St. Pierre Divion and the Hansa line on the 13th instant was a splendid feat and a very fitting conclusion to the operations of your Division before leaving the II Corps.

"The results of that capture will be far reaching, not only on account of the number of prisoners and material you took, but on account of the assistance you gave to the V Corps and the damaging effect on the moral of the enemy.

"Will you please tell your Brigade Commanders, Battalion and Company Commanders and all ranks in the Division, that their work all through has been thoroughly appreciated, and that the departure of the Division is much regretted.

"Success in war cannot be obtained unless all arms co-operate and work together in close combination. The many successes your Division has had is due to the untiring support you have had from the Artillery, which has never failed you. The calls on the Divisional Artillery have been heavy, but their response has always been prompt and efficient. Will you kindly convey to

the C.R.A.'s of the 18th and 39th Divisional Artilleries the thanks of the II Corps for the efficient way all ranks of the gunners have 'played the game.'

(Signed) C. W. JACOB,  
*Lieutenant-General,*  
*Commanding 2nd Corps."*

Subsequently, the Duke of Devonshire, by now Governor-General of the Dominion of Canada, sent to the Commanding Officer a very warm letter of congratulation on the Battalion's achievements on the Somme and at St. Pierre Divion, and our gratification was crowned by receiving the following gracious message, addressed to the Commander-in-Chief, from His Majesty the King:—

"I heartily congratulate you upon the great success achieved by my gallant troops during the past three days in the advance on both sides of the Ancre. This further capture of the enemy's first line trenches under special difficulties owing to the recent wet weather, redounds to the credit of all ranks."

The wheel of fortune had turned full circle, for our former elusive objective, Beaumont Hamel, fell in the same battle.

On our last day on the Somme, Fate had enabled us to avenge the misfortunes of the first.



## CHAPTER IV

### BELGIUM

#### YPRES

##### VOLKERINCKHOVE AND POPERINGHE

AT the time of the Armistice there was hanging on the wall of the Conference Room at General Headquarters, Montreuil, a chart showing the number of days each Division spent on the Somme during the long drawn-out battle of 1916, in which our part has just been described.

It will be remembered that each Division in France took its turn in this offensive, and that some took more than one turn. On this chart the 39th Division occupied an honourable place, for its turn had lasted no less than eighty days—a period not exceeded by any, and only equalled by two, other Divisions.

Its first engagement, at Beaumont Hamel, had been unfortunate, but the last, at St. Pierre Divion, was one of the outstanding incidents of the war. The intervening weeks had been arduous, the war of attrition had removed many of our veterans as casualties, and their number had been further reduced by trench fever, no doubt induced by the fact that those ten weeks were among the wettest experienced during a very wet war. It will be appreciated therefore that we felt that the report that we were designated for that Will-o'-the-wisp of the fighting unit—Divisional Rest—was more convincing than usual.

On November 15th we marched to Gezaincourt, and thence two days later to Candas, where we entrained for the North—arriving at Esquelbecq on the morning of the 18th. At the same time we passed into the VIII Corps (Lieut.-General Sir Aylmer Hunter Weston, K.C.B., D.S.O.) and the Second Army, under the command of General Sir Herbert Plumer, G.C.M.G., K.C.B.



THE BARRACKS, YPRES.



THE BARRACKS, YPRES.

The Battalion was billeted in the little Flemish village of Volkerinckhove and its outlying farms. These afforded very comfortable accommodation in houses or barns and in spite of the now wintry weather we much enjoyed a rural existence in surroundings untouched by war.

Those who have never had the fortune of being on active service should be reminded that—like Einstein's theory of gravity—rest is not absolute but relative, and this history must therefore record that we spent the next few weeks in *relative* rest and quiet, and some of us went on leave.

The Battalion started training by Companies and Platoons, and we endeavoured to get fit by games, sports and a certain number of route marches. The social amenities of this bucolic life were not many, but we looked into the question of musical talent, and concerts were given for the first time since our arrival in France.

The even tenor of our way was broken by three general inspections—firstly by the Brigade Commander, Brig.-General R. D. F. Oldman, who referred in flattering terms to the capture of St. Pierre Divion; secondly by the Corps Commander, Lieut.-General Sir Aylmer Hunter Weston, who certainly lived up to his reputation for minuteness and closeness of scrutiny, which he savoured on this occasion with very cordial congratulations; and finally by the Army Commander, General Sir Herbert Plumer, who inspected us one day on the march. The last named was particularly complimentary—expressing his appreciation of the fine bearing and smart turn-out of all ranks and congratulating us on our fine fighting on the Somme.

On December 9th we received orders to take over the front line, and on the 12th we moved by a light railway from Bollezeele to Poperinghe. Here we spent one night, which gave us our first experience of that well-known social centre of the Salient. Normally a sleepy and not very clean little country town, Poperinghe was at this time at the zenith of its fame and was always thickly

populated with ever-shifting masses of khaki-clad inhabitants of all branches of the Service. It represented the acme of comfort and civilization to them. Though many of the civilians had left owing to the periodical bombardments and the menace of gas attacks, there were yet enough brave souls left to minister to the more luxurious of our wants. There were restaurants, maintained by families whose names became household words in the British Army, in which excellent dinners could be obtained and where the popping corks of the widow's vintages were not the only detonations punctuating our conversation. There was a club for Officers in a fine old house in the main street, and unlimited cafés, estaminets, and even modest buffets which purveyed fish and chips to an army whose members in civilian days had nourished themselves largely on those delicacies; while Toc H diffused its cheery influence over tens of thousands of our troops. In the back streets redoubtable old ladies could be seen weaving by hand the thick Poperinghe lace, and found a ready market for their wares among those who gave a thought to the question of presents for those at home.

#### GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF SALIENT

Poperinghe in those days deserves this brief mention, for it formed a very definite background to our lives for many months to come. On this occasion we tasted its sweets for one evening only as the next day we left to take over the line.

We travelled by train and thus missed the long, tedious march which is so familiar to all who served in the Salient. One needs no reminder of the dreary road which emerged from Poperinghe by the station, and after passing a few out-lying houses took on the uniformity which carried it in an almost straight line to Ypres.

All will remember that tree-bordered embankment from which one could see the surrounding country—the open fields, the occasional estaminets and farms, the little village of Brandhoek, the distant woods containing the

camps with alphabetical names, the endless hutments, horse-lines and dumps—and so on, mile by mile to Vlamertinghe, with its beautiful church broken and stark against the skyline and its battered houses giving shelter to various branches of the Service, and they will recall the slight bend to the right there, Goldfish Château, and the increasing dreariness of the outlook till they reached the Lunatic Asylum on the outskirts of their destination.

We need no reminder of this road, nor shall we easily forget moving along it, struggling by day through the crowded stream of military traffic of all sorts, or endeavouring by night to dodge the mile-long snake of limbers, lorries and ration carts.

Our train stopped in the open country on the west of the town, from where guides conducted us through its outskirts to the support billets of the Centre Sub-section (Ypres Salient), whose Headquarters were located at the Château des Trois Tours.

Many who read this will remember the feelings with which they first set foot in the city which in fame and name has soared far above any of its neighbours, the scene of some of the most brilliant achievements of the British Army and the grave of a quarter of a million of its men.

"If thou would'st view fair Melrose aright,  
Go visit it by the pale moonlight,  
For the gay beams of lightsome day  
Gild but to flout the ruins grey."

(*"Lay of the Last Minstrel."*—SCOTT.)

The ruined, roofless houses, the twisted skeletons of the former public buildings, the gaunt remains of the Cathedral and the crumbling grandeur of the Cloth Hall, all combined in the dim light to give one a feeling of awe, almost as if one was walking on holy ground; and in the "gay beams of lightsome day" the feeling was never quite absent, for one of the most beautiful mediaeval cities in Europe still retained in her devastation a majesty



which was no doubt increased by the knowledge of the gallantry which had contrived to retain her within our lines.

Thus we first set foot in Ypres and began our long connection with the city, during which we were to occupy almost every sector of its defences except the extreme north. The fact that for more than twelve months the Salient was to be the scene of our activities may justify some description of its surroundings and our conditions there.

The system of defence adopted was roughly the same all round the Salient. In both the Northern and Southern Sectors, two battalions of the Brigade held the front line. One battalion was in support and one battalion was in reserve. The latter in the Northern Sector was lodged in dug-outs ranged along the Yser Canal Bank like cabins on a liner, with the duck-board walk outside taking the place of the deck, and the Canal itself that of the sea.

Variations of this arrangement were caused by the fact that the Canal in its course northwards gradually approached the enemy's lines, and in one part formed the support line, while further north still, beyond our limits, it took the place of "No Man's Land," and its dug-outs were the abode of our front line troops. The Yser Canal terminated at Ypres, and reserve battalions of the Brigades holding the Centre Sectors were accommodated in the town itself, where the Ramparts, the Barracks and the Lunatic Asylum afforded ready-made security. Further south the Ypres-Comines Canal, Spoil Bank and the Bluff took on the rôle of the Yser and its banks in the north. When the whole Brigade was in Divisional Reserve we occupied hutments in the woods and fields off the main Ypres-Poperinghe Road, or round Baillien and Reninghelst. To go from the front line into Divisional Reserve was an all-night affair. The relief had far to come and could not proceed beyond a certain point till darkness fell, while those relieved had the long trek to the rendezvous behind the town, where they climbed into dingy

railway carriages, to which an engine silently glided, hooked on and drew away to safety and the camp.

Our trenches, generally speaking, all round the Salient, were low-lying and were dominated by those of the enemy who occupied rising ground to the east of the city. This made their occupation peculiarly unpleasant, owing to the attention of the snipers and the enemy's marked discouragement of any smoke which might issue from the culinary department or the humbler contrivances for obtaining warmth. The dug-outs were very wet, and in some cases were little more than the retreat of subterranean lakes. The trenches themselves were not "dug," but consisted of ramparts made of sand bags. The dug-outs in the Canal bank were much better, most of them being made with "elephant" shelters; while many were equipped with some sort of furniture—tables, chairs and bed frames.

The best, and, consequently, the most famous of these "state cabins" was one over which was suspended a board bearing the sign "The Pike and Eel." This was a massive structure protruding from the bank, supported by imposing beams and appointed with large glass windows. In front a small "pleasance," fenced with white pailings, sloped to the Canal, wherein the unruly vegetation was embellished with the Regimental crests of previous occupants skilfully rendered in mosaics of different coloured stones.

In the winter the outlook from the dug-outs was depressing. The muddy stagnancy of the canal created anything but an exhilarating effect, relieved though it was by that old-standing and substantial chestnut "The Second Army Leave Boat," a legend which had been painted by some satirist on the barnacled side of the wreck of a barge, whose immovability was its most striking and convincing characteristic. In the summer, however, the Canal Bank brightened up considerably and we could come out of our "cabins" and sit on the "deck." The uses to which the "cabins" were put

indicate a variety of service and activity—for they represented such diverse vocations as Brigade Headquarters, billets for sappers, miners, gunners and infantry, dressing stations, churches and canteens. An ever changing life throbbed round us; the banks were alive with industry. We could watch our more enterprising comrades bathing and fishing in the anything but limpid stream, or joining in organised crusades against the rodent world. This idyllic picture would convey a false impression without the other side, and moreover it would hardly be just to the enemy. So we have to recall that in June, 1917, soon after the Battle of Messines, the sports and pastimes were brought to an abrupt conclusion by the German artillery.

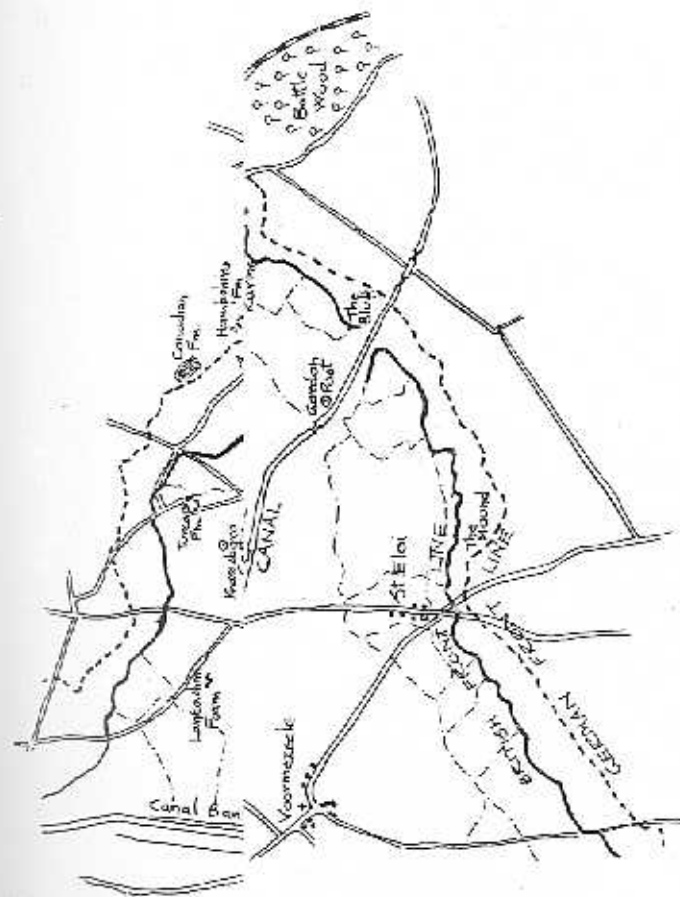
Those who have been there, and they can be numbered by the ten thousand, will also remember the pontoon bridges over which one ran the gauntlet of enemy shells on active days, the little cemetery at Essex Farm, now—alas!—so large, and the trepidation with which one passed, a point so ominously named, Salvation Corner.

All things considered, however, there were many worse places than the Canal bank.

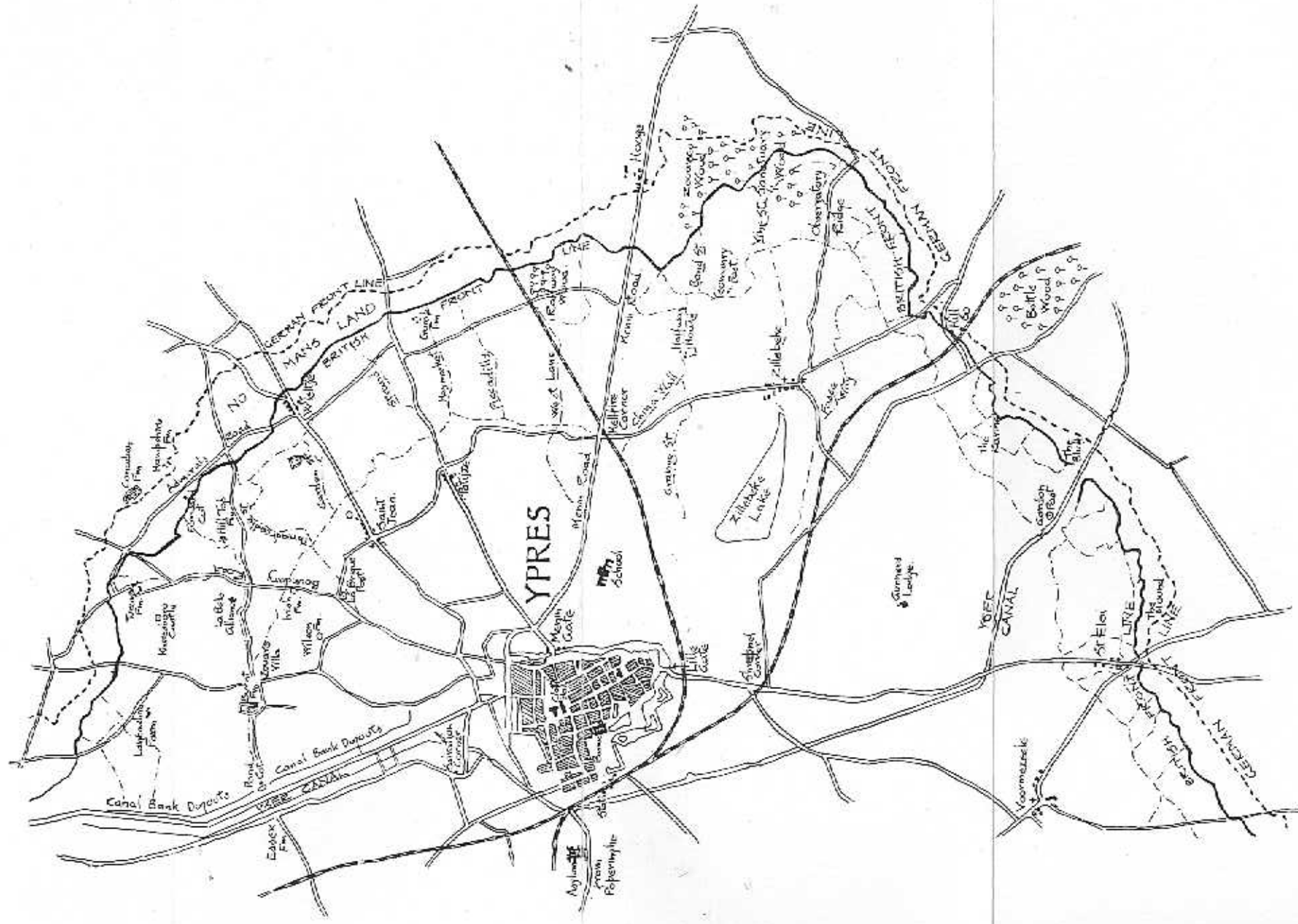
#### LANCASHIRE FARM

We must now return to the night of December 12th.

We reached the Château des Trois Tours in due course, and found ourselves in curiously splendid surroundings. The "castle," which stood at the end of a fine avenue just outside the battered village of Brielen, had been shelled several times in rather a half-hearted fashion, and very little damage had been done. This relative immunity was, in the spirit of contemporary orthodoxy, attributed to the fact that the whole demesne belonged to some mysterious German. From its upper windows a view of Pilkem Ridge could be obtained. Some of the original furniture was left; the rooms were lofty and handsomely appointed, and large gilt mirrors magnified their size. Even art was represented, for a full-size statue of Venus



THE YPRES SALIENT.



THE YPRES SALIENT.



met one in the Hall, though it should be added that the Goddess of Love had paid the penalty for so insolently invading the Kingdom of Mars, for she had been somewhat mutilated by his ruthless hand. We shared this sybaritic palace and the favour of the goddess with some heavy gunners, and we all felt rather as if we were spending a few days in a large country house party.

On this occasion we only spent one night there, as on the following evening (December 13th) we relieved the 13th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers in the Right Sub-section, Ypres.

The central and best known feature of the system of trenches, which we now took over, was Lancashire Farm, a ruin just behind the support line of one of the front companies, between which and it, lay a long narrow stagnant pond. Our right rested on the Pilckem Road. The whole position was situated in marsh, and the trenches were the reverse of what one understands by such, for they were areas which had been, so to speak, reclaimed from the surrounding quagmire by the skill and indomitable perseverance of our sappers, who had drained the trench passages, solidly revetted the sides with wooden supports and suspended the duck boards on myriads of frames. We "lived and moved and had our being," like the Venetians, on constructions founded in water.

The front line had, however, proved too much even for the sappers, and more than half of it was a morass in which we floundered up to our knees in any endeavour to reach the small "island" outposts by which part of it was held.

In mediæval and ancient times armies in the field retired into winter quarters, and for a definite period nothing aggressive took place, by a mutual or implied consent. A winter in the trenches round Ypres made one realise there was a good deal to be said for such an arrangement, since nothing of importance occurred or even could occur. For the next three months our history was singularly uneventful. There was, of course, no lack of minor incidents, and the conditions were much

harder in many ways than during the more active season of summer.

Cold, wet and damp were added to the rigorous routine of the trenches, but when all was said and done the winter was uninteresting. Though life was ordered, regular and disciplined, it was not often possible for the infantry to do much. Artillery and Trench Mortars could stir up the mud in every sense of the term, but with us, keeping clean, keeping warm and having foot inspections were apt to take up more of our time than we cared to count. It was not possible to take much pride in one's trench line—it was, in fact, very difficult to do much to improve them without elaborate engineering appliances, and we sighed for our active, methodical, tidy life at Richebourg and Givenchy.

These conditions are reflected in the contemporary letters and memoirs at the disposal of the historian, while the Diary is very reticent. So, having set the scene, the early acts of the drama can be briefly summarised.

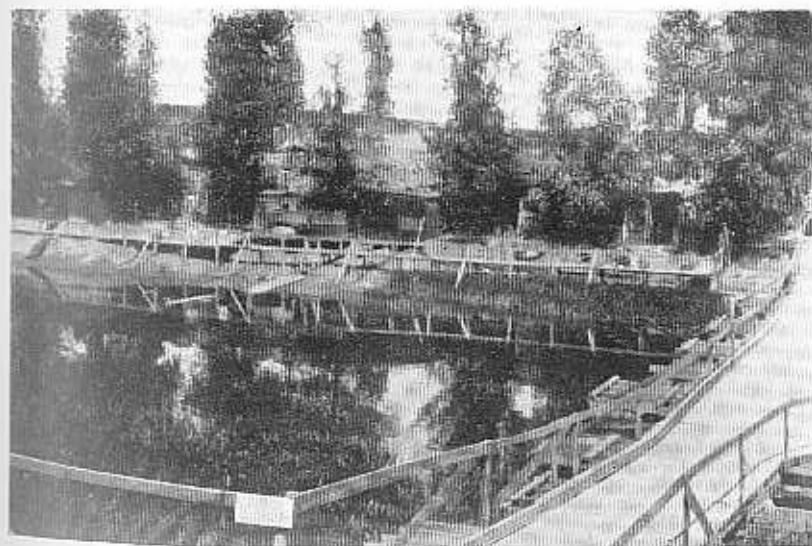
During our first tours of duty nothing of tactical importance occurred. We took our turn in the front line, in support and reserve in regular rotation, and there are but few incidents to record. On the 20th, Brig-General R. D. F. Oldman inspected us in our "cabins" on the Canal Bank. On the evening of the 23rd the enemy bombarded our front and support lines with high explosive, shrapnel and minenwerfer, and we suffered a number of casualties:—*Killed*, 2 Other Ranks; *Wounded*, 13 Other Ranks.

In the New Year Honours List, Lieut.-Colonel C. Herbert Stepney was mentioned in despatches, and Lieut. J. R. Cholerton was awarded the M.C., while on the same day, under the authority of the Commander-in-Chief, the further mention in despatches of Lieut. P. U. Laws was gazetted.

Just before Christmas the normal discomfort of trench life in winter was intensified by two or three days of



YSER CANAL BANK, YPRES.



"THE PIRE AND ERI," YSER CANAL, YPRES.

sharp frost, and then considerably accentuated by a fall of snow and the subsequent thaw.

We spent our first Christmas Day in France in the line and the usual celebrations had accordingly to be postponed, though our Artillery and Trench Mortar Batteries gave a display on Christmas Eve for the benefit of those opposite to us. This drew a weak retaliation: our casualties were:—*Killed*, 3 Other Ranks; *Wounded*, 7 Other Ranks.

On New Year's Day similar though mutual compliments were paid.

During Christmas night we returned to the Château. While here one evening there was a "gas alarm," and the air reverberated with Strombos horns. The illusion of the country house party was somewhat rudely shattered, though the actual situation was bizarre, and those present will remember all the Officers seated round a large table at mess in a handsome salon, blinking through the goggles of their gas helmets at some highly coloured trifle with which their plates were heaped, and bubbling imprecations down the mouthpieces.

#### 1917

On January 9th the Corps Commander, Lieut.-General Sir Aylmer Hunter Weston, paid our lines a visit of inspection.

On the evening of the 10th the Château was shelled, but there were no casualties, and only slight damage was done to one of the outlying billets.

On January 14th we were relieved in the front line by the 14th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and the Brigade went into Divisional Reserve. The day was marked by much hostile Trench Mortar activity, and one of the main arteries, Ealing Trench, was blown in, which considerably delayed the relief. We marched to "B" Camp at Brandhoek, on the Ypres-Poperinghe road and arrived in very late.

It is impossible to be enthusiastic about Brandhoek.



There was something infinitely dreary and derelict about it, although the accommodation was not uncomfortable and a Y.M.C.A. hut added much to any amenities it possessed. However, we did not allow our surroundings to prevent us from enjoying, as a Battalion, our second Christmas, which we celebrated on the 16th.

After Church Parade dinners were served in gaily decorated huts, and were succeeded by sing-songs. As on the previous occasion at Witely, the Commanding Officer visited all Companies and wished everyone a Happy Christmas. We received a very pleasant remembrance from the people of Derbyshire and from Mrs. Herbert-Stepney in the form of a box of good cheer for each member of the Battalion. In the evening 24 Officers sat down to an excellent dinner of all the orthodox fare, which was eaten to the strains of gramophone music.

On the following day Private Harrison of "C" Company won the Welter Weight (Second Army) Boxing Competition.

On the 17th we held a concert in the Y.M.C.A. hut, provided entirely by "home talent." The room was crammed with troops from every unit in the vicinity, and so welcome was this concert that we gave a second one a few evenings later, at which the Brigade Commander was present.

We remained at Brandhoek until January 25th, and were able to carry out some training. It was extremely cold and much snow had fallen. The latter enabled us, like Napoleon at Brienne, to rehearse raids more realistically and more enjoyably than usual by utilizing the snow in the place of Mills bombs.

On the 23rd the Army Commander, General Sir Herbert Plumer, G.C.M.G., K.C.B., came, without notice, to visit us in camp, taking us, so to speak, just as he found us, a seemingly casual inspection during which he shewed the kindly consideration with which all ranks under his command were familiar.

### WIJLTJE AND RAILWAY WOOD

On the 25th we relieved the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters in the Wijltje Sector, where we became the Left Support Battalion, and found ourselves once more on the Canal Bank. The Canal itself was frozen over. The weather was fine, but intensely cold, so much so, in fact, that we enjoyed a new form of exercise by making enormously long slides, on which all ranks disported themselves. On the 30th we relieved the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters in the front—the Left Wijltje Sector. This we found was a large rambling system of trenches, the chief of which, Liverpool Trench, had good parapets, two or three hundred yards from the enemy, who were in their normal relative position on a ridge looking over us. Company Headquarters had excellent accommodation and the other dug-outs were better than usual. Battalion Headquarters was at Hasler House, St. Jean. This latter was a large mansion, whose upper stories had been converted into an artillery observation post, from which fire was customarily directed on to the Frezenberg Cross Roads, and drew retaliation on its place of origin! Here we had an uneventful time, though the quiet was enlivened on the evening of the 1st February by very active machine gun fire and a raid on the 14th Battalion Hampshire Regiment on our right. The tour, however, was a hard one for the front line troops owing to the intense cold. On the 4th the 1/1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment relieved us after a day in which enemy aeroplanes seemed particularly inquisitive as to our movements. We retired to the cellars of buildings on the outskirts of Ypres. One Company however went to Dragoon Farm, Potijze. Battalion Headquarters was established at the Convent.

After one night in these positions we moved up into the Left Sub-section, Railway Wood, which we took over from the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade, and where, during a short spell of two days, all was quiet, except the enemy snipers. These, certainly, inspired our respect, for, as in

places we were only 70 yards from the German line, we had to be more than usually careful not to show our heads at any time. However, our own snipers retaliated with effect and two of the enemy were seen to fall.

The 7th saw us back once more in Ypres, having watched our Artillery and Trench Mortars engaged in cutting the enemy wire opposite to us all the 6th and 7th, and having modestly assisted in this during the night by letting our Lewis guns play on the gaps made. The Germans took it all with a quiet resignation.

After a brief rest we relieved the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade on the 9th, and again took over the Left Sub-section, Railway Wood. We spent the two following days enduring a vigorous bombardment by an enemy who was not unnaturally incensed by the fact that our artillery of all calibres bombarded his trenches from the 9th to the 12th from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., while we put on drill barrages with machine and Lewis guns each evening for several hours.

We lost another of our original officers on the 10th in the person of Lieut. R. H. Ellis, who was transferred to the Royal Engineers, a branch of the service for which his training in civil life had qualified him.

On the night of the 12th the consummation of all the wire cutting and bombardment was reached, for the 1/1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment made a most successful raid on our left, and captured two prisoners. We were heavily shelled during the operation. The 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade relieved us the next day, and we moved into the support billets at Ypres, but left behind a small contingent of 31 other ranks and a Lewis gun, drawn from "C" and "D" Companies, under Second Lieut. W. A. Medcalf. These were to assist in a raid to be made by the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade from the front we had vacated.

The Rifle Brigade party consisted of four Officers and 120 other ranks, and its plan was to attack the enemy's front line trenches near the Mound. Second Lieut.



LILLE GATE, YPRES.



DUG-OUTS, YSER CANAL BANK, YPRES.

Medcalf and his men were to form the left flanking party. It hardly comes within the province of this history to describe this raid, but we must briefly follow the fortunes of those of our own contingent. These successfully negotiated "No Man's Land," located the gap in the wire and entered the enemy trenches. Here they encountered no opposition and, indeed, met no one. The enemy appear to have withdrawn from this part of their front line, presumably advised by the wire cutting of our intention to raid them. Second Lieut. Medcalf with his main body therefore established themselves in the front trench, keeping touch with the left flank of the Rifle Brigade raiding party, while Sergeant Jayes and 15 other ranks further reconnoitred the position to the left. Finding no enemy in the trenches they hoped to cut off the garrison of a sap which they discovered, but after pushing up this they found it unoccupied. Second Lieut. Medcalf withdrew his party in due course after covering the retirement of the main body. The casualties to our contingent were four other ranks wounded, in all cases by shell fire; while our total casualties during the tour amounted to:—*Killed*, 4 Other Ranks; *Wounded*, 20 Other Ranks, the latter including C.S.M. Onion.

We were relieved on the 15th by the 7th Battalion Liverpool Regiment, and marched to Brandhoek. The somewhat dreary march along the Ypres-Poperinghe Road was disagreeably brightened by shelling, but happily no casualties resulted. There followed twelve days' training in "E" Camp, which afforded excellent facilities as a rifle range enabled each man to fire ten rounds in his box respirator. In addition we all discharged a rifle grenade on the bombing ground with the same respiratory handicap. These exercises were supplemented by drills and marches and the whole programme was crowned with a revival of football. Our team showed that nearly a year's active service and the loss as casualties of many of our best players, had not reduced its form. We defeated the 17th Battalion



King's Royal Rifles by 12 goals to nil. This Battalion took its revenge a few days later, as a team of their Officers defeated ours, 2—0.

Football was not limited to our First Team, for inter-platoon and inter-company matches were played daily. We thereby were able to stretch our limbs after the cramping life of winter in trenches.

On the 24th the 39th Division passed from the VIII into the X Corps, commanded by Lieut.-General Sir T. L. Morland, K.C.B., K.C.M.G., D.S.O.

#### HOOGE AND SANCTUARY WOOD

On February 26th we entrained at Brandhoek and returned to the line—still slowly fetching a compass round the circle of the Ypres entrenchments—to a sector known as the Left Zillebeke Sub-section (Hooge), where we took over from the 11th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers. Our left rested on the Menin Road, where a deep dug-out formed the Headquarters of the left (our "D"), Company. The defence of this section was sustained by a singular, and, it is believed, unique, contrivance. An island outpost had been pushed out far into "No Man's Land," and it was planned that, should the enemy raid or attack this miniature redoubt, its garrison would give way. On the enemy occupying the position thus left undefended, the Company Commander was to consign its invaders to the skies, by exploding a mine beneath it. For this purpose he was entrusted with the key of a small fixture in his dug-out which contained a lever for the modern Guy Fawkes to operate.

The period of our defence of this sector was without any event of importance. The enemy was very quiet indeed. Those of the Battalion who were there will remember their acquaintance with the Great China Wall, under cover of which we moved to and from the line, the hurried migrations to and from the front over Hell Fire Corner (both of which, from their similarity to

their originals, were singularly well named), the curious little settlement, called Half-way House, which constituted Battalion Headquarters, and the extremely exposed communication trench leading forward from there, of which the German snipers sometimes—though not often—availed themselves.

They will also remember the more than usual discomfort and insecurity in which we maintained a precarious existence in the front line, on to which the enemy could look from his elevated positions with the facility one can see action on the stage from the dress circle of a theatre.

On March 3rd the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade relieved us, and we became the Battalion in Divisional Reserve, with accommodation in the Barracks at Ypres. We must all hold this vast building in grateful remembrance. We need no reminder of the German shells beating impotently against its massive walls—of the parades and inspections we held in its Colonnade and the comparative comfort and security in which we slept in this battered city in the very quarters which had been built for, and occupied by, our Belgian Allies.

It was in this situation that we celebrated on March 6th the first anniversary of our arrival in France, by a Dinner in the Barracks, at which were present twelve of the officers who had come out with us to France.

We spent a very enjoyable evening, and it is interesting to put on record the names and *temporary* or permanent situations of those who attended it:—

Lieut.-Colonel C. Herbert-Stepney, D.S.O., Commanding the 117th Infantry Brigade.

Major N. Houghton, Commanding the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters, owing to the absence of Lieut.-Colonel H. M. Milward, wounded.

Captain S. F. Lilley, Commanding the Battalion.

Captain R. F. Truscott, Second-in-Command of the Battalion.

Captain R. L. Illingworth, M.C., Commanding "D" Company.

Captain D. H. Cohen, Acting Staff Captain, 117th Infantry Brigade.

Captain P. H. Coleridge, M.C., Commanding "B" Company.

Captain H. R. Stevens, M.C., Commanding 117th Trench Mortar Battery.

Lieut. P. U. Laws, Intelligence Officer, 117th Infantry Brigade.

Lieut. D. W. Stevens, M.C., Attached to the General Staff, 39th Division.

Second Lieut. A. D. Parkin.

Rev. A. P. Daniels, M.C., Chaplain.

The day before this anniversary Brig.-General R. D. F. Oldman, D.S.O., relinquished his command of the 117th Infantry Brigade and proceeded to England to train a Reserve Infantry Brigade.

Brig.-General Oldman was well-known to all ranks, for his keenness and interest took him frequently round our lines in front and our billets behind. He had commanded us throughout our service in France and during a period of distinguished success. He left us with the best wishes of the whole of the Battalion, though his sudden exit when we were in very cramped conditions prevented anything in the nature of an official farewell. His departure seems to close a chapter in our history.

Lieut.-Colonel C. Herbert-Stepney, D.S.O., our Commanding Officer, as has been shown, assumed command of the Brigade until the arrival of his successor, Brig.-General G. A. Armytage, D.S.O., who joined us on the 9th.

We were relieved by the 4/5th Battalion Black Watch on March 10th, and spent till the 15th at Toronto Camp, near Ouderdom, in Corps Reserve.

There was a marked difference between the North and South sides of the Ypres-Poperinghe Road. On the North, generally speaking, the woods and fields retained something of their original character. On the South side, however, where we now found ourselves, the landscape,

which can never have been remarkable for its natural beauty, had been robbed of any there had been.

Toronto Camp was one of many situated in a wilderness of cantonments, dumps, debris and mud, and although not particularly uncomfortable was certainly cheerless.

Here we spent five days, not without incident, for on the 11th our new Corps Commander, Lieut.-General Sir T. L. Morland, paid us a visit and inspected us in our camp. The Battalion Team played the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters at football, and defeated them, 6-0, and an enjoyable period of rest was rounded off by a successful concert in the Y.M.C.A. hut. The day before we left the Army Commander, General Sir Herbert Plumer, paid us another—his third—visit. He inspected us for the first time on parade, and expressed his pleasure at the turn-out and soldierly appearance of all ranks.

On the 15th we moved from Brandhoek by train to Ypres, and relieved the 1/1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment in our former position in the Left Zillebeke Sub-section (Hooze), where we spent a very quiet tour of duty indeed, most assiduously rewiring our front and establishing an entirely new belt. The uneventfulness of the month was reflected in our casualties, which numbered only two other ranks wounded. The 21st of March found us once more as Battalion in Divisional Reserve at the Barracks at Ypres (on relief by our former opposite number, the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade), where we spent so quiet a time that our Diary has nothing to record. The fact is nothing very much could be done when in reserve in Ypres. The Battalion in such a position must be ready to conform to the elaborate Defence Scheme, a copy of which haunted the Barracks—indeed, it was even immune from that *bête noire* of the infantry, the working party, since the men could not go far afield, as they might have been required at any moment to reinforce the battalions in front. Training, except such as could be done in the Colonnade, was not within the range of possibility, and

"walking out" in Ypres was not a popular pastime and apt to be discouraged by the Germans. So that though battalions—like nations—which have no history may proverbially be supposed to be happy, such a state of felicity is apt to be dull; anyway, until relief by the 4/5th Battalion Black Watch on the 27th, we had "no history," and so none can be given.

We moved from Ypres to Winnipeg Camp, another of the numerous cantonments behind Ypres, which had nothing particular to recommend it, set as it was in a surrounding landscape of debris and dumps. Here our football team met its Waterloo, losing by two goals to one a match against the 25th Howitzer Battery. Otherwise the five days were spent in domestic training in minor military exercises. On April 3rd we relieved the 1/1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment in the Barracks at Ypres and after three days there, again "without history," took over the Toor Top—Sanctuary Wood Sector—from the 11th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment, and found ourselves in the front line for the only tour of duty we were to do there during the month. Here we had to garrison an unusually long front, which was reached by a trench called Regent Street. This main artery of communication afforded very precarious protection, as it proceeded from the high ground behind, and was downhill all the way. We felt the enemy could count us, so exposed did it appear. The front line, 200 yards from the enemy, consisted of breastworks thrown up in the middle of the wood, the trees of which, in various stages of decapitation, stood around and in front of us, silent and deceptive sentinels, which in the dark looked disagreeably like waves of oncoming raiders; in fact, at night their presence was so misleading to our sentries that we had to rely for security on covering patrols. The whole trench system was a spongy mass of mud and water.

This tour lasted from the 6th to the 11th, and was very

quiet until the 9th (Easter Monday), when the Sector on our immediate right was bombarded all day. At 6.30 p.m. the enterprise to which this was the preface was made clear to us for the enemy made a daylight raid on the trenches of the 11th Battalion of the Regiment. Our line was unaffected except near Maple Copse, where the approaches to the front line were shelled. Our casualties during the tour were:—*Killed*, 2 Other Ranks; *Wounded*, 7 Other Ranks.

On the night of the 11th the 14th Battalion Hampshire Regiment took over from us, and in due course we assembled at the Asylum Station, Ypres, where we entrained for Brandhoek, arriving there at 6 a.m. on the 12th.



## CHAPTER V

### TRAINING

#### MERCKEGHEM AND BRANDHOEK

AS has been observed, the departure of General Oldman seemed in itself to close a chapter in our history—but his departure took place at a time when, in any case, the historian would have felt that other reasons impelled him to start a new section, since a period of fresh preparation was about to begin. Owing to circumstances which do not concern us here, but which are now made clear in histories and memoirs of the War, our own entry into the battles of the year 1917 was deferred until the end of July. There was, however, in April every reason to believe it would be much sooner, but as events turned out, the historian now finds himself embarking on a description of three and a half months' training.

A new chapter, therefore, in our history undoubtedly opens.

The long winter in the trenches was over, the summer was before us, our strength had been made up with large drafts of reinforcements, and a new General commanded us—a combination of circumstances which afforded us a great opportunity for reorganisation and a fresh start.

On the 14th April we marched to Poperinghe, whence we moved by train to Esquelbecq. From there we marched to billets in Merckeghem, where we began training under our new Brigade-Commander, whose Headquarters were at Bollezeele. Merckeghem was one of several villages in the vicinity of the latter town in which the various units of the Brigade were accommodated. We were near our former haunts at Volkerinckhove, but now the country round presented a very different aspect, for it was brightened by the advent of spring, and the

prospect of green hills and woods made a refreshing change of scene.

On the 16th the 39th Division was transferred back to the VIII Corps (Lieut.-General Sir Aylmer Hunter Weston, K.C.B., D.S.O.).

We started our training, so to speak, at the beginning, and great emphasis was laid on the platoon as the basic unit. The Brigade Commander offered a banner for general all-round efficiency, to be competed for in an Inter-Platoon Competition, open to the whole Brigade. We spent our days building up or remaking the Battalion on this basis, and though they were strenuous days, they were very welcome after a winter in the mud round Ypres.

On the 21st a practice attack was carried out on a carefully chosen position, and Major-General G. J. Cuthbert, C.B., C.M.G., G.O.C. 39th Division, was present during the operation. This exercise, in fact, scarcely amounted to a rehearsal, for on the 25th we again gave a similar demonstration under the eye of the Army Commander, General Sir Herbert Plumer, G.C.M.G., K.C.B., A.D.C. The actual performance, as has been already indicated, was so long deferred, and there were to be so many further rehearsals, that one can hardly call this practice a dress rehearsal, even though it took place under the supervision of so high a Commander.

In the meantime we all fired a course on the miniature range, and the while suffered the pangs, if not the results, of suffocation in our gas masks; moreover, the specialists were being either instructed or polished up, and our signallers were subjected to a test under the supervision of the Brigade Signalling Officer. As a result of this last, we were notified that our Section contained three qualified instructors, and nine first-class and three second-class signallers.

The Platoon Commanders had meanwhile been busy with their commands, and a Battalion Inter-Platoon Competition was held for the selection of two to compete

in the Brigade Competition. This latter was held, with the Brigade Commander acting as judge, on the 26th, when to our great satisfaction, No. 6 Platoon, commanded by Second Lieut. W. E. Wright, "B" Company (Captain P. H. Coleridge, M.C.), came out first. Some days afterwards Brig.-General Armytage presented the banner to Second-Lieut. W. E. Wright, and this pennon was carried at the head of No. 6 Platoon when on the march—an oriflamme pointing out to all and sundry that the contingent immediately following it was the best platoon in the 117th Infantry Brigade.

This period of hard training was relieved by a varied programme.

On Sunday a Brigade Church Parade was held with the 39th Divisional Band in attendance. The Band also gave us a delightful concert the same evening from 5 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. On the 23rd we were inspected by the Surgeon-General of the Second Army, and a Brigade Concert was held on the 21st, which we much appreciated.

On the 18th we lost our Padre, the Rev. A. P. Daniels, M.C., who had received an appointment in the Mesopotamian Forces. He was held in affectionate respect by all ranks, who had come to regard his cheerful presence, his unconventional sermons, so direct and to the point, his gallantry in the hour of danger, his solicitude to those in suffering or distress, as a permanent part of the scheme of things, and his departure was a matter of very sincere regret.

This first instalment of training came to an end on the 27th, as we were needed to assist in other preparations for the "battle season." We marched that day to Esquelbecq and took train to Poperinghe, from where we marched to "L" Camp on the Watou Road three miles north-west of the town. The same day "B" Company was detached from us and moved to Proven, where it was employed in constructing works for the water supply.

The next day we moved to "C" Camp, a sylvan retreat near Brandhoek, and commenced work on the

railways in the vicinity, where we were employed from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. daily, in conjunction with the 17th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers.

There is no disguising the fact that the one thing the Infantry soldier really does not like is that form of activity which is comprehended by the phrase "working party." Though "work" (in the engineering sense) must always be part of the infantry's duty, it is perhaps inevitable that it should be distasteful in that the call invariably comes just when the alternative is recreation or rest. One does not expect much fun when in the Front Line, but when one is behind, it needs much philosophy to regard turning out, often in the dark, to dig, with any degree of complacency.

Generally "working parties" were incidental to life, not infrequently in addition to a more or less normal day's activity. Now, however, we really settled down to them as a whole-time job, and they were therefore not unpleasant. Preparations for the concentration of enormous numbers of troops in the Salient were already going forward, and in making these we took an important share for the next few days, for no less than 500 of us were thus engaged at a time.

Thus we spent the 29th—the second anniversary of our birthday.

On May 1st we shifted our quarters to "O" Camp in order to be nearer the point of construction. Here "B" Company rejoined us, and Divisional Headquarters became our neighbours.

The Honours conferred on No. 6 Platoon were not confined to the Banner, for on May 2nd this unit was sent as the model or demonstration Platoon to a newly-formed Brigade Platoon School and Captain P. H. Coleridge became its Commandant, or Chief Instructor, with Second Lieut. W. E. Wright as Assistant Instructor. Before No. 6 left us it had to take up the Football Challenge of No. 2 Platoon, and was defeated—one goal to nil. The same evening we attended another Brigade

Concert, which was patronised by both the Divisional and Brigade Commanders.

Inter-platoon Football matches were continued whenever opportunity offered, with the following results:—

No. 11 against No. 16: 2—3.

No. 2 „ No. 16: 1—0.

On May 5th we extended an official welcome to our new Brigade Commander, Brig.-General G. A. Armytage, who dined with us, and on the 6th the redoubtable No. 2 Platoon played the 117th Machine Gun Company, but drew with them, 2—2, though a return match two days later brought it victory, 2—1.

On the 11th Lieut.-Colonel Parsons, O.C. 39th Divisional Train, inspected our Transport, then under Lieut. T. L. Darbyshire. Lieut. F. P. Holmes took over responsibility for this section a few days later, when Lieut. Darbyshire was sent to Hospital with trench fever.

On the same day we held Battalion Sports, and thus decided who were to represent us in the forthcoming Brigade Sports. In these latter, which took place at "C" Camp, Brandhoek, on the 13th, Private Lowe, of "C" Company, won the 100 yards, and Armourer-Sergeant Pollard won the mile. The day closed by our entertaining Colonel Brazier Creagh, the A.D.M.S., at dinner, and another Brigade Concert rounded off our social amenities.

#### HILL TOP AND WIELTJE

This varied and pleasant fortnight came to an end on the 15th, when we marched from "O" Camp to the Yser Canal Bank, and found ourselves in old quarters as Left Reserve to the Hill Top Sector. We were compelled to leave 16 men in quarantine at "O" Camp, owing to one man having contracted measles.

Our first day on the Canal Bank gave us a warning that this familiar haunt was not as placid as it looked, for one of "C" Company's dug-outs was blown in by a direct hit. Happily there were no casualties.

Three hundred men were engaged on work in the Hill

Top Sector that night, and our marvellous digging powers, acquired in the coal mines of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, were employed on one of the most important duties of the kind which ever fell to our lot. We constructed one of three great Trenches which formed part of a new Divisional Scheme for defence and attack. This was named "Bellingham Trench," and was dug in advance of Forward Cottage Gap to the north of Hill Top Farm. The Work was carried out under the command of Lieut.-Colonel C. Herbert-Stepney by the 225th Field Company R.E., the 13th Battalion Gloucester Regiment (Divisional Pioneers) and ourselves. We began work at 11 p.m. and continued until 4 a.m., when the excavation was nearly complete. Before we started the enemy put over a very heavy barrage, causing several casualties and wounding Lieut. Holley, R.E., and his Sergeant, who were to have taped out the line of the new Trench. Three platoons completed the work the next evening.

On May 23rd we relieved the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters in the Hill Top Sector—a front which was held, as at Festubert, by a series of island posts pushed out into "No Man's Land." Battalion Headquarters were at La Belle Alliance. The trenches here were honoured with names familiar to us—Hornby, Gillson, Bellingham and Armytage; while old trenches will be recalled by such designations as Finch Street, Coney Street, Buffs Road, Canopus Trench and the graceful Bilge, with Forward Cottage and Admirals Road in front. The sector had certain merits which made it almost unique in the Salient—a good line, very fair dug-outs, deep trenches, regular firebays—and, above all, it lay on high ground.

The tour was quiet until the 26th, when the left front Company, "B," was heavily shelled with minenwerfer. A gap of about 20 feet was made in one of the posts, and the Lewis gun team of Corporal Crich was put out of action. The following day it was the turn of the island north-west of Turco Farm, and minenwerfer were hurled at this point for no less than four hours, doing a great



deal of damage, obliterating one of our posts and putting a further Lewis gun team out of action.

At 3.30 a.m. on the 28th, having breached our parapet and wire with a minenwerfer bombardment, a party of the enemy, 50 strong, raided the front line north of Turco Farm and entered No. 11 post in spite of heavy and persistent fire from our Lewis guns, one team of which continued to direct their jet of lead with the enemy actually on top of them. Two of our men were taken prisoners, one of whom, Private Charlesworth, resourceful and intrepid, hit his captor on the head with a bomb when in "No Man's Land" and escaped back to our lines. It is uncertain how many casualties the enemy suffered, though it is known that two were left in "No Man's Land" and one, who had lost his way, was captured by us. The enemy shelled Turco Farm heavily on the two subsequent days with high explosive. On the last day of the tour "A" Company Headquarters was demolished by a shell and Major H. A. Leggett and Captain A. Stevenson, M.C., were wounded. Our casualties, all ranks, were:—*Killed*, 2; *Wounded*, 4; *Missing*, 1.

On the 30th the 38th Divisional Machine Company fired 15 guns from 6.0 to 6.15 p.m. on the German back areas. The enemy retaliated with 50 shells on Turco and Hill Top Farms, but during this tour aggression was not confined to artillery and machine guns, for it should be added that this Sector afforded an opportunity for our Snipers to add to their laurels.

We received, while at Hill Top, the gratifying intelligence that the following had been mentioned in the Commander-in-Chief's recent despatch—Lieut.-Colonel C. Herbert-Stepney, D.S.O., Major N. Houghton, R.S.M. Pepper, C.S.M. Turney, and Private Crossland (the last attached to the 117th Trench Mortar Battery).

We were relieved on the last day of May by the 11th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment, and proceeded to "O" Camp at Brandhoek, after an exceedingly exhausting tour of duty. Here we found working parties

for the 7th Canadian Tunnelling Company, and played two victorious football matches—one against the 11th Battalion of the Regiment, 3—1; and the other against the 17th Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers, 4—1; while a new distraction, which was for some time to come to give us much amusement—The Brigade Concert Party, "The Cuckoos" (to whose performers our own Battalion contributed its quota)—gave its opening performance.

We left six platoons, under Captain C. G. Lord, in "O" Camp, Brandhoek, to continue work for the 7th Canadian Tunnelling Company, and ourselves returned to the line on June 8th, this time to the Wieltje Sector, under the command of the G.O.C. 116th Infantry Brigade. We began the tour that night in a combative spirit by projecting gas and bombarding the enemy. He retaliated heavily with minenwerfer and 5.9's, so that Armytage Trench—a companion to Bellingham—suffered very severely, being bombarded from 11.15 p.m. till dawn.

On the 10th the Fifth Army, commanded by General Sir H. de la P. Gough, K.C.B., took over the VIII Corps front, and on the 13th the 39th Division passed into the XVIII Corps, commanded by Lieut.-General Sir F. I. Maxse, K.C.B., C.V.O., D.S.O.

It was gratifying to us all to learn at this time that Captain and Adjutant S. F. Lilley had been awarded the Military Cross in the King's Birthday Honours.

Our tour in the line continued as it had begun, in anything but quiescence, and we were bombarded by the enemy on the 9th, 10th and 11th with high explosive and minenwerfer.

The enemy continued to be "jumpy" the following day, and began at midnight to send gas shells in large quantities over the area between St. Jean and Ypres. A certain number came actually into our zone, and necessitated the wearing of our box respirators, which by this time had taken the place of the old helmet. (They were more cumbersome to carry, but much more comfortable to wear, having minimised the stifling effect of

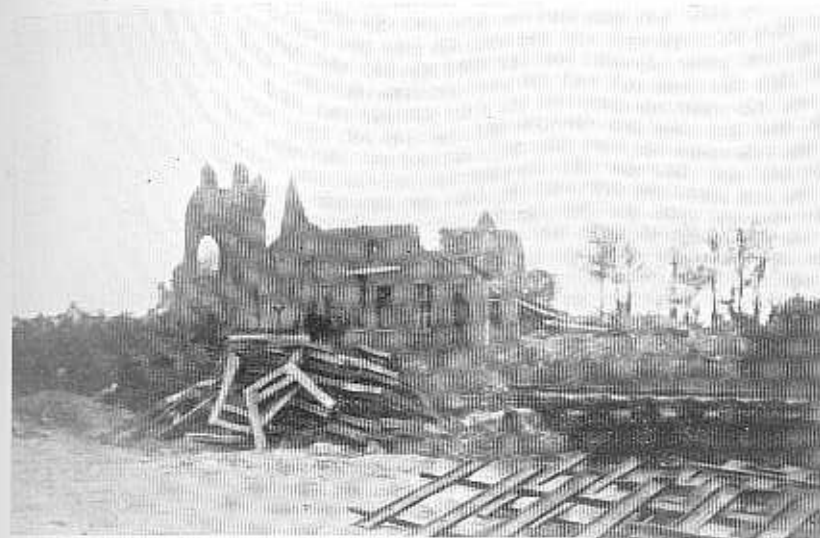
the former protection.) The gas shell bombardment was kept up till 5 a.m.

Even so, our adventures this night were not exhausted, for the Germans interspersed some "big stuff" with the gas. At least two 8-inch and several 5.9's came over, besides shells of smaller calibre. An R.E. dump adjoining a ruined building near Battalion Headquarters caught fire, with the result that a great many trench boards were destroyed, and numbers of Stokes Trench Mortar Bombs and much S.A.A. were detonated. The cellars of the ruin formed the dug-out of several of the Headquarters Staff, and before they could be roused the ruin with its wooden supports also burst into flames. The situation was extremely dangerous—a heavy bombardment by the enemy, an almost equally heavy bombardment (if such a term may be applied to a detonating dump) from our own neighbourhood, and a ruined building burning over some 20 of our men. R.S.M. Pepper led the "Fire Brigade" operations with much resource and efficiency, and also, at great personal risk, went below the burning ruin, roused those sleeping there, and thus saved them from a terrible death. In due course the "Fire Brigade" triumphed and the fire was got under control, but R.S.M. Pepper had received injuries which necessitated his leaving us for a while.

For his act of gallantry R.S.M. Pepper was subsequently awarded the Military Cross.

The 12th was a quiet day, but it must be emphasised there was nothing in this tour to correspond to the quiet, ordered, routine life in trenches which we had been experiencing at Richebourg the year before.

We were relieved on the 15th by the 9th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment after a good send-off of 5.9's by the enemy, and moved to Canal Bank as left support to the Hill Top Sector. Here we supplied working parties for the 13th Battalion Gloucester Regiment (Divisional Pioneers) and the 225th Field Company, R.E.



ST. JEAN CHURCH, YPRES.



BATTALION HEADQUARTERS, ENGLISH FARM, ST. JEAN, YPRES.

Our casualties during the tour had amounted to 6 killed and 20 wounded.

In the meantime the Canal Bank was being rapidly transformed under our eyes (and to some extent under our picks), for the Corps Commander wished to accommodate as many reserves there as possible. The Banks were a mass of teeming khaki life, and the number of "cabins" was being greatly increased. The weather was wonderfully good, and the sluggish waters of the Yser were galvanised into life by large numbers of bathers, much to the annoyance of the patient anglers. As has been already stated, the enemy gave those enjoying this idyll a sharp reminder on the 21st, when, at dusk, he heavily shelled the Canal Bank with 4.2's and 5.9's.

On the 16th our own Brigade Headquarters took over the front and the command of us as well, and the following day Lieut.-Colonel Herbert-Stepney assumed command of the Brigade in the absence of General Armytage, while Major N. Houghton became responsible for us.

Our few days on the Canal Bank cost us in casualties :—  
*Killed*, Other Ranks, 2, up till then an unprecedented occurrence.

On the 24th we took over the front line, Hill Top Sector, from the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters, and were tactically disposed in a somewhat unusual manner. One Company, "D," in front, "A" Company at La Belle Alliance, "C" Company near Battalion Headquarters, and "B" Company in reserve with two platoons at Irish Farm and two on the Canal Bank.

We remained here till the 30th, and the Official Diary of this few days is absolutely uniform. The enemy, no doubt conversant with the elaborate preparations which were being hurriedly pushed on behind, shelled us heavily and consistently every day. Nor did he confine his activities to shells of the smaller calibre, for each bombardment was thickly savoured with 4.2's, 5.9's and minenwerfer. There is no need to detail experiences which were so unvaryingly unpleasant; every day for



several hours the bombardment continued; a great deal of damage was done to the trenches, and in this short tour our casualty list reached a very heavy total for trench warfare:—*Killed*, 11 Other Ranks; *Wounded*, 2 Officers, 76 Other Ranks.

As has already been observed, sitting in trenches and being bombarded is one of the most trying experiences which infantry has to endure, and the historian may perhaps be forgiven the pun when he says we were relieved in every sense of the term when the 1/1st Battalion Cambridgeshire Regiment came up to take over on the night of the 30th. We moved back to our old quarters in "O" Camp at Brandhoek.

#### SERQUES

On July 1st we marched to Poperinghe and took train to Watten, whence we marched to billets near Mouille and Serques, four miles north-west of St. Omer, where we spent the next day restoring ourselves and our equipment to normal brightness. Brig.-General Armytage returned, Lieut.-Colonel Herbert-Stepney resumed his interrupted reign, and we started another and final spell of training.

At Serques everything combined to make us ready and fit for the next fighting—a wonderful spell of summer weather, some of the best billets we ever occupied in France, and delightful country. Since the last engagement on the Somme at St. Pierre Divion we had not taken part in any battle. As has been noted, many of our veterans had passed from us as casualties, and we had a considerable proportion of relatively untried reinforcements. They had all had some insight into war, but our period of training at Serques undoubtedly did much to make the Battalion into the fine force it showed itself in the next few weeks, and to put our promising material into fighting trim.

Almost all July was spent in this preparation and in training for the attack, which eventually took place on the last day of the month.



Left to Right and Back to Front:

2nd Lieut. G. F. Wright, M.C.  
2nd Lieut. C. E. Rossiter,  
2nd Lieut. E. N. Rowley,  
2nd Lieut. H. M. Hazenave,  
2nd Lieut. L. A. Gottard,  
2nd Lieut. A. Rossiter,  
2nd Lieut. J. G. Morris,  
Lieut. F. H. Gielast, M.C.

Lieut. F. P. Hume,  
2nd Lieut. A. S. Mollon, M.C.  
2nd Lieut. B. T. Muller,  
Major P. M. Muller,  
2nd Lieut. H. M. Blakes, M.C.  
Capt. F. L. Burgess, M.C.  
Lieut. A. D. Parry, M.C.  
Capt. C. H. L. Ryan, R.A.M.C.

THE 10TH (SERVICE) BATTALION THE SHERWOOD FORESTERS, JULY, 1917.

The Rev. J. F. Boxer, M.C.  
Capt. A. Stevenson, M.C.  
Lieut. W. J. Hastings, M.C.  
Lieut. F. C. O. Williams, M.C.  
Lieut. C. F. Bowen,  
Capt. L. H. Aspinwall, M.C.  
Capt. P. H. Cockburn, M.C.  
Major N. Edwards.

Lieut. Col. C. C. Herbert-Stepney, D.S.O.  
Capt. S. F. Lally, M.C.  
Capt. R. L. Eversworth, M.C.  
Hon. Lieut. & Q.M. A. P. Loxton, M.C.  
Capt. C. G. Linn, M.C.  
Lieut. C. E. Garsdale, M.C.  
2nd Lieut. G. Searle,  
2nd Lieut. W. H. I. Bursley.

We started on the 3rd by digging a copy of the enemy trenches, much as we had done nearly a year before at La Thieuloye, and interspersed this entrenching work with company and platoon exercises. By the 5th the trenches were so far complete as to enable us to begin practising attacks over them, and we continued these manoeuvres daily up till the 13th, when at dawn we carried out a rehearsal in which the whole Brigade took part.

This was followed, later that morning, by a practice attack on the model enemy trenches by the whole Division. The 117th Infantry Brigade was on the left and the 116th Infantry Brigade was on the right. The 17th Battalion King's Royal Rifles and ourselves were detailed to take and consolidate the first system of enemy trenches, and the 17th Battalion Sherwood Foresters and the 16th Battalion Rifle Brigade, to take and consolidate the second system. Bombers, signallers, runners and all specialists filled their respective rôles and the Field Cooks served a better meal at the rehearsal than we knew would be possible at the actual performance.

After this we continued our training under Battalion arrangements, but the day before we left, July 20th, we were again roused in the middle of the night and once more, under the command of Brig.-General Armytage, assailed those enemy trenches as the "first grey of morning filled the East," rounding off our victory over phantom Germans with an *al fresco* breakfast.

During this delightful country life—it hardly rained—we played a good deal of football, for active service is superior even to the short summer respite permitted in League matches. On the 8th we played the 9th Battalion of the Regiment, who were billeted in the neighbourhood, and defeated our senior in creation, 5—0. On the 16th we played the 17th Battalion of the Regiment, at our transport lines. This was quite a social function, as we entertained the officers of the 17th Battalion at tea on

the ground. The actual match was exciting up till the end, and we only just won over our visitors, 4—3, after a display of partisan enthusiasm worthy of a Cup Tie Final.

The recreational part of our training was further coloured by three concerts given by "The Cuckoos."

On the 8th the Rev. J. F. Bloxam, C.F., whom we had known for many weeks as the kindly presiding genius in the Y.M.C.A. hut near "O" Camp, joined us as Chaplain in the place of the Rev. A. P. Daniels.

On the 15th a Brigade Church Parade was held near our billets. This was attended by the Head Padre, The Right Rev. Dr. Gwynne, C.M.G., Bishop of Khartoum, Deputy Chaplain-General, who gave an Address.

The same afternoon there was a Brigade Horse Show at Houle. This show, which included Sports and such events as jumping, wrestling on mules, and musical chairs, took place in a setting worthy of Richmond or even Dublin. The ground was gaily decorated with flags and bunting, there were ladies among the spectators, and the Divisional Band was in attendance. The result may most concisely be given by quoting the following extract from Daily Orders:—

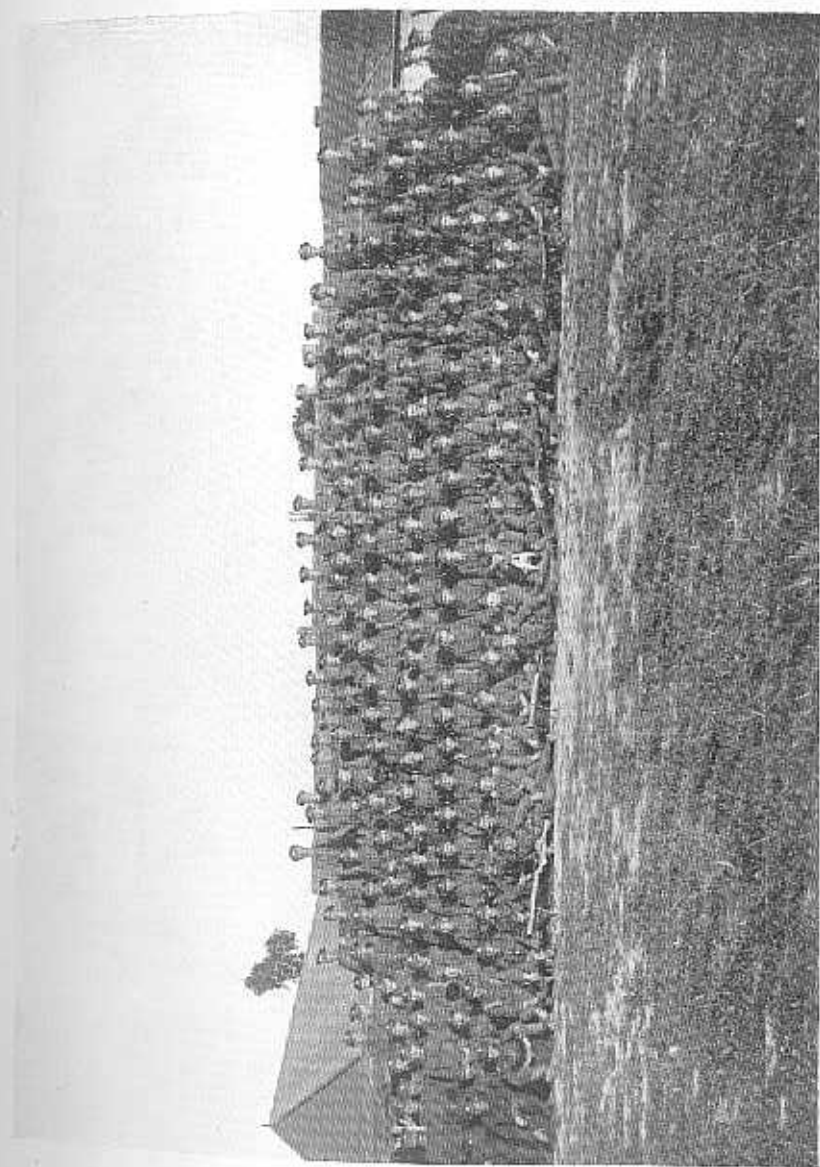
"The Commanding Officer desires to congratulate Lieutenant F. P. Holmes and the N.C.O.'s and men who took part in the Brigade Horse Show. The Battalion carried off in prizes four Firsts, two Seconds and one Third.

"A most satisfactory result, which is due to the enthusiasm and pride with which all ranks have entered into their work."

On total points we were Second in the Brigade. A photograph of the Officers was taken on the 17th and on the 21st this restful period came to an end.

Though life in France had a certain uniformity about it, we were seldom without fresh experiences. On July 21st we took part in an entirely new one, for we proceeded by 'bus to the neighbourhood of Poperinghe.

It sounds simple enough to get on to a 'bus and alight



"B" COMPANY, SERGES. JULY, 1917.



from it at one's destination, but these operations, elementary in Piccadilly, are dignified on active service by the terms "embussing" and "debussing"; nor is such terminology entirely misplaced, for it requires no great effort of imagination to perceive that getting some 5,000 men with packs and rifles into a stream of 187 'buses might result in a protracted scene of embarrassing and inextricable confusion. The London pre-war omnibus accommodated 25 passengers, and 187 parties of that number (which is without military significance, and fits into no scheme of units or sections) had to be drawn out along the straight St. Omer Road. We had been informed that one formation which had not grasped the true import of the operation, had taken nearly two hours to board their 'buses. Spurred on to greater things we determined that no adverse criticism should be levelled at us, and intrepidly entered on this new adventure. We assembled on the roadside in these arbitrary contingents, and soon after, with vanguard and flankguards of dust, with the thunder and rattle of archaic mechanism, the mighty Armada of the London General Omnibus Company appeared in the distance, whirled by us to the leading party, and stopped with the precision of gunners at the Military Tournament, at the designated distance apart and opposite the party of passengers each was to receive. For so desperate an engagement the bugle appropriately sounded "The Advance," and we moved against the monsters. In less than five minutes the whole Brigade was aboard, with packs and rifles stacked; the General swung by in a car like an Admiral in his pinnace, and the great clanging, snorting, fleet got under weigh once more.

We proceeded via St. Omer, Esquelbecq and Wormhoudt to a point two miles from Poperinghe on the Proven Road. About half-way, near Wormhoudt, a halt was called and we had two hours' rest, during which tea was served to the strains of the Divisional Band. The journey was completed by 3 a.m. on the 22nd.

In due course we received congratulations on our form from very august quarters.

From the debussing point we marched to A 29 Camp, near Brandhoek and spent several nights in bivouacs in the wood. Here we could not do much—the position was very cramped—though the weather favoured our life as wood nymphs.

Here "The Cuckoos," transcending the seasonal restrictions of their namesakes, gave us two more concerts. The stage was set "under the Greenwood Tree," and our auditorium had no limits. It almost looked as if the audience had no limits also, for the ground was a solid mass of khaki, lying, sitting and standing, while those right behind dragged up G.S. wagons to form a Dress Circle beneath the "gods," who were perched aloft in every branch. In the midst, embedded in his Brigade, there shone out the red and gold of the General. We shall not easily forget Major King, of the Rifle Brigade, singing "Where did that one go to, 'Erbert?" a song so disagreeably topical in a neighbourhood which almost daily received its ration of "heavy stuff," while the account of this concert will bring back to many who read it, memories of the quaint dry humour of that most efficient quartermaster and kindly comedian, C.Q.M.S. Tudge.

There was a further distraction in this camp, as the enemy dropped some new gas on us, apparently indulging a taste for practical joking rather than with maleficent intent, for it only made us sneeze, but when a whole Battalion sneezes it is like an epidemic of influenzal catarrh in Brobdingnag.

## CHAPTER VI

### BELGIUM

#### THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES

THE time had come for which all this preparation had been made. During many weeks we had been training and getting ready for a further taste of battle, and it was obvious to us that "Z" day and "zero" hour were very near at hand. The Salient was crammed with troops of every branch of the service, guns and horse lines were spread everywhere, and the woods were thick with an undergrowth of bivouacs. We were all served out with special equipment, and on July 28th moved into the forward area. As we passed up we could not but observe the enormous concentration of infantry on the Canal Bank, while in the fields below serried ranks of field guns were drawn up. These latter were far from inactive, and German 5.9's searched steadily, methodically and relentlessly for them, added to which the sharp shrill whistle of our gas shells bursting over, and the monotonous wail and sickly thud of the German gas shells coming back, gave an ominous flavour to our impressions.

The curtain was slowly going up. Rehearsal and preparation were over and we were assembled for the real "Play."

As was observed with regard to the Battles on the Somme, it is not the province of this history to describe comprehensively the engagements in which we took part; such can be read in the despatches of the Commander-in-Chief and the official history of the War. The historian will again confine himself to the actual operations we ourselves carried out and will only overstep this self-imposed limit where it may be necessary in order to make them clearer.