

# SCIENCE OF WAR 1915-1918 (PART 2)

**G. G. J. LAWRENCE**

## **France and the Somme Battle -- Delville Wood**

Landing in France to most of us was a thrilling adventure; to myself, barely out of my teens, everything was excitingly new and of great interest. The whole atmosphere was so different from Egypt and more so from England and home. We had plenty of time around the dock area waiting whilst our effects were being unloaded, checked and assembled. The glimpses of the many civilians passing by, so different in dress and behaviour from what we were accustomed to was intriguing and in many cases intensely amusing; the happy-go-lucky attitude to the ordinary proprieties of life as we knew them were blissfully absent. Being only Tommies and the lowest of the low in the eyes of the world, we had a down-to-earth view of life around us.

Our rifles and kit were stacked in an open area just off a busy side street. Near us was a men's urinal with the usual briefest waist-high cover from the passing pedestrians. We were naturally very amused at the performance going on. In one case a young lad, busily engaged, made no bones about greeting his girl friend passing immediately behind. He simply took off his hat cheerily and continued as before.

The 4th Regiment and a company of the 1st Regiment remained behind in Marseilles for two weeks owing to a case of contagious sickness aboard their troopship. The Scotties with their kilts always stole the limelight with the French civilians and it so happened that on one of their route marches they were given a chest-high wall to clamber over as a fitness test. Being closer than was realized to a built-up area, the French women turned up in force to watch the fun. The hilarity and shrieks of laughter as some of the Jocks stuck at the top with kilts over their heads could be heard from afar, and the old recurring feminine question of what Scotties wore under their kilts was answered in the negative. The sight must have been better than any entertainment they had ever had.

Our regiment later in the day marched through Marseilles to our entraining point. This march

through the crowded streets thronged with wildly excited people remains an unforgettable memory. The people of France were filled with enthusiasm over the terrific battles and the heroism of their men in the great struggle for the defence of Verdun. In this month of April when victory was swaying one way or the other amidst great slaughter, feelings were at fever pitch, and so it was that fresh troops coming to their aid were given a great spontaneous welcome. Flowers were showered on us, in fact some men were garlanded with flowers. Women broke into the ranks and at times made it quite difficult for us to keep formation and moving. On the station we filed past long tables loaded with champagne, coffee and cakes. The coffee I remember being well-laced with rum.

Journeying up through France was most interesting and so different to the low-lying country we knew lay further north. All along the Rhône River winding between high hills there seemed to be an old castle perched above each of them or lower on a point commanding the river. Somewhere along our journey we pulled up on a side line alongside a troop train filled with Russian soldiers, part of a division sent to reinforce the French. We did our best to communicate with them and managed quite well with sign language. They were big strapping fellows from Northern Russia armed with long rifles and unusually long thin bayonets.

Our slow three-day journey ended near Steenwerck one late afternoon. As our train approached the fighting lines we all gazed with great interest at the little puffs of white or black anti-aircraft shell bursts in the sky as they followed planes near the opposing lines.

We detrained and marched to our billets in an area near Bailleul and were lodged by half companies in one of the little farm buildings dotted so closely in most of France and Flanders. Our platoon was led to a long barn filled with fresh straw where we were each given a fairly generous allotment on which to bed down and keep our belongings. Both sides of the barn were thus occupied with a central passage for movement and general use.

The farmsteads were mostly of the same pattern,

a square consisting of the farmer's dwelling and three barns or cow byres completing the square with a large depressed swimming pool like midden in the centre. Into the pool all refuse from the cow byres and household was dumped with a mixture of straw to complete the compost mixture, and in due course carted out and spread on their fields as manure. There was thus always a distinct stringent aroma though after a time this was hardly noticed. We got on very well with the farmer and his family in this place though we saw little of them in the daytime. The whole family rose at dawn and went off to work in their fields lower down usually with the old man sitting comfortably sideways on the broad back of their huge shire type horse

Gas helmets were issued soon after arriving and all practiced their use. The helmets were the early PH type of impregnated cloth with eye pieces and a rubber tube kept in the mouth to breathe through. They were most uncomfortable; the eye piece glassed fogged up very quickly and the cloth next to one's neck burnt and produced a rash. These helmets were replaced by a better one the next year. Even so they were a handicap during an attack allowing only limited vision, hot and making breathing difficult.

The billets were about one-and-a-half miles behind the trenches. At night the rumble of gun fire could be heard with occasional machine gun fire. There were the constant flashes of the guns lighting up the sky and Verey lights of all colours going up, giving us newcomers this April of 1916 a foretaste of what was to be our lot at close-quarters during the next two-and-a-half years.

In our first week the enemy launched a gas attack at night using chlorine gas. We were jerked awake by the sound of gas alarm gongs near and far. Candles were lit and helmets hurriedly pulled on and kept on until dawn. By then the wind had increased and the clouds of gas dispersed. We had smelt or seen nothing so wondered if it had all been a false alarm. However, the sight of two dead cows nearby soon convinced us. The farm owners had no ill effects from the gas for this peasant family always slept with windows tightly shut and were apparently gas proof. The stabled horse was also unaffected.

Two more gas discharges followed a week later and then stopped for the period we were in this sector. It appeared that the last discharge backfired due to a change in wind direction. No gas reached our lines, instead it fell back and choked the enemy

with their own evil contraption.

Gas warfare proved to be very tricky when using cylinders to discharge clouds of gas. Fortunately the prevailing wind was almost always in our favour blowing from West to East. Further difficulties for both sides was the strength of the wind. A four mile an hour wind was ideal from the discharger's point of view; too little was dangerous, too strong was ineffective. Later in the war gas was used by firing shells discharging phosgene or mustard gas into the enemy lines. In the great St Quentin offensive the Germans used different smelling non-toxic gas mixed with the lethal gas to delude our troops.

The few weeks before taking over duty in the trenches were happy days spent in fine weather busily training for trench warfare by day and in the evening strolling to *estaminets* in nearby villages. The *estaminets* mostly very small and homely, the central feature being the stove in the middle with its horizontal pipe extending across the room for warmth and usefulness. We were most agreeably surprised to find that these Flemish people on the borders of Belgium could understand our Afrikaans and we their language and newspapers.

Our fortnight of peaceful existence over we marched by platoons in cautious silence along the road leading to the entrance of our trench system. We filed with interest through a roofless building in the little village of Ploegsteert (commonly known as Plugstreet by the British Tommies) our gateway to the underground sand-bagged defences. A long communication trench brought us to the front line where we took over from the troops who were relieving. The greatest care for silence and for keeping well below trench parapets was stressed. Some of our very tall fellows had to be specially warned. We passed notices such as, 'Hell fire corner, keep moving, duck or die'. The opposing lines here were fifty to a hundred yards apart.

The trenches were in very low country so that in this area the trenches (so called), were all above ground being built up with sandbags fore and aft with duck boards below to keep feet off the swampy ground. I occupied the first few nights firing at the flashes of the German rifles as they fired at us. It was too dark to see or be seen so really no risk provided one ducked quickly after each round. The enemy was probably passing the time in the same way. Every now and then we would lose off a Verey light to make sure no one was creeping

up on us. As trench life and boredom continued in the many spells ahead we often passed the night hours killing rats, sometimes selecting one of these overfed scavengers running along the parapet and sending him up with a Verey light.

We had two spells of duty in the front line before moving from this sector for further training in anticipation of the coming Somme battles. On the second spell we were issued with steel helmets, or tin hats, as we called them. Several of our men on the previous occasion had had light head wounds, quite unnecessarily, from shrapnel penetrating the light cloth service caps we wore. It seems we were amongst the first to wear the old tin hat that gave not only protection from light shrapnel but also served as a good wash basin on occasions.

At first these helmets deluded our chaps into taking chances; we had our first casualty in the trenches when a man in my platoon kept firing at the enemy too long after first light. The poor fellow got a bullet that went slap through his helmet and killed him instantly.

In our reserve line the trench ran underneath a demolished house. We had a cosy cellar for our sections quarters, one that had remained firm under the rubble above. It seemed very solid until one afternoon Jerry opened up with his artillery. A little Highlander machine gunner joined us for the duration of the *straf*. I remember looking up apprehensively at the nicely arched brick roof and wondering if it would cave in from some of the shells falling just short or over. The Scottie reassured us by his cool fatalistic attitude, the attitude of an old hand at the game and one most of us acquired of necessity later.

Our training for the Big Push was carried out further north in a quiet area nearer the sea where on 31 May the booming of the great guns came floating in from the distant great naval battle of Jutland. All night we heard the heavy firing and wondered what the result would be. For us land forces in France so much depended on the outcome of the action and the sea routes being kept open for us as well as for the safety of Britain.

About the middle of June we commenced our march south and were dispersed in company strength amongst the little villages or farms to the rear of the area we were scheduled to attack in the great battle of the Somme. We were several days on the road and moved through the busy old

Cathedral town of Amiens. It took us two hours to pass through this big town of broad cobbled streets lined by a mingling of ancient and modern buildings. Out and beyond once more amongst the farmsteads, woods and fields — on and on. The weather certainly favoured us in that golden summer of 1916 as we marched through lovely green peaceful country far removed from the sounds of battle. It was hard to believe there was a war on and that each day brought us closer to the belching guns and the slaughter that awaited us.

One was struck by the neat fields of ripening crops, the profusion of red poppies and deep blue cornflowers and the birds. The larks in particular were new to us — so numerous and strangely interesting with their happy singing high above, almost out of sight in the clear sky. What lovely memories of beautiful countryside and of wonderful comrades.

On our march southwards we stopped for a weekend near a village called section de Lonpre and our platoon with company headquarters was billeted on a small farm holding. The owner, a widow, was so kind to our men and made us as comfortable as possible in the only barn or outhouse she possessed. The company officers and Padre Hill had their quarters in the dwelling house. The good madame was greatly impressed by our tall fine-features saintly chaplain. She came out the next morning to tell us all about him and described him as *trés grande — très grande* — and much else. We reached the area near the town of Corbie and were billeted at Saily le Sec until moved quite close to the line at Welcome Wood and sheltered there safe from observation.

The great bombardment of the German trenches had commenced and continued for seven days. We arrived in the wood in time for the last two days of the terrific battering and wondered if anything in the enemy trenches could possibly survive.

I have very clear and happy memories of our few days in this well-hamed wood. For once we were free of all parades and duties and able to wander and mingle with friends in other companies or regiments and also fortunate in having unclouded skies and dry conditions for camping, our only cover the beautiful overhead foliage of the trees.

A most inspiring sight and sound was the marching and playing by the massed bands of the 9th Division's Highland brigade. Each of the four fa-

mous Scottish regiments, the Black Watch, the Camerons, the Seaforths and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders seemed to be playing their hearts out and vying with each other for the best performance. To a man we were thrilled and spellbound.

Even after sixty years a memory of comradeship and kindness in that wood is indelibly etched in my mind. I looked up a friend named Kensit\* in another company who with two others was just about to finish the last of his parcel from home, a tin of canned peaches. The generous fellow insisted on me joining in though it meant one less peach all round. With the dull roar of the great bombardment as orchestra those peaches were eaten with deliberate and thoughtful relish. This was a man with a lovely unselfish spirit, very cultured and knowledgeable. He was killed in Delville Wood two weeks later, mortally wounded whilst trying to run through an impassable barrage of bursting shells with an urgent message to our command post. He struggled through, delivered the message and collapsed and died almost immediately. One of the four of us besides myself survived the battle and told me of his death.

On 1 July the great battle started and the first we knew of it was when Germans were brought to the prisoner-of-war wire cages in the valley below us. A number of us gathered to see them being brought in. There were far fewer by mid-morning than expected and it was only then that we began to fear that all was not going according to plan. A dazed little man of the 8th Manchester's said he was one of the few survivors of his company. Being in a very shocked state we hoped he could be wrong. The casualties were very heavy. However, in the area to our front the attack had been successful and a considerable penetration had been made into the enemy defences. It was here that our division was to come in and exploit the success.

The 9th Division was now moved closer to the original trenches and we in conformity left our wooded shelter for the artillery lines and were put into dugouts on the side of a hill. French heavy guns and our own South African heavy artillery were all around us firing continuously. Being as yet reserve troops we were used to dig emplacements for the bigger guns that were moving up as the firing range extended. Shelling by the enemy batteries was sporadic. I had a narrow escape when a shell burst a few yards on my left, knocked over a man in front of me and killed a French

soldier further on. We had to carry on and not take shelter when things became too hot. After two days here we moved to the British original front line and entered the trench system after dusk. It was very close humid weather, there were no dugouts and sleep was difficult on the duckboards. Desultory shelling went on all night but only one man in our company was killed. Most of those killed five days previously in the early morning assault from these trenches had been buried yet there remained the reek of death everywhere. My half-section and myself hunted around for an unburied body for the air was so thick and overpowering we could not sleep. At dawn we collected and buried the small scattered remains of a poor fellow who had, got a shell to himself, as the saying was.

For five more days we remained in this line of trenches close to Maricourt and were occupied by fatigues whenever there was a quiet spell of shelling. Enemy observation balloons floated in the distance and could report any undue movement on our part. A number of men on our left were killed and wounded by shell fire in this way. In fact before advancing on Longueval and Delville Wood the 1st Regiment had fifty casualties during our occupation of these trenches.

On our second day the prevailing cloudy conditions cleared and apparently gave the enemy observers in their sausage balloons full scope. Our cook had so far been able to continue producing meals above ground behind very scanty camouflage. Suddenly we heard the scream of heavy shells coming and two five-point nines burst with a crash on the cookhouse and poor Jock Munro,\*\* was very badly wounded and his dixies of food destroyed. He was carried off on a stretcher during a quiet spell to the field dressing station where he died soon afterwards. Poor old Jock, a very loveable, happy-go-lucky Scotsman. One company commander once said of him he had never known a man who wrote so many letters to so many different girls.

On the evening of the 13th we left our trenches at Maricourt and dug ourselves in on a hillside some distance in front. Here we were given our orders for the big advance the next morning in support of the 26th Highland Brigade. Our trench being sufficiently deep, I moved aside to a higher point and watched the intense shelling of the wood we were to assault the next day. It was a most fearsome

\* Private E.G. Kensit, from Wynberg.

\*\* Private D. Munro, from Invergordon, Scotland.

sight to see the wood a mass of flames rising to the full height of the trees, a perfect hell, and this was our objective for the following day. I felt terribly afraid. I think all of us before battle were jolted into facing the facts of fear and death and knew they must be fully dealt with. In my case I was granted a peace that remained throughout my days in the wood.

Returning to my place in our trench I was keeping a sharp lookout with my rifle at the ready and must for an instant have fallen asleep with my eyes open when a Major peered at me from in front of the trench and said 'Are you awake?' I jerked to reality and promptly said 'Yes, Sir'. Warning us to be wakeful he passed on. Our officers were constantly on the move in front of us that night seeing that we were wakeful, evidently expecting an enemy counter attack.

We were up at 2.30 the next morning, 14 July (Bas-

tille Day), and moved off at dawn. We made our way up through a valley alongside a light railway line passing on the way streams of Highlanders wounded in the taking of Longueval at daybreak. Higher up the valley we saw a fine and unusual sight, a squadron of Bengal Lancers mounted on horses, their long lances at the ready and the metal tips glinting in the sun. Understandably they were soon spotted by the enemy observation balloons, heavily shelled and dispersed with a number of losses. Even to us it seemed a wasteful and misguided appreciation of the stubborn enemy defences held in strength behind wire ahead of them.

We filed into a captured German communication trench and remained there until our call came to advance two hours later. In this time we were able to have a meal though the trench was packed with dead Germans laid out in rows inside and outside on the parapet and very old. Our shelling here must have been deadly.



Mrs L. Botha and General Tanner in front of a row of graves of South African fallen.

From here we moved out into the open plain and headed for Longueval. We soon came under fire from shrapnel bursting overhead, also high explosive and tear gas shells. The latter forced us to put on eye goggles partially blinding us. It seemed to be indirect fire and luckily our platoon escaped casualties. The next company, not so lucky, had several casualties here from shrapnel balls, amongst them my later friend, Mackay. We reached the German line of trenches on the outskirts of Longueval and occupied them all afternoon. The enemy gunners had the exact range and shelled us with uncomfortable accuracy.

In mid-afternoon I was told to go off on a fatigue party to carry plum pudding type mortar shells through the village to the mortar battery on the fringe of the wood in front of us. It was a very tricky affair carrying a 60 lb bomb on one's shoulder plus our usual equipment. Our route took us through broken-down houses and streets where many of our dead were lying. At one corner we dodged around, quickly stepped over two dead men, and round the next shelter before the snipers could get us. Bullets pinged and ricocheted everywhere. We were relieved to return to the less dangerous shelter of our trench.

That night we had a bad time and little sleep. Added to the type of shelling we had all afternoon, a battery of long-distance heavy naval guns was ranged onto us and fired all night. In the early morning one of these heavy ones fell on our parapet and buried a man close to me. We dug him out as quickly as possible though I was too shocked by the blast to help much. He was carried away unconscious but we heard recovered only to be lost in Delville Wood later.

On the 15th our company was needed to press forward an attack in the Wood. We filed out of our trench and took up a position next to some of the Argylls. We lay down amongst the bracken waiting for orders to advance, meanwhile keeping very low and quiet. A young Scottie of the Argylls, about my age, had opened a tin of sardines and was thoughtfully and carefully selecting and eating one at a time, slowly as if they were to be his last. I wondered at him not offering me one when I spotted the worsted star of a Second Lieutenant on the shoulder strap of his Tommies' tunic. Just then there was a great shouting and cheers and a long rattle of machine gun fire. It seemed Captain Jenkins had given an order to his men around him to prepare to charge a strong point, and blown his whistle and as his men rose with him were

swept down by the machine gun. Captain Jenkins and five men were wounded and one was killed. Owing to a gap in our extended line the order did not reach us.

There was heavy shelling all that day after we returned to our trench. At dusk we moved into the wood and dug ourselves in. Amongst the tree roots digging was difficult and slow so that we worked until the early hours of the 16th. At dawn we were ordered to move deeper into the wood. We filed carefully through the dense and beautiful forest to the furthest corner and were told to dig again and to dig quickly as the enemy was very near. Gussie Harrison\* and I paired off and dug down about three feet with only just room for us to squat. Lying close to us were two strapping young Bavarians killed during the night and many wounded Germans. I went over and took the water bottles, still full, from the bodies.

All was quiet for a short spell and we were able to look about us and admire the beautiful wood of tall trees above us and bracken and brambles below. The sun shone and everywhere great spider webs glistened with dew. The noise in the wood was terrific though in our area no shells were falling at the time.

Standing up and keeping a good lookout for an enemy attack, I noticed the tree leaves close above our heads dropping steadily every now and then. It suddenly struck me that it was not yet autumn — those leaves should not be falling — they were being cut down by bullets. We got down very quickly and soon machine guns were raking us from two sides. The fresh earth on our parapet came tumbling down on us as the bullets swept along it. Two men close by were wounded by this fire, one very badly.

There was as it were a blanket of supendous noise everywhere yet only now as heavy shells and falling trees crashed near us did we hear it. As the day wore on new artillery tactics were used on our line of slit trenches. At about 3 o'clock they used high velocity shells, the ones we called whizz bangs, searching up and down our line. They burst in pairs just above our heads. We heard them exploding on their way up over us, past and then coming down again. On the second trip up, the two burst just above our trench with a crash. A piece came flying back past my ear and drawn up my legs and struck in my right thigh. There was a scream from the next little trench as a poor

\* Private G.A. Harrison from Glasgow, Scotland.

sergeant was badly smashed up and mortally wounded by the same shell. Gussie at once bandaged my leg and said 'You have a lovely Blighty, get out'. I was dazed and shocked by the concussion and at first refused to leave for what seemed a small wound: Soon the leg stiffened and I realized I would be useless in combat. Waiting for a lull two of us made our way slowly back through the wood. Midway we had to take shelter in a shellhole from the heavy explosions close around us. We went on though it seemed impossible to get through. We reached a log and sand bag shelter full of wounded in the care of a medical orderly, hoping to shelter from the terrific bombardment. The orderly said 'Dont't stay, rather take a chance outside. We expect to go up any moment'. With the heavy shells falling we feelingly agreed there was little future for these poor fellows and went on.

With the aid of a branch as a stick I hopped along and somehow by watching the spots where there seemed fewer bursts we got through to the road leading to Montauban. There we were joined by a young fellow named Botha wearing a German overcoat. His bare chest was bandaged and as we passed a dressing station sited in a shelter dug into the bank of the sunken road, a doctor ran out and looked at our late-comer in surprise for he had been shot clean through the chest, where the doctor said his heart should have been.\* The doctor then looked at us two and advised us to keep moving. We needed little encouragement for the Bosch was sending over regular salvos and the road was littered with dead. I suggested getting off the road and walking a little distance off and parallel to it. This we did and escaped the heavy stuff we could hear coming before they landed on the road. We reached Montauban and here returned to the now fairly quiet road. All along our way men ran out from these funk holes and gave us cups of lovely hot tea. Passing through the village we reached a light rail line and joined a number of wounded on a trolley that ran us down to a dressing station, and from there were taken by ambulance to clearing station some miles back. Here, of all luxuries, a warm bed on the grassed floor of the large tented ward, and a hot meal.

Lying in the bed next to me was a young Highlander with bandages over both eyes. I was told a bullet had passed through behind the eyes severing the nerves and blinding him.

\* Private John Grabil Botha, of Pretoria, survived this severe wound and returned to the Regiment, only to be severely wounded in the last weeks of the war.

I could not sleep that night for listening to the roar in the distance and thinking of the fellows I had left in that awful wood. I was somewhat consoled about leaving them when my wound was examined and it was considered necessary to put the leg in splints, there being no exit wound. I was now a stretcher case and put into a nice bed in an ambulance train bound for Rouen and from there loaded on to the St George hospital ship. Stretcher cases were stacked far below; knowing enemy submarines were about, I was pleased when we were safely put ashore at Southampton.

### **Hospital and Winter in Arras trenches**

We reached Waterloo Station in due course and were stacked in long rows on the platform where some lovely nurses attended us. All South Africans were taken to Tooting Military Hospital and very well treated there by kind nurses and staff.

To go back to Devil's Wood, for knowing no other this was the appropriate name we gave it, until we read of the name Delville Wood in the papers. The bombardment of the Wood by the enemy was stepped up on the 17th when all hell was let loose and caused terrible losses. Our men were attached by a fresh enemy division on the 18th when ground was lost and retaken and partially lost again. Our brigade, decimated and exhausted, fought on until relieved by fresh troops on the evening of the 19th when 142 men under Colonel Thackeray marched out.

My poor little half-section, Gussie, and most of my company fell in that holocaust of destructive fury. My first ten days in hospital were spent in bed. The comfort of cool sheets, good meals served by nurses or patients on the mend, made life in bed a restful and happy affair. For the moment our main worry was of the news in the daily papers and the long casualty lists. If only we could get news of the friends we left in the wood and how the battle as a whole was going. Reports in the papers appeared to us rather over-optimistic and yet progress was claimed and ground won, but at what a cost? In our ward there were many of our men who could walk around being wounded in the arms or head. I had many of these as visitors and we would go over again our individual experiences. Some were wounded earlier than I was though a surprisingly large number were hit on the 16th as I was. A few were there who were wounded on the 17th and 18th July and described the terrific fighting and overwhelming shellfire of those days of sheer horror and grim holding on relieved by in

tense bouts of repulsing heavy enemy attacks when they were killed in their hundreds by our accurate rifle and Lewis gun fire.

A man in our ward of dormitory-like rows of beds kept walking up and down the ward in great pain claspng his armless shoulder. He came from the Bedford district and as far as I can remember his name was Ainslee. I know it was a Scots name. The poor chap had his right arm taken off very close to the shoulder and told us his still raw wound was painng him terribly and that he could distinctly feel his fingers that weren't there. He told me now his arm was shattered from the elbow down by a shell blast and as he was being dressed at a first aid post in the wood another shell fell alongside him and took the remainder of the same arm off as far as his shoulder and killed most of those who were aiding him. He got away somehow and after a further operation in France was evacuated to Tooting Military Hospital. All this happened only two weeks earlier and the fresh wound was giving him great pain. Being a hefty and extremely fit fellow he was able to stand the shock, one that would have killed a weaker man. He was in the 4th (Scottish) regiment of our brigade and I remember wore his kilt with great dash. Unfortunately I lost touch with him when we left us for specialised treatment and a metal arm. He was a great chap and was liked and admired by us all.

In bed on the other side of me was a young chap by the name of Jones, either 1st or 3rd South African Infantry who had a very narrow escape. He was firing at the enemy at the edge of the wood when a bullet struck him in the mouth, pushed his back teeth through his cheek and passed out at the base of his head only just missing his spine. He was wonderfully patched up and got a fine set of false teeth to boot.

Another young fellow came in with shell shock; he had been blown high up into the air by a bursting shell and miraculously came down without a scratch of any kind but was deaf and dumb. His deafness cleared in hospital but he was unable to talk. A few weeks later he was accidentally bumped and being annoyed, said 'Damn!' From then on he was cured and spoke fluently and amusingly of his strange experience and of the frustration during his spell of speechlessness.

I was soon up and about and spent many cheery hours chatting with the less fortunatge still in bed. An X-ray was taken of my leg and this showed up a nose cap screw from the shell that got me.

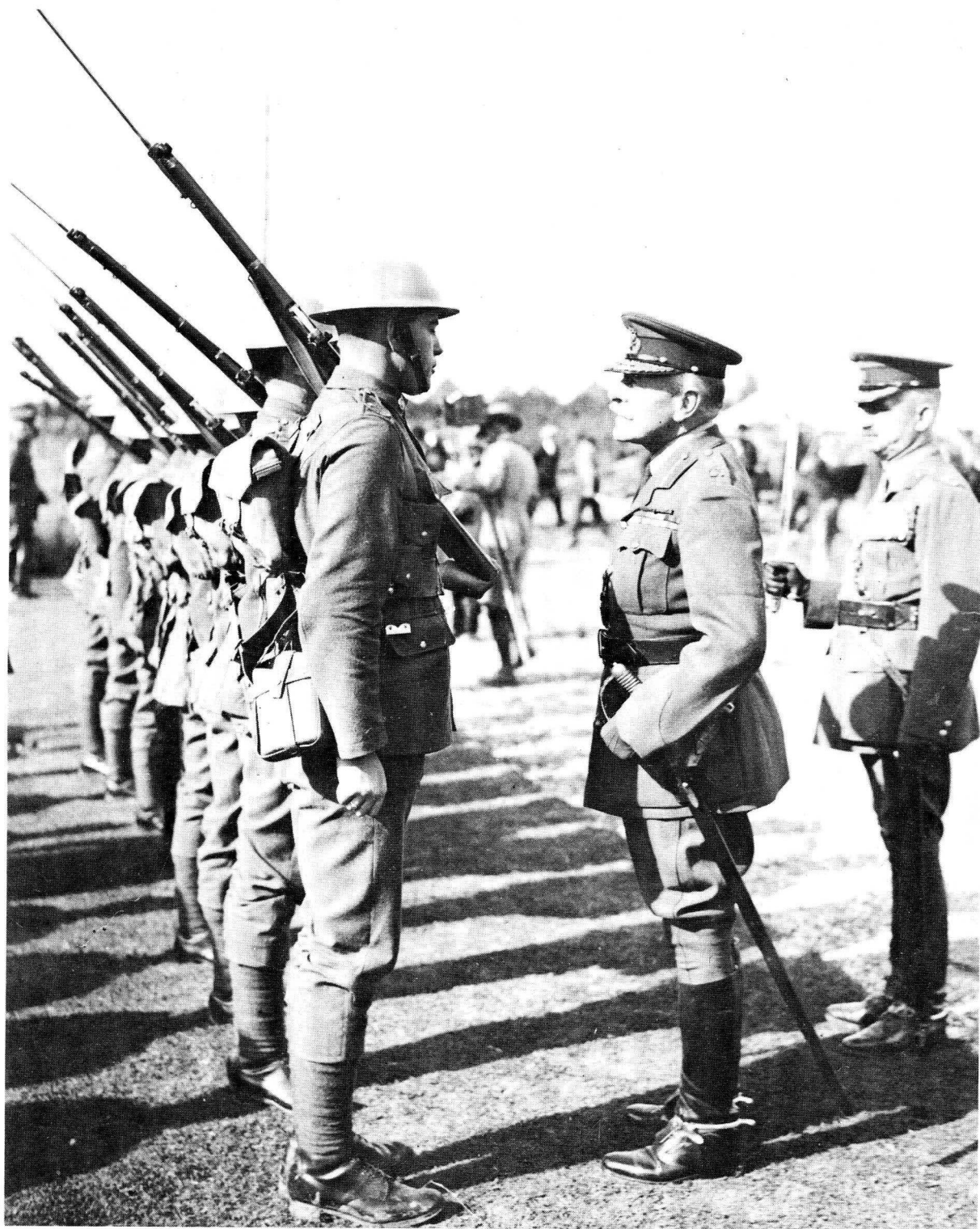
Having burnt and sterilized its way in, it was decided to leave it and await further developments. My cousin, a doctor in the South African Medical Corps, promised to take it out free of charge when we returned home. Unfortunately the poor chap did not survive the war. The screw remains with reminders at times of my lucky 'Blighty'.

Fitted out in hospital blues we were free to visit the town with few restrictions. We were well entertained by many people who took us on jaunts into the countryside and generally made a fuss of us. After six weeks I was discharged and given the customary ten days' leave. This was mostly spent in the Isle of Wight at Totland Bay with an old aunt of mine who had made her home there many years before. What a lovely island it is in the early autumn of September; it was good to be alive and able to enjoy the peace and beauty of the green countryside. The days flew past and soon it was time to report back to the same barracks at Borden Camp. But what a difference to be felt there — not one of the old company and only new faces of fresh drafts come from home to train and replace our many gaps at the front. Going through the old bungalow only ghostly faces seemed to meet me with memories of happy days and evenings of last year. Even the smell of coal smoke on the night air was a reminder of some bungalow member and of evening sing-songs and slightly beery speechifying by late-comers, all adding to the gaiety of the night in the warm blaze about the fire.

I went through a great bitterness of spirit as the awareness of our great losses gradually unfolded. It was a great relief to qualify for one of the first drafts crossing to France as also the thought of re-joining the few comrades left in our depleted and reforming regiment.

And so in due course our draft boarded our cross channel troopship in Dover harbour. As so often happens with troopships, we lay a full day after embarking the night previously. The full day is vividly remembered because of the ghoulish pestering by every possible type of religious persuasion. Hot-gospelers and religious cranks interspersed with a few genuine well-meaning men. There they stood on the quayside exhortng repentance and salvation ad nauseum, preaching to young fellows who in fact were in many cases going to their deaths in the bloody shambles of the Somme, men who were fighting their battles and saving their skins. To make it more galling many of the preachers were young and fit enough to fight for their country.





Earl Haigh addressing the South African guard of honour during the opening of Delville Wood Memorial.

To those of us returning again and knowing what lay ahead it was hardly talk to cheer us on our way. One of our wits yelled at one of them 'Come and join us and take a one-way ticket to the Pearly Gates!'

We landed at Rouen the same morning after an easy uneventful passage and marched to our camp

quite close to the famous Bull Ring where on a huge field intensive training was carried out.

We were told it was here that Napoleon drilled his troops for the invasion of England until Trafalgar put paid to his hopes. The Bull Ring instructors were wellknown for their harsh and rigid discipline.

For many weeks we underwent barrack square type of drill. There was a quick stop of 140 paces to the minute we particularly disliked, one only suitable for parade purposes and useless for practical marches. This was somewhat relieved by bayonet fighting and instruction in gas. Our food was first-class and I can still taste those thick rashers of bacon.

At night we were well off for entertainment in the nearby army huts or YMCA canteens. It was here that I heard a first-class lecturer give one of the finest lectures I have ever heard. We could pick any one of four subjects and he then entranced us with our choice of the Life of General Sir John Moore and kept us spellbound for the whole evening.

On the whole we had a happy time in Rouen waiting our turn to join a draft 'for up the line' to our various regiments. Three of us privates stuck together at all times. Alex Smith who later rose through all the non-commissioned ranks to sergeant-major, was commissioned and finished off in France as Captain. Later in the second World War he was Colonel of the Kimberley Regiment. Gates, a tall six-and-a-half footer, I lost touch with after our spell in the Arras trenches and I don't think he survived the war.\*

In the first week of October the three of us were warned for the next draft. Our regiment, still under strength and preparing for the next big attack, urgently needed more men. A few days before the draft left I went down with, of all things, German measles. I was sent to an isolation hospital and my two friends were put in quarantine. This fact probably saved their lives as well as mine for the draft we were warned for reached the brigade in time for our disastrous attack on the Butte de Warlencourt.

The tale of our brigade's part in the battle of the Butte de Warlencourt is a mournful one. The objective, a stronghold of heavily wired trenches, was made even more impossible by days of drenching rain and sleet. Between the 12th and 18th October heavy and partially successful attacks were made by the 2nd, 3rd and 4th regiments and fighting had been bitter in the intermediate maze of trenches against stubborn resistance by the enemy. After days of trench fighting by bombing parties A, B and C companies of the 1st Regiment attacked the main stronghold behind a creepy artillery barrage. Our attack met with very determined resistance and

\* Private Alban William Gates did survive the war despite being wounded on the Somme and later at Ypres in 1917.

failed to reach the enemy position. In C Company, of the 100 men who took part in the attack 69 were casualties mostly killed. The Company Commander, Captain Jenkins, one of the wounded, was the only officer left. A and B Companies fared even worse, except for one officer, Lieutenant Percy Stapleton\*\* and a few stragglers, who returned after killing many of the enemy and bringing with them 19 prisoners, and for two officers and 16 men captured by the enemy, all in A and B companies were killed.

The stronghold was a death trap and was taken in the Somme Battle despite an attempt by the 50th division in early November. Our men fought under appalling conditions of sleet and mud and looking back it appears the task given them was not humanly possible.

In ten days of battling in knee-deep slush the brigade lost 1 150 men in killed and wounded. We three members of C Company were fortunate in not being uselessly sacrificed in this debacle of apparently over-optimistic planning, poor reconnaissance and worse generalship. The sacrifice of our men is honoured by this macabre tribute to their gallantry... 'One saw a large party of South Africans at full stretch with their bayonets at the charge — all dead; but even in death they seemed to have the battle ardour stamped on their faces'. (Lieutenant Colonel Crofts, 'Three years with the 9th Division').

To return to my attack of German measles, I soon recovered from the ill effects and spent many weeks convalescing very pleasantly in a tented quarantine hospital. In a wooded area well away from the main camp I was the only patient and looked after by two charming Canadian nurses. We lived in a series of bell tents with wooden floors. I remember it was my job to get down and scrub these out with soap and water.

At this time the weather was lovely. Under such ideal conditions I was sorry to be discharged and return to Bull Ring strenuous training. Soon in mid-October the weather broke and in November snow fell thickly making training and life in general very unpleasant.

The three of us joined a draft leaving at the end of November and reached the Arras sector after a bitterly cold train journey. It was good to be with the regiment again though nearly all in this reformed C Company were strangers to us.

\*\* Lieutenant P.R. Stapleton, MC. was killed in action in December 1917.

We had arrived in time for the brigade's taking over a sector of trenches in front of Arras and marched through the broken glass and debris of the heavily bombarded railway station on the 2nd December 1916, through the town's old cobbled streets with half-broken-down buildings on either side. The enemy was keeping up a desultory strafe from his heavy guns so we had to halt every now and then until the crash of shells amongst the houses abated for a spell. We reached our entrance to the cellar town at a kind of subway and from here went underground to comparative safety.

We were now in the spacious subterranean world or Arras hewn out of the rock and chalk many centuries ago and probably used in many of the old sieges during the constant European wars. Caverns and drives ran in several directions and it was said that one tunnel now blocked, ran under our own and the German trenches to a secret exit in a village to the East. Here we settled for a few days leading elf-like lives in this dark underworlds that had possibly sheltered Romans, English and Spaniards under similar circumstances in bygone wars. History records that Arras was the last of the chief towns of the Gallic peoples to surrender to Caesar. It was also the centre of the woollen industry from the 4th century until displaced by the English. The Spanish Treaty of Arras was signed here in 1579.

That night my platoon (No 11) slept in rows on the paved floor. Fires were made for it was bitterly cold and as these died down the rats came out in their hundreds. They were the largest imaginable, and quite unafraid. I could only sleep by covering my head completely for they ran over us all night. Several sat and scratched themselves on my blanket-covered face. My companion next to me woke in the middle of the night cursing and spitting. He had slept on his back snoring with his mouth open — a rat had slipped on its way across his face and put its foot in his mouth! It is reported he never snored again!!

We filed into the front line of trenches the next day and relieved a bantam regiment. As we squeezed past each other in the narrow space we heard many amusing comments in broad Yorkshire from these little broad-shouldered miners. I was just behind Gates, my six-and-a-half footer friend. A little bantam looked up at him admiringly and said 'By goom, soom soldiers'. The yarn was that if Jerry came over on a raid he could take one back under each arm! Actually they were very stout

fighters and besides had done splendid work in building up the trenches and digging deep well-equipped dugouts. The Arras trenches were the best and driest we had ever had to man. It was fortunate that we could take over such well-maintained trenches for the 1916/1917 winter was one of the severest for many years past. Now at least we had dry duck boards beneath our feet and solid trenches dug out of chalk and parapets that did not crumble when the snow thawed. December was a month of constant rain and snow. This was a fairly quiet sector and our relief passed off with only a few casualties. With trenches crowded with relieving troops quietness and secrecy are essential and not always easy with the opposing trenches within 75 yards. Had the enemy been alerted heavy shelling could have been disastrous.

Some of our first duties were improving our wire in no man's land, a most unpopular fatigue at night, for usually we were under the orders of cocky Royal Engineer corporals, besides risking a burst of fire at any moment from the Jerries nearby. Flares would be going up continually and not having snow suits at the time we had to get down quickly as they were fired and before the area around us was lit up.

Later when working in the snow and completely covered in white we were told to stand quite still. The idea being we would blend with the poles, wire stakes and snow round about. Much faith was needed when standing in the bright glare, that one was not in fact clearly visible to the man behind the gun in Jerries Lines. Personally, I never liked those tense moments of — 'To be or not to be'... or ever really trusted to the theory!

Our Company was the lucky one to be out of the front line for Christmas. We were the reserves for the occasion and spent a cheery day in a large roofless hall covered with tarpaulins. Both sides respected the day with quiet all along the trenches but without any fraternising of any kind as in 1914. We were back in the front line in time for New Year.

About this time I was selected for the job of company runner rather against my will, for I was loth to be separated from my pals. However, I made the best of it and benefitted by living in the driest dugout used by company headquarters and their staff.

The intense period of cold passed and we had our first experience of the troubles brought on by the thawing countryside. There was a continual

drip in the dugouts from the earth roof propped up by timbers, and in the trenches above, drainage troubles. The New Year of 1917 (my 21st birthday), was ushered in by slush above and wet discomfort below. Undoubtedly the bitter cold and wet was our greatest hardship. The months of December and January were spent by both sides coping with the effects of the weather, but as February approached more warlike thoughts seemed to prevail and we began to vie in 'frightfulness' slinging over trench mortars as well as the usual shell and machine gun fire and to liven matters up sending over raiding parties now and again to kill, but chiefly to capture prisoners for information. One weapon that Jerry used with devastating effect on our trenches and the morale of our troops were his *Minenwerfer* trench mortars. They were huge cylinder-like affairs filled with high explosive that were shot up almost silently to a great height and coming down vertically would fall with great accuracy into our narrow trench system. We would watch them going up and then at their apex try to determine in split seconds which way to run. They always seemed to be coming directly at one. It was quite easy to run right into the path of the missile. This in fact happened to one of the men in our company with fatal results.

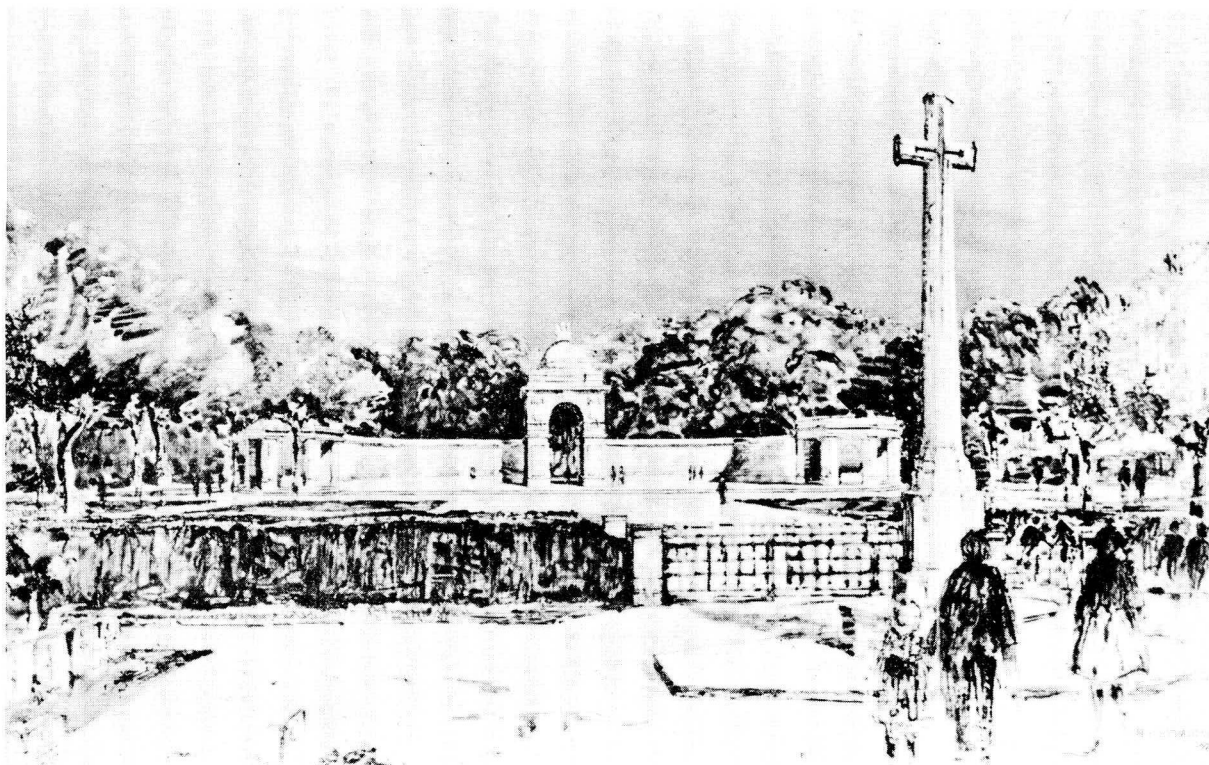
With the trench broken down for some distance Jerry would machine gun and snipe all movement. I was caught like this when taking a special midday report and had no option but to climb out and run over the top before getting back to cover on the far side of the blocked trench. Headquarters was always more windy in these cases when a heavy strafe was going on up front and needed reassembling.

My duties as company runner were to take reports back to regimental headquarters in Arras. Ordinarily I made two trips daily at 2 a.m. and 8 a.m. Both sides were tapping each other's telephone lines so that only limited use could be made of them even if the lines were not cut by artillery fire. Under these circumstances when pandemonium reigned up front word by runner was vital and the runner expendable. With the exception of a couple of mutual periods of hate when the terrific din seemed to indicate at least that the enemy was breaking through in strength, my days and nights were very quiet. In fact they gave me, at night especially, many hours of tranquility broken only by the occasional flare and the rattle of machine gun fire up front. I was also enabled to learn much about the many zigzagging communication trenches and the layout of the streets and squares of Arras.

One sunny morning in early March Jerry, with a somewhat perverted sense of humour decided to concentrate artillery fire on our Company latrine. I happened to be close by at the time when they suddenly opened up. They were bang on target, and caught our Company Commander literally with his pants down. He dived out of there in most unseemly haste not waiting for any niceties of clothing adjustment. Though as scared as he, the amusing sight sent me off in peals of laughter whilst he ran for cover followed by myself soon afterwards. I overheard his recount later how that young blighter Lawrence, cool as he could be, stood and laughed at him.

Of the many discomforts in the front line, fighting a losing battle with lice was probably one of the worst. Sheltering in dugouts that had been used over and over again by previous troops, we were bound very soon to find ourselves infected with these horribly irritating little pests. On our short periods of being out of the line in reserve we were marched off by companies to some big building where steaming water was poured by Madame into rows of big round half wine vats. Our underclothing was handed in and four of us to a tub would make good use of soap and hot water to remove two or three weeks' grime. Fresh steamed underclothing would be swapped for dirty ones. We had a hilarious time on this first bathing parade at Arras taking over the steamed vests and pants the bantams had handed in previously. The difficulty of fittings took much time and quantities of new larger-sized underclothing had to be drawn from quarter stores.

Even fresh clothes failed to solve our problems for the lively little chaps worked through to the outer clothing, bred in the seams, and started the cycle all over again. I once tried leaving my vest outside on a freezing night in the hopes of fixing them. Nothing doing, on warming up next to my skin, they revived and set to with whetted appetites. I believe Lord Roberts when asked for advice for his troops in the same difficulty on the long march to Pretoria said, 'Tell them to change shirts with each other'. A fever developed, thought to be caused by scratching in the excreta of the louse. There were a few cases of men going down suddenly with severe pains at the back of the thighs and a very high temperature. The daily list of casualties of our brigade in the line from enemy action was considerable and added to this were cases of trench feet and trench fever. In the three months of so-called static warfare in the Arras sector our casualties were 51 killed and 171 wounded.



The South African War Memorial, Delville Wood.

At the end of February as I made my way one morning along a communication trench I saw the unusual sight of a number of little sparrows chirping happily and I suddenly realized this must be Spring and felt a lightening of the heart in tune with the singing of the birds. The thought of Spring after the long and bitter winter seemed wonderful and then came the sobering thought that Spring meant a Spring offensive. Soon we heard that this was to be.

We were relieved early in March and moved to villages well back from the line for intensive battle training. It was good to be billeted in the usual well-strawed farm barns and to lead more civilised lives amongst the French people, away from the everpresent menace from *Minenwerfers* and sudden shell fire. Hardening up and intensive training started almost immediately. We were kept hard at it for the rest of March practising over ground conforming to photographed versions of the enemy positions we were scheduled to attack. By putting us so much more fully in the picture we became very keen and worked up tremendous enthusiasm for our part in the great battle ahead.

Towards the end of March bitter driving winds blew continuously. We became well aware of what

we had only thus far heard about, the 'March winds'. The cold seemed to blow through even the warmest clothing. It must have been in the first week of April that I suddenly developed all the symptoms of trench fever and became delirious with a temperature of 106°. I was taken by ambulance to our nearby South African Medical Corps' sick bay and very well cared for by a Corporal Godfrey for a few days before being sent to a fever hospital near the coast.

Meanwhile the battle I had trained for started on the 9th and continued until the 12th April 1917. The battle of Arras is recorded officially as an unsuccessful one in spite of the fairly deep penetration of the enemy lines and quantities of prisoners and guns taken. For us it resulted in heavy casualties and not much to show for it.

*'He's a cheery old card' grunted Harry to Jack as they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack. But he did for them both with his plan of attack.'*

Siegfried Sassoon.

After a month at the base hospital and rest camp I rejoined my regiment early in May at a village in the back areas close to where we had been before the Arras battle commenced. Now the brigade was out of the fighting line reorganising. I

had returned to the regiment at a difficult time when it was reforming and licking its wounds after a very hard-won and unrewarding battle when heavy losses of good men were being made up from drafts sent over from our training camps in England. In spite of our setback spirits were still amazingly high and all ranks full of confidence. Our casualties of all ranks in the brigade were just over 1 400 in the Arras battle.

It was at this time that our very gallant and saintly Chaplain, Father Eustace Hill, MC came back to us once more. He had had his right arm shattered by machine gun fire when helping stretcher bearers carry out the wounded close to the enemy lines. Conditions were so hot that bearers would no longer face the risk of almost certain death. Padre Hill insisted on them following him as he had done before at Delville Wood, reassuring them – ‘Stay with me, do your duty and you will be all right’. It had worked then and his bearers went backwards and forwards into the wood under impossible conditions and brought out the wounded. Some bearers were killed or wounded but others replaced them and carried on fully believing in him. At the Butte de Warlencourt he cajoled and pleaded with stretcher bearers to follow him saying ‘What is death? – do your duty and you will be all right’. Before agreeing one said ‘You are all right, Padre, *you* know where you are going, we don’t.’

This night when attending wounded close to Jerry’s wire the enemy opened up with dire results for the stretcher bearer party including Father Hill. Now after seven months in hospital he defied doctors and hospital orders and rolled up with a half healed arm and a hook in place of forearm and hand. Though still in obvious pain he was happy and keen to be with the boys and get on with his work. What a man? He was known, loved and admired throughout the 9th Division.

On one occasion a company was marching behind the line in sections of fours, well-spaced between sections for fear of artillery fire. They were spotted by enemy balloon observers and heavily shelled. The column was forced to carry on. Suddenly a heavy shell fell in the centre of one section and killed every man. The section behind blanched and hesitated before swerving to avoid the torn smoking remnants of their comrades. Everyone was shocked. Padre Hill’s voice rang out ‘Carry on, boys, carry on, their bodies are dead but their souls go marching on.’

Several of my friends had previously applied for an

officer’s training course in England and on passing had returned to France with commissions. Finding most of my friends either killed or in hospital when I returned to the regiment at Arras, I decided to do the same. Soon afterwards Captain Jenkins, then in hospital, wrote that he had recommended my application. This was endorsed by my then Company Commander, Captain H.S. Wakefield.\* I had put it out of my mind and was surprised when now in May I was called up for an interview by my Colonel and the Brigadier General. Having passed this hurdle, I was eventually sent for by Colonel Heal and offered a commission in the regiment.

That afternoon Sergeant Faulds, VC, Sergeant Eddy and myself paraded in front of Colonel Heal and were told of our promotion to commissioned rank. We were appointed to our various companies, myself to A Company, under Captain Reid. That night I slept in my barn strawed corner as a private of C Company for the last time. With a worsted star on the shoulder strap of my Privates’ tunic I reported to A Company headquarters the next morning, the 19th May 1917 as Second Lieutenant. Captain Reid was most kind and welcoming and went out of his way to make me feel at home in the mess.\*\*

The next afternoon Captain Reid proposed that we ride over to the Army Stores at St Pol to draw my kit. This meant getting horses from the transport officer, Captain Stuckey. Usually such requests were turned down in vigorous army terms and we approached him in some trepidation. However, he was very obliging and gave us two good horses and treated me most kindly. Off we rode in high spirits along country roads unspoiled by war. In fact all was peaceful with peasant farmers going about their work unconcernedly though still within hearing distance of the turmoil just over the near horizon. Our horses’ spirits were as high and unconcerned as our own and it was a joy to be riding and to feel the living movement of a good horse beneath one. I felt fortunate in being able to ride again with the confidence of many experiences of rough riding over veldt and desert.

At the Army Stores I was entitled as a newly fledged officer to draw £50 worth of uniform and kit. I was soon equipped with a Second Lieute-

\* Captain H.S. Wakefield was an officer in the Permanent Force. He later rose to the rank of Brigadier General and was Adjutant-General for many years.

\*\* Captain C.W. Reid, eventually joined the Royal Flying Corps and was captured in January 1918.

nant's uniform and spare slacks, Sam Browne belt, sleeping bag and .45 revolver and holster, plus other necessities, all delivered by army transport. I felt better in my uniform next day, in my metamorphosis from private to Second Lieutenant, and went about my duties with more confidence.

We were now in a period of training and reorganizing and life was pleasant and peaceful. Sports were organized; there was keen interest in various play-offs and to our delight the final match was won by the 1st Regiment. About this time Captain Reid, to the regret of us all in A Company, was transferred to the command of another company and his place was taken by a more senior Captain.

A number of us new subalterns were taken apart under the wing of our regimental Sergeant Major and tested and trained on a parade ground in voice control and the art of giving clear orders audible from a distance. I was fortunate and found my voice carried well. I soon picked up parade ground drill though being mostly close to the line it was seldom needed except for basic column of route marching. Once we took over the front line in July I was able to hold my own again in trench warfare and routine.

In the middle of July I was sent to what was known as a bullet bayonet course lasting ten days of intensive work. There were two of us junior officers, Second Lieutenant Connack and myself and 16 NCOs; we were all made to jump to it by a very nippy little sergeant instructor of bayonet fighting. The course toughened us up, taught us a great deal and gave us a feeling of confidence about meeting and disposing of any of the enemy in a hand to hand contest. The chief benefit was in increased morale.

On my return from this course I was a persistent plague to our company quartermaster for revolver ammunition. I made time after drill hours to practice shooting at bottles until I was satisfied I could hold my own with a Jerry coming round the corner of a trench or in a shoot-out in no man's land at night. Lieutenant Crooks and I became very friendly in spite of my run on his ammunition.

A company of our men returned to us in July dispirited and disturbed, from a task that should never have been given to fighting soldiers. The men had returned from burying the many thousands killed in the Somme battles in a number of enormous graves behind High Wood and Mametz Wood. Some sources estimate the number at 35 000.

Our men had to deal with the bodies of men in every stage of decomposition, take identity discs from every corpse, where possible, also any personal papers for recording in each case. This gruesome task went on for three weeks and dealt with South African, Allied and German soldiers. With deflated morale, these men, sick at heart and with the reek of death still in their nostrils, were to be called on not many weeks hence to go into one of the sternest of the Third Ypres battles. To go into battle with these memories would be disturbing to even the hardest.

It had been bad enough previously to advance into battle over the dead bodies of comrades we had known only days before. But this misuse of fighting troops was cruel and senseless.

With the returning men, tales were told of Padre Hill. Before covering up one of the huge graves filled with our dead, Padre Hill had with difficulty persuaded our men to attend a burial service for them. The service was to be held in spite of Fritz's balloons floating clearly over the lines and a certain amount of shelling on any concentration of troops. To make matters worse the Padre as usual invested himself with a white surplice visible from afar. The men, all on tenterhooks, stuck out the service in spite of a few searching shells and hastily dispersed at the last amen.

Not to be outdone, a chaplain of another denomination collected his men and held a similar service. However, this time Fritz had had enough and half way through the proceedings opened up in earnest. The parson well in the lead, dived down with his troops into the grave and took cover on the corpses below. There was great hilarity from the first congregation, by now well sheltered in points of vantage.

Towards the end of July the 9th Division was moved South and our brigade took over a section of the line at Trescault, north of Havrincourt Wood along the canal du Nord. This was a comparatively quiet sector though at times our line came in for some heavy shelling. We held these trenches until relieved for intensive battle training for the series of Third Ypres battles.

We were in the back areas again and from now on until we moved north to Ypres for our share in the great battle were working all out to fit ourselves for the task ahead.