9TH ROYAL SCOTS (T.F.)

B COMPANY

ON ACTIVE SERVICE

FEBRUARY—MAY 1915

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FROM A PRIVATE'S DIARY

FEBRUARY – MAY 1915

THIRD EDITION

EDINBURGH

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Part I

EDINBURGH – VOORMEZEELE

Part II

YPRES

SECTION I. - CALM

SECTION II. – STORM

Part I

EDINBURGH – VOORMEZEELE

FEB. 23 – MAR. 26

1. THE DEPARTURE. 23RD FEBRUARY 1915

IMAGINE it – seven o'clock on a February night, the snow lying lightly on the street, showing up the dark, cold stone of the surrounding "flats," and the central brightly-lit school; and, in the air as it were, the electric atmosphere of deep excitement. Dark figures of men move to a semblance of order, and around them hangs a thin circle of watchers. The glittering panoply of war is not here. Full packs – far too full – rifles, equipment, and the all-enveloping greatcoat take its place, its khaki making the mass dim and indistinct and rather huge. The tread of the men as they fall in is muffled in the snow, and the subduing thrill is the more felt. No ordinary parade this – "The battalion leaves to-night."

These words had been our réveillé call that morning. Weeks of disappointment, rumours galore, kit inspections, and, worst of all, false farewells had made us bitter. The always-never-going-battalion was the laughing-stock of Edinburgh! "Well, not away yet? When are you going now?" was the one greeting, and we were unutterably sick of the farce. On Sunday we had awaited the next day's orders

in some excitement, but, alas for our hopes! “Companies will parade at 9 A.M., proceed to the trenches and continue the work thereon.” “Continue the work thereon!” - we were sick, deadly sick, of the words, of the work, of the whole business. By Monday night our last hopes were blasted, and he who mentioned our possible going risked his life.

In the very early hours of next morning, as some of us were turning over, we heard the faint far-off notes of a bugle. “Why on earth are they playing réveillé in the middle of the night?” was our thought – and we slept again.

“Wake up, everyone, it's five o'clock, the battalion leaves tonight.” Thus an excited voice from the darkness. But the Ninth, even in its sleep, was sick of rumours, and half of “7” Platoon rose on its elbow, and a simultaneous yell of “Youf” chased the departing figure on his round.

Some minutes later a much-incensed corporal of the guard handed, in silence and injured dignity, a typed sheet to our sergeant in the corner; the magic words were read out again, and we awoke.

Of the orgy of scrubbing, the locked gates, the tense excitement, the final kit inspection, nothing need be said. Somehow the news spread, and in the grey of the winter's afternoon relatives and friends began to gather in little groups first outside and then in. As night came on and seven drew near, the excitement deepened, till the bugle came

to our relief – “The Campbells are coming, hurra, hurra. Fall! fall in!”

That last scene will never fade. Snowy streets and the dark night, the men lining across the street, sergeants flitting about, the officers standing quietly, everything subdued. Then the roll-call in whispered, quivering voices – the last! - and a moment's “at ease.” “All present, sir,” says the S.-M. quietly, a hush, and the well-known deep voice (a shade deeper perhaps) of the Captain in the well-known words but fraught with how much meaning! “'B' Company. 'Shun! slope arms, advance in fours from the right,” and our own officer's sharper voice “'7' Platoon, form fours, right, by the left, left wheel, quick march!”

And so we went through quiet streets, but increasing crowds. There was no band, no wild excitement, or hysterical farewell. The key-note was a quiet note of pride, a steady facing of the Unknown, relief that we were actually off, which softened at the time the “sadness of farewell” – all unemotional perhaps, but impressive.

2. THE JOURNEY TO HAVRE

We entrained quietly in Princes Street Station about eight, gave the first detachment a cheer as they steamed out, and left ourselves at nine, just after the third and last detachment marched in with two bands and great cheering.

Of the journey there is little to chronicle. We record gratefully the breakfast at Crewe – a meat sandwich, Melton Mowbray pie, and hot coffee – after which, cramped though we were, life seemed bright. The next excitement as we steamed through Central England in the spring sunshine was out destination. Rumour had it that we were to go to Winchester for divisional training, but that was knocked on the head when we steamed through the station. After that the possibility of Southampton became real to us, and it the door to France. That rather sobered us up, for it was sudden - but, sure enough, we were soon slipping down the docks.

Going abroad was as quiet as entraining – a few staff-officers, no spectators. It seemed as though we were in another world, shut off from friends and the civil population, set apart for a great task.

The transport was a large South American cargo boat, holding the whole battalion and some of the Coldstream Guards and the A.S.C. We moved out at sunset but lay to down the river. For some reason we did not cross that night, so we watched the arrival of hospital ships, and realised that that was the way not a few of us would return.

What a night that was! Miserably cold, miserably uncomfortable below (we were not allowed on deck), dawn was our only hope, as it was to be

in so many of the nights before us. Even the Lascars with their "tea-veree-hot" could not comfort us, for it was miserable stuff too.

But the day more than made up. Blue sky and bright sun and dancing waves; for our last day of peace and our last look at England, what could have been finer than Southampton Water that day? A hydroplane circling overhead roused us to admiration, another transport came out and lay to, a torpedo boat raced out in the open, but for the rest we ate and dozed, played bridge, or wandered in glorious ease and warmth. There was the inevitable roll-call and rifle inspection, of course, in the afternoon, then we settled down to the excitement of expectancy.

The evening light had faded, the hospital ships were brilliantly lit ere warning blasts proclaimed our going. The other transport with the 4th Black Watch went ahead, and we were ordered below.

The early hours found us under a headland with a great searchlight, looking at the faintly-lit coast of France, and with the growing light we slipped into Harve. Again no excitement; a few orders and we were down the gangway to the quay, where we had an impromptu breakfast from tins and biscuits we found stacked about. Would that all Channel crossings were so smooth and easy!

Midday found us marching through the streets of our first French town. Unfortunately we went through the poorer streets, and those whose first

continental town it was were not slow to voice their disappointment. The people too were by now accustomed to British troops, and the Ninth did not make such a stir as they had looked for! But at a halt in a narrow street we found the France of our imagination. A buxom dame, decolleté and smiling, appeared at a window level with the street. Seven Platoon halted opportunely right opposite, grew excited, and tried their French. It elicited more charming smiles but no conversation, and the face disappeared. A moment later the window opened wide and the charmer re-appeared with a glass and an outstretched arm! The prize fell to old man ---, familiarly known as "Daddy," a connoisseur in drinks. Anxiously watched, he drank it at a gulp, smacked his lips, and – the rush began! Probably the belle dame was glad when the short halt came to an end, but she had saved the fair name of France! The weather also met with unqualified approval, till we started to climb from the sea front to a camp above the town. February though it was, it might have been early summer. We were in "full marching order *with* blankets," and how we sweated!

That camp gave us our first and last experience of the Y.M.C.A., and our first and last night under canvas. The Y.M.C.A. we flocked to and blessed, and thought it a nice war! A few days later, when we arrived at a muddy camp in Flanders, our first

question of a Regular was, “Is there a Y.M.C.A. here?” - to be answered only by a pitying look. A day or two afterwards when shells were bursting in the fields around, we understood, but it *would* have been a godsend!

3. FROM HAVRE TO THE FRONT

Next morning we wound down the hill again to Havre, getting a better glimpse of the town although it was a grey morning. We went to the station, lined up on the low platform, and were shown our seats by the sergeants. To all who know the Continent the long vans with small barred windows and the thought-provoking inscription “Horses (broadways), 8; men, 36,” are familiar. The Ninth gazed fascinated – 36 to a horse-box! The war had begun!

A touch of humour helped us. We were “dished out” with sheepskin coats, commonly called “furries,” of varied hue, and comic figures strolled the platform. Here, too, we heard first the Franco-Belgian woman's war-cry, “Chocolat, good price for English soldiers.” We agreed – at a price.

After a great deal of undecided bustle, serving out of rations for twenty-four hours, and the inevitable order to clean-up (for which reason some of the more unfortunate hunted the dirty platform and underneath trucks for infinitesimal scraps of

orange-peel and wayward paper, hiding them again where we hoped the Colonel's eye would not reach), we entrained. The French engine gave its funny squeak, the guard blew his bugle, a jolt, then more jolts, and we were really off. We started about eleven, we detrained after ten the next morning – roughly, twenty-four hours with thirty-six to a horse-box.

That journey takes precedence even of the first night on the transport, and remains unforgetable. As the short winter afternoon passed and we settled for the night on the straw before it got too dark, it seemed like a gigantic puzzle. Legs had to be fitted to opposite chests, bodies curved to make the most of corners. Legs underneath a criss-cross clump had to be violently released for cramp and a new clump made, unquiet sleepers had to be sternly dealt with, endless arguments that fifteen at one end had the same floor space as eleven at the other, accusations and reproaches, endless turning, twisting, and writhing, and the long night passed. Even Sergeant Ellis – the "Sairgint," as we affectionately knew him – gave it up in despair, and, ensconced in his own little niche by the door, left his flock to grin and groan and dispute as they pleased. Which we did. Crabs in a barrel on their long ride to London must go through the same, but with no hope from the dawn.

In the late afternoon we had passed Rouen, the first indication of where we were. For the rest,

we passed innumerable small stations, none of which gave any clue. We stopped at one for coffee; when it came it was so drenched with cognac as to be unpalatable to most, but the short stop was a relief, and on we creaked and jolted into the night. It is possible some slept; to most it was a nightmare.

A fresh spring morning cheered us; wash we could not, but we got our heads to the grated windows and sniffed the air. Sunday morning.

The outskirts of Calais were spotted, and with the sergeant's map we were able to follow our most devious route to St Omer and Hazebrouck. About here we saw an aeroplane up – to some, at least, their very first. None to whom we shouted, whether our would-be linguist (with a reputation more solid as a Rugby three-quarter than as a French scholar), with his "où êtes-nous, monsieur?" or in plain English, would or could tell us where we were going, so on we went completely mystified, but knowing that we must be getting very near "the front." Edinburgh and our leave-taking on Tuesday night seemed very far off.

With a final creak and groan the train drew up at Cassel, a small country station, and we emerged thankfully from our boxes. We breakfasted on the platform – biscuits, butter, and cheese, with tea – sorted our gear, and set off on the march about noon.

Our first days were marked by experiences - the

first night on the transport, the march to Harve camp, the railway journey, and now this march. We covered about twelve miles, mostly on paved, rather straight Belgian roads, with which we were to become so familiar, and it was an unusually warm day. None of us had had much sleep, and we were dreadfully overburdened. To the usual full pack and greatcoat had now been added blankets and furries – the last especially being a nuisance.

It was a "trying march," but as the sun set we came to the transport-crowded street of L'Abeele, whither we had heard that our advance party had gone, and when the "Halt" came we heaved a deep sigh of relief. After all, it was over and we had not fallen out. Scarcely had we got off our packs when Lieutenant Urquhart came down the line – "Fall in, 7 Platoon, your billets are a mile farther on!" Our feelings can be imagined.

As we swung round the corner we greeted Colonel Clark of the 9th Argylls with a cheer, standing watching his old corps march by. Then we set our teeth to that last mile.

4. OUR FIRST BILLET. MARCH 1- 6

We finally halted in a sea of mud, once a field, and then filed in to the courtyard of a Belgian farm, whose buildings stood on three sides of a small square, with its muck-heap and duck-pond in

the middle. Everything was indescribably muddy, but once we were shown the barn full of hay we were too tired to think of anything else. Here, as always, our officers, tired as they too were, saw to our comfort first, and bore with our weariness. Then we "dossed down," and, oh! the bliss of it. The first of a memorable series of Sundays was over.

Some of us slipped out later into the quiet star-lit night, heard the far-off rumble of guns, and the faint reflection of star-shells, and turned in again with graver thoughts.

We stayed in that barn from Monday to Saturday. Early morning found us rushing for basins and hot water in the farm kitchen, or for space on the stove in the living-room to cook some extra. The farm people must have found the invasion of kilted warriors an unmitigated nuisance, but their comments, if any, were made in guttural Vlaamsch, which no one understood. There we saw the huge family pot, seemingly always on the fire, full of vegetable stew (mostly potatoes), which, with black bread and coffee, seemed the staple dish of the stolid, hard-featured peasants of the farm. They made money off us, of course, by selling beer, coffee, and eggs. The British soldier is a wealthy man and fair prey.

Each morning we lugged boxes of rations over the muddy fields from Headquarters, not without disasters. Thin waterproof sheets were dished out

to become our faithful companions in many wet resting-place and trench. Parades for rifle-inspection (and rifle-cleaning was "some" job in that land of mud) and physical drill were varied one morning by a General's inspection at the roadside, and another by a most illuminating lecture by Lieut. Norman Young of the 1st Royal Scots (of whose death later we heard with sorrow) on getting in and out of trenches, and tips for trench life; and at night we practised it - a rather amusing game.

Parading after dark we stole through hedges and over (sometimes) ditches and across muddy fields in single file to an appointed spot. At intervals the officer in charge fired his revolver in lieu of a star-shell, and down we flopped, hoping for a dry spot, as often as not on top of the man in front, in silent convulsions of laughter. The distant horizon was lit with star-shells and audible with guns where the real thing was going on, while we played the game like children "pretending," and marched back, hugely amused, to our rum-ration and our straw. Hose-tops, kilt, and greatcoat took on the prevailing mud of the country, but we suffered no ill effects from our wettings, though our rifles took cleaning next day.

But the afternoons were the best time, when we strolled to the near village of Boesheppe (which, of course, we re-christened Bo-peep) and took our ease in some cosy estaminet round the stove, with coffee and a round loaf and some ration jam: or tried our

hand at shopping - bread always, eggs and sugar, candles, and maybe a bottle of red wine for a later bean feast in our corner of the barn. It was all very pleasant and knit the company together (in small groups, it is true) into closer comradeship, soon to be tried.

One night our first mail came in, worthy of chronicle for the feelings it stirred. Probably not one of us but was moved as we read in the dim lamp-lit barn those anxious queries and assurances from home and thought of the difference now. We "got down to it" more silently than our wont that night.

Rumour had it that "A" Company were to move on Saturday for "somewhere," but as we lazed after breakfast the order came round, "Be ready to move at twelve, full marching order," and at twelve "B" Company moved off, and so took precedence of the battalion in going under fire, as it turned out. It was a drizzling day, and we marched by devious routes through Westoutre and Reninghelst (places afterwards familiar) in a sodden and depressing land. With all the weight of our equipment the few miles we went seemed long, and we were weary ere we turned off the road to a small clump of trees. The path was muddy, the wood itself was dreadfully so, and for our billets we saw gipsy-looking, tarpaulin-covered huts in a sea of mud. Inside was even less inviting, wet and dirty straw over a wet and muddy floor, and we were crowded in at the rate of twenty to a hut.

The orderlies who went up for tea that night had a bad time. In the dark they stumbled up to the ankle and over in watery mud, losing their way in the maze of the wood, into ditches and against stumps with the heavy dixies in their hands, and their report made us still more cheerless. We lay down in our clothes and slept somehow, dreaming of our barn. And this was our home for eighteen days.

5. THE MUD-HOVEL AT DICKIEBUSCH MARCH 6 – 23

From this time we became night-prowlers. The very night of our arrival the officers and sergeants had gone up to the trenches for instruction, and we followed the next night (Sunday) and had our first uneasy experience of bullets flying over and about us. Every night thereafter we were out on these "fatigues" (and they fully justified their name) working to the wee small hours. In three parts of the line between Voormezeele and St Eloi we dug trenches, filled sand-bags, put up barbed wire, and each place was hotter than the last. Some nights we stood in water putting in barbed wire; others we dug in sopping trenches. One night we filled sand-bags when the snow lay on the ground, making the whole scene ghostly. Our first casualty came on the fourth night – the first war-casualty of the Ninth – and, after the spell was broken, scarcely a night passed without one.

Luckily our first casualty was slight, and we were broken in gently. We were digging a trench, and the man had put down his spade (probably fed up, for it was wet), and a moment later felt a whack high up on his leg. “Who hit me, you blighters?” and he turned wrathfully to smite the joker. Nor was he convinced till he felt the blood trickling down and the tiny hole, and straightaway became the hero of the night. The rest of us found this first shock pass easily, and very soon we were wishing we might be as lucky. “Oh, for a cushy wound!” - how often we said it, half in jest and half in earnest, and discussed with care in our slack moments just where we would like it to be.

On the fifth day “A” Company joined us, and the next day the battalion arrived, and our forest camp became full. The weather, which had been grey and cheerless, grew milder, and the mud began to dry quickly. We learned the art of brazier fires, and had many a cheery meal. We found our way to a farmhouse, where we got a respectable wash, hot coffee, and beer, though at exorbitant prices. But strolls to the village, a mile away, and cosy afternoon teas were now banned, and we were cooped up to our mud-dwellings. Especially coming back in the early hours of the morning, when we stumbled along the muddy paths and dropped on our evil-smelling straw, we found our hovel cheerless, and the thought of it added depression to our fatigue on the weary way home.

After a full week of nights we had a change – without a rest. It was Sunday again, the 14th, a peaceful day till five P.M., when heavy gun-fire opened and shells began to burst over Dickiebusch and in the fields near us. We watched, fascinated, but that soon gave place to excitement when "Parade at once, full marching order!" was shouted, and forty-eight hours' rations were dished out. As we lined up in the early darkness the night was lit by the gun-flashes, and the rifle-fire crackled unceasingly. But we were dismissed to "Stand by, ready to move at a moment's notice," and spent an uneasy night in our full equipment, with the distant roar of artillery to disturb our dreams. There were other disturbers too. In prospect of a hurried march our packs were ordered to be stacked in one hut, and the inmates prepared to sleep, if they could, on top of the pile. But after the first excitement passed we feared that the rest would be anxious to get back their packs to rout out hurriedly packed tit-bits wherewith to make the long night less cheerless. So we took counsel to keep out all comers, for, if one got his, there would be no more peace for us. Sure enough it was not long before a knock came, and there entered a corporal, very humble and apologetic. "I say, you chaps, would you mind? I packed a little keepsake in the rush, and in case (quaveringly) anything happens, you know, I'd like to have it with me." Not often did we have a mighty

corporal at our mercy, and we found his pathos rather ludicrous; but harden our hearts we could not. And for the next half hour we only held the rest at bay by violence and vituperation. So much for sentiment. We were all keyed up that night and strained, but, like Scotsmen, we hid it, and found the corporal amusing.

In the morning there were many rumours, but nothing happened, save that "C" Company, who had been in the trenches and had to stay an extra day, had an exciting experience and suffered their first loss. Not till some days later, when we got home papers, did we know of the German attack on the mound at St Eloi.

By this time we had joined the ___ Brigade, an almost Scots Brigade with four kilted battalions, and became part of the ___ Division. After the battalion came up, companies began to go into the trenches for twenty-four hours' experience. "B" Company's turn came on the fifteenth. After long waiting on the way, we finally went in with a double and a scramble, not at all as we had practised it at L'Abeele!

During one of the waits we had our first taste of shell-fire. We were all very jumpy, with a tendency to give at the knees when a bullet whipped past more near than its fellows; for remember we were completely in ignorance of how near we were to the fire-zone or what the intervening country was like, as it was quite dark. Then out of the night sky

came a rush and a roar, a double crash and a flash of flame, and the line of dark figures in the road quivered and broke. Some dropped with a clatter, and from one a groan: "Oh! I am hit – oh-h!" We were very raw; we gazed awestruck at the prostate figure, not one felt for his field-dressing, till finally the figure got up and looked fearfully about him. We gathered round, and very shamefacedly poor Cocky decided that the lump on his forehead was not a shell-wound but only the result of the nose of his rifle swinging round in his precipitate fall. As a matter of fact, the two shells had burst three-quarters of a mile away!

After we had realised that the floor of the trench was deep in water, and that it was therefore wise to make sure of walking on the boards, one's first impression was smell. Wet, slimy, stinking mud rose up to meet us on all sides, and we wondered how we were to endure for twenty-four hours. Later reflections were not much better; it was a perfect moonlight night, the embodiment of peace, but rifles were crackling, bullets zipping none too far away, while star-shells lit up with ghastly glare the dead cold mud of No Man's Land, such a land of lost souls as Dante might have visioned.

Dawn showed us our surroundings. Everything was gruesome, from the dank field topped with yellow scum, the rotting cattle, and the roofless farm, to the snipers' bullets at the rising smoke of

our fires, and the two-day-old grave at the back of the trench. We were very cramped, but the day passed quietly, and we were relieved punctually at 9.30. We got safely out, a little more circumspectly than we came in, and once out of danger had an unusually cheery march home. In "7" Platoon, at least, there were no casualties.

But the trenches were a mere episode in the story of fatigues. It is fatigues we associate with our stay in the mud-camp, and, the last night was the worst of all. We paraded early to the 'Bus-house trenches near St Eloi, and, on promise of a stop when finished, put up barbed wire at a record pace, with the star-shells more frequent and the bullets closer and more incessant than ever before. And, after eleven, when we looked with just pride on our finished line of entanglement, we were told – not by our own officers – that it was too early to go back, and were sent to give help at another point. We pottered about and frankly slacked in the chilly night till 2 A.M., when the welcome whisper "Fall in" came. Though we did not know it, it was our last fatigue at St Eloi, our last march on the open bullet-cracking road, our last look at the village that was Voormezeele, our last heart-breaking stagger down the long straight road to Dickiebusch, our last night in the mud-hovel.[1]

[1] See Appendix, p. 83, 1st Letter.

6. VOORMEZEELE

Voormezeele and the Voormezeele road were so much the centre of the experiences of those eighteen nights that they deserve fuller mention in such a chronicle. Parading nightly between five and six, we marched three-quarters of a mile to the "R.E." Park. There, after a longer or shorter wait, we got loaded up, two shovels apiece, coils of barbed wire, wooden posts and heavy malls. Then through Dickiebusch, whose street at night was in constant turmoil. Battalions moving up to the trenches, others on fatigues like ourselves, motor cars and heavy transports, all were on the move. We followed the street, and out the straight, paved road between the tall straight trees, turned to the right after a mile on to a more exposed road, whose surface began to be indented with shell-holes, past a ruined cluster of houses with an evil odour, and on through hedges till the roofless ruins of Voormezeele appeared.

About now the first bullets wheezed over us. At the beginning of the village was a side road to the left, and in the angle in the field row upon row of wooden crosses, the first of many such that we were to know. Down the damaged street we went between rows of battered, desolate houses, past the shattered church and the tree-encircled pond, where the bullets sometimes sparked on the road before

us; on through this village of desolation in fitting silence we passed to the country road beyond. Here bullets cracked more menacingly, and how we dreaded the message, "Pass the word for the stretcher-bearers; man hit in front."

Just past a derelict London 'bus at the roadside we turned into the fields, and arrived at our working place; it was better. There was work, and plenty of it, and digging meant cover. Barbed wiring was nastier, especially when bullets hit the wires and ground close by. But our long nights hardened us, and the darkness taught us the absurdity of trying to dodge bullets. So we learned that dull fatalism which does duty for courage in such unheroic work required by modern war.

But it was the walk back that made the name Voormezeele an unhappy memory. By 2 A.M. we were beat, whatever we had been doing, and there was still the long march "home." Particularly the last straight mile to Dickiebusch, our feet aching on the hard stone, our bodies full of fatigue, with that interminable line of maddeningly regular tree, it *nearly* broke us.

As we stumbled into our cheerless mud-hovel of a camp (in itself no small cause of our depression) we lined up for rum. Rum may be bad in principle, but at 3.30 A.M., after nine hours' continuous "fatigue," sodden, wearied wretches like ourselves may be forgiven for imbibing. For it gave us sleep till the sun was high and life seemed brighter.

Voormezeele was our first introduction to the tragedy of Belgium, and made an ineffaceable impression. Soon, however, we were to see the same tragedy acted through on a large scale and on historic ground.

The evening after our last fatigue party, the battalion marched to beyond Westoutre, and we billeted again in barns. Two clear days of rest we got, and our first bath – in a brewery at Reninghelst - and at 4 A.M. on the 26th we set off again for a fresh scene. Our introduction to war was over, mud and fatigues its chief memories, and a grave or two to steel our hearts.

(See Appendix, p. 86, 2nd Letter.)

Part II

YPRES

SECTION I. - CALM. MARCH 26 – APRIL 22.

SECTION II. - STORM. APRIL 22 – 27.

SECTION III. - SANCTUARY WOOD AND THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES. APRIL 28 – MAY 27.

INTRODUCTION

At noon on March 26, a bright spring day, the Ninth halted in the square at Ypres. So sudden had been the change, and so unexpected, that we barely realised where we were – standing in the shadow of the world-famous ruins of the Cloth Hall and the Cathedral Church of St Martin, in the broad, paved square of the old-world historic town, for whose possession the fiercest, fatefullest struggle of the war had been waged. The very name seemed romantic, and it stood to us for the barring of the road to Calais, the final baulking of German plans, and one of the most heroic feats of all British story. Were we to stand in the place of that thin, oh! so thin, line of heroes who fell and died, but held the ground in the shortening days and chilling nights of October against all the might of Prussia? Ypres in her ruined majesty bequeathed that inheritance of pride and dour unconquerability to us too, and in the tragic weeks that came we never forgot. If ever the soul of a town lived on indomitable and enthralling, if ever the spell of tragedy and victory fell on the spirits of men, nerving them, that happened at Ypres.

The dead had not died nor Ypres suffered in vain, for we who came after were inspired.

From March 26 to the fateful evening of April 22 were days of calm. Life in Ypres followed life in the trenches, in dug-outs, and on rest, in ordered succession, made up a peaceful tale over which not much time need be spent.

On the night of April 22 the storm burst, as all the world knows, and the Ninth went to support the Canadians. Not till thirty days later, on the night of May 22, were we at last relieved from the trenches, and marched for the last time through Ypres to "rest." It was only a remnant who came back, but Ypres was dead.

After one more dire experience we finally left the district on the 28th and shifted to another – "healthier" – part of the line, and a great chapter in our history (perhaps the greatest, who knows?) ended. For those who went through it Ypres will be for ever a name of memories, not all sad, not all terrible, but haunting, soul-stirring, full of pathos as befits the tragedy of her passing; whose like pray God, we or others may never see again.

I. CALM. MARCH 26 – APRIL 22

1. DAYS OF PEACE. MARCH 26 – APRIL 3

The march to Ypres in itself was of good omen. To us confirmed night-prowlers on the horrid Voormezeele road it was a new experience to march at ease in the fresh spring morning. The very country seemed fairer (or less muddy!), and we could *see* and revel in it. The sunshine and the release from haunting fears were alike pleasant.

Coming near Vlamertinghe we saw, on the right of the road, the lines of black huts, afterwards to be our rest camp when relieved from the trenches. The Liverpool Scottish, old Rugby rivals, were there, and at a welcome halt we swopped yarns, and were told of what was before us. Ypres and fatigues summed it up, but anticipation of the former was strongest as we marched on through the village to a fine stretch of macadam, and after a mile or two saw the first houses of Ypres.

We were billeted in the town, and to the lot of "A" and "B" Companies fell the Convent of Irish Benedictine Nuns, which had been vacated by French troops. Our first job was to clear the little wood-partitioned cubicles of dirty straw, and generally

clean up. Cubicles were portioned off, one to three men, and we got off our superfluous gear. Then we all started on a tour of inspection, which degenerated for most into a hunt for souvenirs. What we expected to do with them none of us probably thought as we ransacked the bare attic rooms into which the Sisters had evidently gathered everything in great haste. One brought back in triumph a branching brass candlestick, another a crucifix and a small image of the Madonna, still another a small painting which he fondly imagined *might* be an old Master – the most impossible things were secreted in packs to be quietly got rid of when we realised the folly of it. One or two lingered longer over the papers and ledgers strewn about the floor; the daily housekeeping of seventy or eighty years ago written in a clear, fine old-world hand touched us to the quick. What a peaceful, sequestered life – what an awakening and an end! At first there was a sort of awed feeling at being in a convent and among scattered relics of Roman Catholic worship, a life most of us had known of dimly, but now we were brought face to face with the reality, and we thought wonderingly of the schoolgirls and nuns who had lived their quiet life within these very walls. It taught us something of the convulsion into which Belgium had been thrown.

But how comfortable we were! a sacrilegious horde of kilted heretics! The days we lay within the high-walled garden in the sun; the afternoon

teas we gave when some of us "struck it lucky" with parcels; the cosy sleeps close together with shared blankets in the wooden floor of our little cubicles – what days of content and comradeship those were! Even the fatigues – and we were out every night nearly – we had a slack time. The fatigues were properly worked, in two shifts, from eight to twelve, twelve to four, and we dug near the town. There was none of the dreadful fatigue of the long nine-hour stretches at Voormezeele, and, if anything, we worked harder knowing relief was sure after four hours. And there were no bullets and no shells at all, only the far-off lights and crackle and grumble. "Fatigues at Ypres are rather a picnic" was our unanimous decision.

We slept or lazed in the forenoon, and in the afternoon we strolled in the town and its outskirts, walks by the canal, omelette and chip "teas," shopping, patisserie-tasting, lace-buying, exploring the Cloth Hall ruins – all these we found time for in glorious weather. Some of us made ourselves at home in the kitchen of an estaminet, amidst an admiring Belgian family who were vastly entertained, and gave us welcome washing facilities as well as the ordered meals. One of the most at home and popular was a corporal, who got on something as follows: -

Schoolgirl of the family (on his entering): "Good morning, sir."

Corporal: “Mornin’, ma bonnie lassie, and how are ye the day? Bon, eh? and how’s a’ the faimily?” (To Father entering) “Bon jour, Monsour. Fine day.”

Father (very expressive): “You – wash?”

Corporal: “Oh, ay, we'd better hae a wash, auld man, and a shave tae. Hae ye got a glass? Mine’s broken. (Father looks puzzled.) D’ye no ken what a glass is. It's like this” (goes through the motions of shaving, and the Father dashes off).

Corporal: “Compris, eh? Oui, oui, Monsour, thank’ee.” (Sits down to shave, with family grouped admiringly round.)

Schoolgirl (the inevitable remark): “German soldiers no good, English very good.”

Corporal: “That’s ma bonnie wee lassie. Can ye no say Scotch soldiers very good? English yins canna wear the kilt like us” (twirls it amid spell-bound admiration).

Father (coming forward with frying pan): “You – eat?”

Corporal: “Oh, ay, shairly. A man maun aye eat. I'll hae twa biled eggs – eggs – biled – in there (points) – *twa* (holds up two fingers). Compris? And chips – frites, ay – and bread and café. That’ll dae fine for a tightener!”

Very homely and pleasant it all was. Little wonder that Ypres took fast hold of our affections, and we thought much of the little gay town in which we had our happiest days since leaving home.

For it was gay and full of people, the market square lined with booths on one side in front of the larger shops, though in the back streets one came on scars – shell-torn roofs and battered houses. And the Cloth Hall was over all, a gaunt and empty ruin, but every chipped and battered stone eloquent, and its pinnacles still proudly cutting the sky.

2. DUG-OUTS, TRENCHES, AND REST

April 4 -8. Dug-outs in Sanctuary Wood

Our time at Ypres was too good to last. We had nine days of it, only broken on the last night by a fatigue of the old sort due to a wet night, and losing the way. But the next day, Sunday the 4th, orders for moving came, and we packed up and made our cubicles bare and tidy. Loath to leave them we were, like many another former inmate, for we too went from peace to a world of storm.

That Sunday night, as we stood silently in the great square waiting for the word to move, whither we knew not, someone started softly the twenty-third Psalm, and we all joined in. That singing will remain in our memories so long as we remember the market-square of Ypres, with the tragic ruins shining darkly in the veiled moonlight.

Midnight found us ensconced for the first time in dug-outs, like rabbits in a warren (having relieved a French battalion). The carrying party in the

rear got lost, and wandered about in soaking fields, with shoulders aching under heavy boxes or tins, till they were found at 2 A.M., with vocabularies used up and "fed to the teeth."

Daylight, grey and drizzling though it was, showed us our position. We were lying on the edge of a large wood, known to us as Sanctuary Wood, a hundred yards or more west from the main Ypres-Menin road. The ruined village of Hooge lay by the road, and looking back through the straight lines of trees we could see the pinnacles and spires of Ypres, some four miles in our rear. Later in the day we explored the village of Hooge and its chateau – a heap of stones overlooking the Bellewarde Wood and Lake – around which were dug-outs still held by the French. Even from the ruins we could construct a scene of great loveliness. Such was the position of which we were soon to know every inch, in and near which we were to stand our greatest testing, the ground which we were to hold at heavy cost through many a dark day, a corner of Belgium with which we forever link ourselves. For that broad, straight Menin road on our left was the Germans' door to Ypres – and beyond.

We stayed four days, during which we learned the art of living underground. Usually about eight men were in a dug-out, and with fires allowed, a store of candles, parcels from home, and good comrades, it is an existence not to be despised.

The day began with the mail (ever first in our thoughts), and there was always one of us willing to stir himself from our close-packed warmth to get the letters. Then came the call, "Section commanders for rations," and we gladly poked up our superior to go and do his duty.

When he returned, arms full with the day's supplies – four hard biscuits each and a tin of bully, pot of jam between four, a slab of cheese, or, if we were lucky, a tin of butter between the lot, and bread and a Maconochie[1] or some packets of pea-soup – we considered seriously the question of the fire-lighting and breakfast. Orderlies for tea was the next call, and when it arrived in steaming dixies we settled down to business. We ate, sitting back up to the mud wall, all in a row, and passed up the shares of bread or the tin of jam from hand to hand. The dug-out was long and narrow and low and dark. To move we had to crawl on hands and knees, over everyone else's feet. In the half-light which filtered in it was more like an Arctic Expedition, for we sat with our greatcoats over us and, with our woolly sleeping helmets still on, looked bleary.

To be pleasant, of course, it depended entirely on the quality of comradeship shown by each. Even a wet floor or a leaky roof was less important. Men paired off, sharing supplies and dividing labour, and lucky the man who paired with a good cook.

[1] Excellent tinned stew with vegetables, a very pleasant change from bully beef.

It was at tea that we did most of our cooking – tea, and at night. Tea in the Army is an apology meal – tea and little else. By late afternoon the pairs would have decided what luxury their parcels allowed of, and the cook squatted at the little brazier fire (which we managed to beg, borrow, or steal), and the odour of ham and such filled the dug-out. Or they opened a tine (sardines usually) and luxuriated with tea from tea tabloids and a tin of Nestle's and maybe some shortbread. It was the meal before rest ended and the night of work began – horrid, uncertain night, with the bullets in the trees. After it we lay all ready, smoking the pipe of ease as the light failed in the dug-out, chatting and arguing as good comrades; that hour before "fall in" was surely given over to the goddess of friendship. Till at last "the Sairgint's" cheery voice came at the door, "All ready, boys? Come on, then." And we crawled out one by one from our burrow, as the wild beasts do whose day is night.

And at nights what brews we had when we came in tired and weary, often wet, and the dug-out seemed like a cosy home. It was a bad day when not one had a bit of candle and we managed somehow to get a fire, and soon the mess-tins were boiling merrily, and we sat with hunched-up knees comparing notes of the night's job and discussing our drink – tea, café-au-lait, soup, or oxo, with bully beef sliced in and hard biscuit floating on

top. How good they tasted, and how often we wished our anxious home-people could realise what intervals of comfort and good cheer we had.

At night we went on “ration parties,” a new form of night-fatigue, meeting our transport at an appointed spot behind Hooge – “the dumping station” – and staggering back under boxes of bully beef and tins of biscuits, which job in the darkness tried our tempers more than a little. Ration parties were now part of our nightly routine, and the thought of the mail which came with it helped to lighten our loads.

In front of our wood was a ridge (afterwards to be the enemy’s position) with a white chateau conspicuous on it. Near by was a guard post, at which some of us were unfortunate enough to spend a night in that choice misery peculiar to sleeping in the rain under a badly-leaking roof.

Otherwise, the four days passed with few excitements and fewer casualties, for the bullets that came at night were mostly high and the occasional shell was wide, probably aimed at a cunningly concealed battery of French 75’s near us, with the sound of whose bark we now became familiar. But on the seventh we heard of the calamity that had befallen “D” Company, shelled in their billet at Ypres at breakfast-time with heavy loss. Next night we moved again, a mile north-east of the road, to new dug-outs, this time in direct support of the first trenches into which “C” and “D” moved the next night.

April 8 – 10, 16 – 18. *Dug-outs in Glencorse Wood*

Our new dug-outs were also in a wood – rejoicing in the familiar name of Glencorse – sloping from the firing line and facing the little hamlet of Westhoek, half a mile away, which was our dumping station. Both our dug-outs and life in general were much as before, only we kept closer to cover through the day, and were more careful of the smoke of our fires, for once or twice an aeroplane with the Black Eagle on its wings passed over us. At night, too, the parties divided, some to the dumping station for rations and some to the trenches with materials or for digging, while the companies in the trenches sent out their own ration-seekers. The weather all this time was coldish, but bright through the day, when life was a pleasant picnic.

3. DUG-OUTS, TRENCHES, AND REST: TRENCH 71

April 10 – 12, 19 - 20. *Trench* 71

Two nights later came the word to go to the trenches to relieve “C” and “D.”

From the edge of the wood to the trenches lay some three hundred yards of open mud-land, in places cross-cut with abandoned trenches waist full

at the least with water, but otherwise easy going though open. This time we went in more correctly at a slow walk, with heads down, halting dead as the star-shells flared, and trying to look inanimate, though we felt like travelling camels with a pack, a bundle of firewood perhaps, or a parcel and a brazier, or some such comfort on our backs – and all in utter silence.

Silence was the atmosphere of all our night-work. Silence and solitude, for there is no loneliness like that felt going under fire at night. Though one could touch one's pal in front, and the man behind followed on one's heels, once the bullets flew one was shut off from all the world – oneself, a bullet and God the only *real* things in the great world-emptiness of the night. Life and death were in the balance for each of us; and in peace and war alike man must needs walk the Valley of the Shadow alone. Life was more appreciated as death loomed near, but death itself seemed easier as we faced it squarely in the dark. So we moved over the open to the trenches, in a quick thrill of excitement, alert for star-shells, fearful lest any of our superfluous gear should rattle or come loose, yet each alone in the world of his own thoughts.

Safely in we settled down to wait for light to see our home and surroundings for forty-eight hours. We found ourselves part of a long line of breastwork trenches, of which "7" Platoon's was numbered 71. Trench 71 became a name

of happy memories to us all. Two visits of forty-eight hours we made to it, improving it each time, and in neither did we suffer a casualty. By day, after the chill of dawn passed, we cooked and read our mail, slept, wrote letters, or did one hour's sentry-go in complete peace and delightful weather. Few shots were fired on either side; their trenches were at least 200 yards away, and we let sleeping dogs lie; even through periscopes we hardly ever saw a movement. At night we went on ration-parties across the open, which we came to regard as safe – with care – or worked at trench-improving in the intervals of sentry-go. Behind the trench shallow pits were formed, where we dug earth for sand-bags, and these being found safe were used for siestas or tea-parties. Aeroplanes in the clear blue were idly watched, especially when shelled, and they soared triumphant with a trail of white puffs of smoke. Shells were most infrequent, and never very near. If trench life could ever be idyllic, Trench 71, on those bright April days, would have been. The only discomforts (once the wet places were boarded or dried) were the chilly hours from 1 to 3 A.M., and the cramped sleeping-places in the back of the trench. But so long as we got plenty of food, plenty charcoal, plenty letters and parcels, and the enemy kept quiet, we were quite pleased.

After the general retiral on May 3rd, Trench 71 passed into German hands, to the deep and bitter

regret of "7" Platoon. Not only we were sorry, and for other reasons. Other companies had not been so fortunate; casualties had come, and a little corner of Glencorse Wood was hallowed ground, where, under plain wooden crosses, some of our comrades lie buried. It, too, passed to the enemy – a bitter thought.

(See Appendix, p. 90, 3rd Letter.)

4. DUG-OUTS, TRENCHES, AND REST: RESTS AT VLAMERTINGHE

April 13 – 15, 21 – 22. *Rests at Vlamertinghe*

We were relieved in Trench 71 by the 9th Argylls, the other brigade territorials, whose speech proclaimed them as Glasgow as we were Edinburgh – a cheery lot. We gave them a "good luck, boys" as we filed out and started across the open to the "rendezvous" at Glencorse Wood. There we had the weary wait which seems incidental when a whole battalion moves, but annoyed us excessively, lying on the chilly mud with the excitement of our relief from the trenches oozing out and the reaction of sleeplessness setting in. Then we went through Westhoek to the railway, and that put (in vulgar phrase) the tin hat on it. Stumbling along over the rails or sleepers or the edge of the embankment in pitch dark, in full

marching order and a great weariness, it was a cross and sleepy battalion that finally came off the line on to the broad Menin road a mile from Ypres.

In our early nights of fatigue we had often passed companies of men near Voormezeele who slouched along in the dark, spiritless and depressed, who rarely answered our eager queries of "Who are you?" or "Where are you from?" or if they did, merely with a growl and went on with their heads still sunk on their chests. We had wondered then, but we understood now. At our first halt we dropped on the road, and in a moment a steady chorus of snores told its own tale. For those who sat awake it was weird, almost ludicrous.

Dawn found us still on the road, walking mechanically on with one dim thought animating us of the moment when we would arrive, drop our packs, and sleep, which we did at last about 5 A.M. at the black huts beyond Vlamertinghe. We only kept awake to have a hot drink of tea, get our teeth into a solid meat sandwich, and bless the quartermasters who had had them ready. Then we got our boots off and slept the round of the clock.

We found the black, tarred huts very comfortable structures. With a full house of ten aside we did not suffer from cold or draughts, and by this time we could sleep, tucked in our greatcoats, on anything, especially a wooden floor, after the mud of trench or dug-out.

After our first long sleep we woke to parcels and letters, the height of bliss, and soon the tidy hut was strewn with cardboard boxes, paper, string, and luxuries. For a day we gorged; everybody passed everybody else his cakes or sweets, and the bully beef or our daily ration was stacked in a growing heap – untouched. What a riot of feasting! what digestions we had! and what a mess there was to be cleared up when we got the order to move! One good man, whose only vices were cigarettes and tea, after bemoaning the scarcity of "fags" in the trenches, and hoping all the march down that some were waiting for him, sat opening (with a grin of happy incredulity) box after box till he found himself the possessor of 700 odd. And we were all, according to our tastes, as happy as he.

Our days of rest were filled up with a bath parade, washing (though water was scarce) and cleaning, consuming parcels and writing letters, strolls in the village and drinks (it's a dry life in the trenches), or gloriously lying at ease near the camp. On the third day of our first rest we even paraded for company drill, rather to everyone's amusement; but it was a glorious day and it passed the time. And for just judgment we were called out that very night back to the real thing (April 15 – 20).

Our rests at Vlamertinghe, indeed, were most notable for the alarms that ended them. Current report had it that our routine was "four days in

dug-outs, four days in the trenches, and four days on rest." We never had our four days rest. The first rest we congratulated ourselves on getting three whole days, and then at night the order came. The second rest was shorter still.

The march away from our first rest saw the perpetration of a joke which deserves to be chronicled. We went down the street and swung off on to the railway at Vlamertinghe station. Here a message was passed down from file to file – the magic words "thirty-six to a carriage." Officers and men in "B" company were alike mystified. Was the wild rumour true after all that the ____ Division was to be sent to the Dardanelles to help the 29th? Were we to go down the line La Bassee-wards? Past the station we went and no train appeared. Excitement waned, only to be revived a hundredfold when farther up the line we saw the dim outline of a train which proved to be armoured and with steam up. But alas! we swung by it too and went quietly on till we found ourselves at Ypres *en route* for the old round of dug-outs and Trench 71 (April 16-20). But for half an hour it had given us the jumps.

The second alarm was more memorable still. We had had only forty hours' rest and the call was sudden, "Fall in in five minutes." But we knew "something" had happened; we had been lying uneasily waiting in full order and we "sprang to it." That was the night of the historic 22nd April.

II. STORM. APRIL 22 – 27

1. THE BREAK IN THE STORM. APRIL 22

On the 22nd we were beginning to appreciate the rest after the fatigue of the march two nights before from the firing line. By evening most of us were either in the village or strolling about camp, our bodies "raxed wi' leisure," and thinking of the good sleep before us. It was a rare evening, and we watched the aeroplanes circling overhead. One to the north looked suspicious, and as we watched it turned back to the enemy's lines. Then in the twilight we saw that it was dropping lights as it went. What did that portend? we wondered uneasily. Later some came back from the village with the extraordinary story of Frenchmen running down the roads from the front with fear in their faces and tales of retreat. Also of a strange acrid taste in the air. We quietly began to prepare, and soon the word came to lie down ready. Hardly an hour passed when, at nine-thirty, a whisper swelled along the line of huts, "Fall in in five minutes; hurry up, everyone."

We marched by the railway half-way to Ypres, crossed the main road and went down a side road.

On the railway side we met with the first signs of disaster – old women crumpled under huge bundles, young women with babies, little groups and families, even the children with their little loads stood aside wearily to let us pass - and we knew they must be fleeing from Ypres.

The main road was a sight we shall never forget. It was absolutely solid with troops, marching, marching, marching – to Ypres. Fugitives were there too, transport wagons were at the side or parked to let the infantry pass. Down the side roads where we went gun limbers were rattling along. The turmoil was indescribable. Something *had* happened for sure.

We did not go far, but entered fields, and were told to lie down, but *not to sleep*, and to be ready to move at once. In front there was the incessant crackle of rifle fire, not too far away, but behind the sight was tragic. It was very dark, but Ypres was lit up by a solid mass of flame. As we looked, fascinated and horrified, we could see the dark mass of the Cathedral and Cloth Hall backed by the wall of flame, whose crackling we could hear above the stillness. The flames were leaping high, so high that the Cathedral's square tower and the Cloth Hall's delicate pinnacles were picked out and silhouetted in the night sky. The story of the pathetic fugitives by road and railway was clear to us now, and as we lay on the cold ground, chilled, we talked in whispers of the horror of the sight

from which our eyes could not turn. Ypres of happy memory – in flames!

About midnight a whispered word came to get up, and we moved off, nothing loath, for it was cold. We turned towards Ypres and soon reached the outskirts and halted. We had to run the gauntlet through the burning shelled town. We went, platoon by platoon, at one hundred yards' interval, hugging the walls of the dark side of the square, at the double, past the blazing quarter by the canal, with hot breath of the flames on our cheeks, and out to the Menin road beyond. It was a last terrific sight.

Safely on the Menin road we went on in the growing dawn. After a mile we turned to the north-east, on a road new to us, and circled a wood (afterwards discovered to be Potijze Wood), which we found to be literally a warren of dug-outs. In some of these we were settled down to wait in a chill morning for the next move and think of the scenes of the night.

2. IN SUPPORT OF THE CANADIANS. APRIL 23–27 NEAR ST JULIEN. APRIL 23 (MORNING)

Lying in Polijze Wood that morning we knew nothing of what had happened, nor did we get any clear account till we got home papers, but it will make this chronicle of the successive events more intelligible if the circumstances are told now.

The French holding the line to the north of

Ypres *had* retreated, unprepared and terror-stricken before the first attack of the new enemy – Gas, in volumes so great that the air had been tainted even at Vlamertinghe, miles away. A great gap had thus been made in the line, through which enemy troops were pouring, almost surrounding the left of the Canadians, which, attacked in front and flank, was being bent back on the village of St Julien, six or seven miles or so north-east of Ypres. To meet this, every available battalion for miles around (the Ninth among the number) was being thrown into the gap to hold the line and help the Canadians, who were heroically holding on.

For ourselves we heard we were part of a hurriedly formed Composite Brigade, but who or where the rest of the Brigade was we never knew. Nor did we know what we were doing; from hour to hour we obeyed orders blindly, advancing, retiring, digging ourselves in or holding our trench, for four long days and nights of great strain and many losses, little food or water, no sleep and much work. We did it all completely in the dark, but hoping we were being useful in the evidently great emergency. Nor are we much wiser yet![1]

It was ten in the forenoon before the order to move came, and we got up stiffly from our dug-outs. Over a field or two we struck into the main road, and turned west. It was very exposed, and we wondered quietly where the enemy were. They

[1] See Official Note on page 54.

did not leave us long without evidence of their presence. Ere we got near the first houses of a little village (Weiltje) white puffs of smoke came bursting ever nearer us. As our first experience of shrapnel it was distinctly unpleasant, but discipline kept us steady. Eight platoon (we were in reverse order) got safely to the shelter, but others were caught, seven suffering slightly and six and five severely. It was a rather shaken company which gathered itself together for the next advance.

This time we were wiser, dividing into sections and going by the fields, with every possible cover taken advantage of. And we got to within a few hundred yards of St Julien, a little group of houses over and among which shells were every moment bursting. On the way, in the farm-steadings we had shelter in, we came on Canadians, just one or two, whose story of the night before was terrific.

We lay long enough in a thickly-hedged square of field to snatch a bite of whatever came quickest from our packs. Then – because, presumably, the storm of shell-fire made St Julien impossible, and we were coming in for attention from "coal-boxes" – we retired the way we had come, strung out in single file well spaced out, doubling over exposed parts, till we formed up in "dead ground" behind Weiltje. A moment later and we were told to line a hedge and lie down some two hundred yards from the houses. We thought we might at last get a rest; we little knew!

Since then we have often wondered why we were not all wiped out at St Julien that day!

OFFICIAL NOTE

The original intention was for the whole battalion to advance on the German line with the rest of the Composite Brigade from Weiltje; but at Weiltje the Colonel received urgent orders from the Brigadier to take two companies at once to St Julien, to help the Canadians there, who were in sore straits. A and B Companies, therefore, went off to the right through Weiltje, which was raining shells all the time. A Company got safely through the village, but B Company suffered severely.

Arrived at St Julien, the Colonel in charge of the Canadians told Colonel Blair that he could do nothing with us till nightfall, as he was quite cut off, and told us to wait till dark in what shelter we could find.

A couple of hours later an urgent message came from the Commanding Officer of the Composite Brigade to return at once to support the attack on the German lines from St Jean. So we went back.

3. IN SUPPORT OF THE CANADIANS: ADVANCE APRIL 23 (AFTERNOON)

Hardly had we got settled when a tremendous rattle of machine-gun and rifle fire broke out, with the crash of "coal boxes" for bass accompaniment, and we were ordered to advance. We stole down to the houses, and at the opposite corner stood the Adjutant and the Colonel. "Keep going, boys, and you'll be all right," was their greeting, and we wondered vaguely what it meant. Round the corner of the house we saw.

An open field, perhaps four hundred yards in length, at the far side a blazing farm (? "Shell-trap

Farm"), with little khaki figures about it like ants disturbed in a hive, a string of men advancing on our left, "coal-boxes" screaming and tearing up the field, and over all the incessant rattle and crack of rapid, heavy fire. We went at the double; a "coal-box" on the left buried a bunch of the other lot, another just on our right quickened our flagging steps, but we got across. At the edge of the farm we got orders to dig in and keep well down. The scene was awful; the farm well ablaze, and shells bursting about it every second; yet men were there.

Before we had even dug cover the order to advance came again, and we rounded the farm, and in small groups dashed through the orchard to a thick hedge, behind which we dropped, sweating but thankful, into a trench and rested.

But not for long. A gap in the hedge gave access to an open flat, over which, some hundred and twenty yards away, was a square hedge and gateway into a small field and cottage. We advanced again, this time amid a storm of bullets from the right. We were well spaced out, and rushed it, and not one was hit, but we could almost feel the rain of bullets past our knees.

Once in the enclosure we lay close up to the hedge, gasping. War never seemed such a hateful thing as in these moments of reflection. The enemy were still invisible, but more than one "coal-box" landed in the enclosure, and some of us had narrow

escapes. The bullets, too, were raining in, and we lay very low. We had not thought of time, but two hours must have passed, for the afternoon light was waning when we crept round the cottage and into the vegetable garden. We began to dig in, but further advance was ordered.

We slipped out of the hedge and doubled as before across coarser grass pasture, with the bullets singing in the tops of the grass, till we reached a hedge and ditch thick with nettles two hundred yards ahead. There we lay till the sky grew dark and the stars began to shine out and the firing died down. In front was an open valley with a wooded ridge sloping from it. Ruined houses were there, but where the enemy were was still a matter of conjecture. Probably this was part of the ground left by the French, and the enemy had retired to the ridge on seeing our advance to gather his strength for the next attack. Our company officers held whispered consultations while we lay in the ditch and wondered.

We had had extraordinary luck so far, but disaster befell us by that hedge. “Coal-boxes” were still crashing about us; one in particular burst very near on the right. In the stillness after it we heard an “Oh – damn!” and in a moment came the dreaded whisper, “Pass the word for the stretcher-bearers.” “Who’s hit?” passed up, and back came the reply, like a numbing blow to us all – “Captain Bell.” We had trusted him completely,

and he had led us well; we would have followed him anywhere, had gloried in being his men, felt for him, secretly, the devotion all good leaders inspire; and now he was down with a great rip in his leg. Stretcher-bearers had got separated from us in the advance, but there were plenty volunteers to carry Captain Bell. His going left a never-filled blank in the Company.

4. IN SUPPORT OF THE CANADIANS: THE NIGHT OF APRIL 23

As the darkness deepened we went forward cautiously. We stole down by a high hedge behind which we came on three field guns, seemingly abandoned, and lay again in a ditch while reconnaissance was made. In front was the ridge with two houses burning fiercely on its slope, but no sign of the enemy. Star-shells went up from behind the ridge, lighting it with ghostly glare, but otherwise it was uncannily quiet. We turned to the left and wandered along the valley.

A battlefield at night has often been described; now we happened upon it, and the description was horribly exact. The very field seemed to be groaning; some we came on were dead, lying with their stiff, cold faces gazing at the starlit sky; everywhere were packs and rifles strewn about, and one pathetic figure propped against a tree, bandaged and moaning for water. And from the field to

our right came always, like the uneasy moaning of a winter wind, the groans of the unseen wounded and dying.

Untellably heart-tearing that low confused murmuring was, rising and dying away in the quiet night.

Further on we came on a company of men digging and we were ordered to continue their line. So for the third time we started with our entrenching tools to dig ourselves in. This time we were allowed to finish, each burrowing for himself with the sure knowledge that by daylight the position – in an exposed field – would be discovered and searched by shells. But it was not to be, for hardly had we put the finishing touches to our holes and sat a moment to rest when the order to move came!

It was about 2 A.M., and this time we went back. We struck a road none of us knew, and marched – wearily – on till we halted on the outskirts of a village (St Jean). Here we lay on the road till dawn, too strained and chilled to sleep. Finally, in the grey of the morning, we marched back to our morning's headquarters in Potijze Wood, which we discovered thankfully were very close.

It had been the day of days for us. On the move the whole day and under fire most of it, we had, it seemed to us, covered a lot of country, made an advance under heavy fire , spent a night in which wandering and digging-in followed each other as in

a nightmare, lost many, especially Captain Bell, and so far as we could see, done absolutely nothing! Still, we had not been wiped out as we thought we might well have been more than once, for we seemed to be manoeuvring all by ourselves in the face of the enemy.[1]

We dropped where we halted and slept – for ten minutes!

5. FURTHER ADVENTURE IN SUPPORT OF THE CANADIANS. APRIL 24 – 27

We had hardly had time to fall asleep with our backs to trees (and it did not take minutes) when we got the word to move. The rest of the battalion had taken up a position on the left of the blazing farm of the afternoon before, and we advanced over much the same ground to a half-made trench and set to work to improve it. Shells were frequent and directed against a Canadian battery of three guns firing away pluckily a little to our right. It was a fine warm day, and most of us snatched an hour's sleep in the intervals of digging. But in the early afternoon we were moved up a few hundred yards and told to dig a new trench behind a hedge. We worked hard,

[1] In reality, of course, the rest of the battalion and the other battalions comprising the Composite Brigade had been in similar action on our left, attacking and driving back the enemy, though we had never come to close quarters.

for we knew that any moment heavy shelling might begin, and here we had to spend the night perhaps.

Here, too, most of us ate the last of our "emergency ration," a tin of bully, four hard biscuits mostly in crumbs, and a little sugar. Water for tea we had none, and probably we would not have been allowed a fire. We had had no real meal since tea on Thursday, and it was now Saturday evening, and it seemed cheerless tucked up on the cold earth behind that hedge as night drew on. But just then came "parade at once, with spades," and away we went in the dark to something new.

We relieved "A" Company in a trench they had hastily constructed the night before and lain in unfinished all day. We set to work at once at the now so well-known digging and improving, and by dawn had made it fairly habitable. But dawn came wet and cold, the floor-mud became very wet, we had no fires, for we had no water and no food. One group mealed sparingly off a tin of Mackintosh's toffee, but we were all in like case. Another memorable Sunday!

A farm just at the left of the trench was occupied about noon by French troops, and in so doing drew a heavy shell-fire from the enemy. It is not a pleasant thing, we found, to cower in a trench and hear coal-boxes come screaming at you, bursting with their peculiarly nerve-racking crash anything from twenty to one hundred yards

away. And on Sunday afternoon, too! Still, it's an ill wind that blows nobody good; a herd of cows, startled by the racket, came out of the farm and ambled along the back of our trench, one or two of them agreeing to stand to be milked.

Whether we were the front line or not we never knew, but we supposed we were, for there was great activity behind us. Evidently reinforcements had come, for numbers of men in small groups crossed the field to Shell-trap Farm amid a steady rain of shells. Dispatch-riders tore down the Weiltje-St Jean road, and ammunition-wagons went up at a gallop, seeming to heed little the white puffs of shrapnel that continually burst overhead. Half-right (the direction of St Julien) there was the continual crackle of rifle and machine-gun and the sight of flaming houses, but we seemed to be out of it.

It was the strangest of all our strange Sundays. We knew now that the line had been broken; we could see the patch of wood where through a dreadful night and day the Canadians had faced unnumbered foes; we knew that the storm-centre was the little village of St Julien, a mile to our right, and that there a desperate struggle was being waged. We knew that British reinforcements must be hurling themselves into that hell of shell and machine-gun fire, and as we listened that long Sabbath day the din of battle never ceased. Sometimes it increased in a crescendo of rattling, and

we said to each other, "There's another attack," and wondered – oh, how we wondered! – how it had fared. By evening Weiltje village was in flames or black and roofless; near it somewhere an ammunition-store had been set on fire, and from the crackling, roaring flames came the sharper rattle of the bullets wasting in thousands. It was as though the whole fiendish powers of war were let loose at once, and even at nightfall they seemed loth to end their orgy of death and destruction.

Others, perhaps, may tell of that inferno. We looked on – but in terrific anxiety, more for our unknown comrades than ourselves; yet we too every moment expected the order to advance into it and take our share, few though we were; or that the enemy would break through again and come surging down on us through the hedges that closed our view. It was perhaps the longest day most of us ever lived through. One thing we all noticed: our guns were silent. What a relief it would have been to have heard their distant roar behind us; heard the whistle of their shells overhead and the crash as they burst far in front. But few came; rather the enemy poured in theirs to the verge of extravagance – about us, behind us, still more to our right, hardly a second seemed to pass without its crash and flying earth. The fields by Shell-trap Farm were ploughed hurriedly and deep that spring day, but the seed was the bodies of men.

We watched the troops advancing behind us under the continual stream of shells. One lot (just out from home, and hurried up) came near us, advancing to the call of the sergeant's whistle, sounding clear in the morning air. Later the whole battalion, after lying in cover for a long time, got up, with the shells still screaming over, sloped arms, formed fours, and marched off as though continuing a route march! We veterans of two months were rather tickled.

Rations came up that night, the first for three whole days of constant fatigue, and water in petrol cans, and our second day was made fairly pleasant. Men were "striking" at home at this time for war-bonuses and more pay. We wondered how they would have liked our experience: constant work or marching, day and night, for three days, no sleep, little food, and less to drink, and precious little pay at the end – if we ever got it!

We were relieved by the West Kents in the early hours of a cold and misty morning, and marched back through St Jean to Potijze Wood. St Jean was a terrible sight, in the initial stages of becoming as Voormezeele, and many another Belgian village. Men and horses lay as they had been killed, broken wagons, burnt ambulance cars, shattered houses, and a tragic stream of wounded – where was the glory of war?

We lay in the wood all day, quiet, like those who have gone through heavy strain and scarcely realise

yet what they have been through. The few survivors of "D" Company (again unlucky) came in with woeful strained faces. Food we had, for we found supplies of the Canadians in a shell-strewn field, and it seemed little to us now to risk a shell for some biscuits, jam, or butter.

And in the afternoon we saw a great sight – the Lahore Division advancing into action. They came through the wood in endless files, stripped off their coats and packs at the edge, and in open order went across the shell-torn field to the St Julien road and the ground we had left. With shells crashing all about them, they went steadily on as if on manoeuvres, and when they disappeared from sight we breathed a wish for their success. Those little, dark figures, impassive and cool, stirred our sympathy as nothing else. Not the islands only, but the Empire, were battling here.

All afternoon troops in thousands filed through the wood, and we watched fascinated. We knew, too, that our job was done. We were no longer needed "in support of the Canadians."

III. SANCTUARY WOOD AND THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES

1. BACK TO SANCTUARY WOOD: DUG-OUTS AND TRENCHES. APRIL 28 – MAY 7

We did not get away from Potijze Wood without two further alarms with their inevitable "stand to," and in the end we left so hurriedly that we had to leave untouched the hot rations promised for that night. We did manage, however, to get a field postcard sent off by the transport, the first word of any kind we had been able to send in the four days. What a relief it was to get it away – the simple sentence, "I am quite well," and the date, that was all – but for the anxious ones at home it was enough. And when we did get to the road we turned, to our astonishment, not to Ypres and our expected rest, but Hooge-wards, and soon we were once again within the shadow of Sanctuary Wood. There, little though we guessed it, we were to remain for twenty-five long days.

The first two days, when we were in reserve to the 82nd Brigade, were days of rest. We had a decent night's sleep, the first for a week, and a wash, also the first in a week. There were

springs in the Wood, and one pool of comparatively clean water, to which we stole in the twilight (for it was considered unsafe by day), and luxuriated in the cool water, bathing our tired and weary feet. Fatigues there were, of course, digging and ration parties as usual, but it was fine weather, and by day we rested.

Then, hurriedly as ever, we shifted to our old part of the wood and back to our Brigade, for which we were truly thankful. The six days, during which we had been detached, had been by far the liveliest and most trying in our experience.

Evidences of a meditated retiral were very plain. Trenches were being prepared on the edge of the wood and within, and at them all men were working feverishly, and we with them. Here, too, we experienced the latest "frightfulness" of the Hun. On Saturday evening (May 1st), a peaceful, early summer evening, we were sitting outside our dug-outs after tea, when suddenly some noticed a murky, greeny-yellow cloud floating through the trees. In a very few minutes the sun was obscured, and the forest filled as with a city fog, only its taste was bitter, it nipped our eyes and caught at our throats. We retreated to our dug-outs and sat it out, though some suffered severely, and there in the dark a new feeling, born of Gas, grew in our hearts. This was no clean war, it was devil's work, and had to be cut out of the world, an utterly wrong thing. The enemy had burned their boats, and now it was war

to the end, bitter and implacable. In half-an-hour our feelings had been changed from comparative amiability to deadly wrath and bitter, burning resentment.

Next day was Sunday, and we were congratulating ourselves in the afternoon on a Sunday at rest, when the nerve-exciting order came, "parade at once." Off we went back to Potijze, of unhappy memory, very ill at ease. We lined a trench near the wood; evidently things were still humming over by St Julien, and we were there in case of a break through. But we got fed up cramped in the trench, and thought longingly of our cosy dug-out and supper, till at last the move came, and Lieut. Urquhart's refreshingly Irish order, "get out (of the trench) and fall in" put us all in good humour for the road home, where we got by 1 A.M.

Next afternoon saw a repetition of the performance, but far worse, because coming back at dawn we did not get to our dug-outs, but had to lie down anywhere. And then it rained, a cold and misty rain, and we sat for hours huddled under a waterproof sheet. It was cheerless, and to cap it came the word that we were to go into the trenches that night.

Fortunately, however, it faired up, and these two days in the trenches came to be classed with the idyllic days in Trench 71 – almost. The trenches lay on the edge of the wood in a sort of recess facing up to the ridge with the white chateau, now,

we presumed, in German hands. For we had retired owing to the break in the line north-west of St Julien, and the Germans, we supposed, were working their way forward cautiously, and digging in behind the ridge. At all events they were very quiet, and so were we, having plenty to do to improve the trench.

In striking contrast to the previous days we were undisturbed, just because we were in the front line. Whereby comes the strange statement – strange to home people – that the firing-line is the safest place. Or, as Lieut. Urquhart put it in words often to be echoed by the Platoon after one of our hurried alarms from "rest" at Vlamertinghe, "if this is rest, give me the trenches!" There was water in the wood, and we could steal out of the trenches and wander down the path, then; we had fires and charcoal, and could have hot meals (to which we'd been rather strangers) at any hour; we could lie, too, behind the trench in the sun and sleep. And we had the certainty that there would be no alarms and hurried marches to wherever there was hard pressure. We were there to hold the trench until relief, and could not be disturbed unless the enemy in front did it. The only flaw was that parcels could not be sent up.

The night we waited for the welcome word "relief" was very peaceful; dark but starlit, with the shadows of the fine trees all about us. Very quiet we were too, humming softly to ourselves or

talking low, the spell of the night upon us. All nature was at peace, but over on the right a machine-gun spat a few rounds out, epitome of man's restlessness and the hatefulness of war.

What a contrast to the days before us! Though rumours of a long rest were very prevalent, we only went back to our dug-outs within the wood, a couple of hundred yards from the firing-line, had one quiet day, and then on the eighth the heaviest bombardment we had ever experienced broke out.

2. THE GREAT BOMBARDMENT. MAY 8, 9, 10

Saturday, Sunday, and Monday (May 8, 9, 10) were days of great anxiety for the holding of the line. The shelling was terrific; from early morning till dark high explosives and shrapnel rained through the wood. Fine old trees fell torn to the roots by a coal-box; tops of others were sliced by shrapnel, and their new year's greenery died early: the whole wood became a scene of tragic devastation. Far worse than that, the stream of wounded became uninterrupted. We ourselves lost our first officer killed – Lieut. Lyon – and several men, besides wounded, but others, between us and the Menin road, were more in the direct line of fire and suffered severely.

On the Saturday afternoon we heard that the line had been broken on the other side of the road by Hooge chateau, and our Brigade headquarters had

been in imminent peril. We ourselves, if that part of the line were lost, would be dangerously near being cut off, but while the shell-fire grew worse and the rattle and crackle of fire more incessant till the whole wood was wreathed in smoke, nothing happened with us and night came. It had been a nerve-racking day, cowering in our dug-outs into which bits of shrapnel fell, our heads bursting with the crashing of the high explosives, fearing what any minute might bring, yet with nothing to do but wait.

That night our first draft arrived, and found us in this pretty pickle.

Sunday dawned, and the bombardment opened more fiercely if anything than before. We set out to dig a reserve trench, but had to stop, so heavy was the fire. The day was full of alarms and rumours of hard pressure. The Glo'sters in particular were suffering badly, and their wounded came past our dug-outs in a steady stream. Later some came rushing down, shouting "Get out, Jocks, they've broken through, they're on us," but after a moment's wild excitement we found it a false alarm. Slowly the heavy day passed, full of uneasiness and forebodings.

So when at four Lieut. Urquhart came round with the well-known call, "Fall in, '7' Platoon, *at once*," and we learnt that the Glo'sters needed help and that "7" and "8" Platoons were all that were available we thought surely the worst had come. Of course it was Sunday evening! It was

a quiet and awed lot of men who fell in, looked to their rifles and bayonets, and went off through the wood to what we knew well might be a very desperate enterprise. But our luck still held. The worst was really over; the Glo'sters, when we crept up to their trench, said they could hold on if we would take cover behind. And fortunately the Germans had had enough, for the night came on and no attack was made. After the excitement wore off we realised we'd had no food (no supplies had come up owing to the bombardment), so we foraged in empty dug-outs near and "souvenired" some biscuits and jam which both officers and men shared, for we were alike hungry.

Then word passed up of British and French advances in the south, and we were wonderfully heartened. We hoped that that would stop the pressure on us, and so, when relieved in the dark before dawn, we went back cheerily, relieved indeed! It looked as if it had been touch and go, both for us in our forlorn venture and for the whole of the line about Hooge, but it was over, so we thought. We had our "usual quiet Sunday"!

Next morning, to flatter our hopes, was quieter, and then a perfect storm broke out. All the hideous sounds of war, guns, machine-guns, rapid fire, seemed to let loose at once. The Camerons and 1st Royal Scots on our left were violently attacked, and at one moment we saw reserves (the 9th Argylls) advancing with bayonets flashing in the

sun on our left and *behind* us. It looked as if we were again to be surrounded. But the men in the trenches – Camerons, Argylls, Royal Scots – stuck fast, and the sorely-strained line held.

The next day was quiet. The bombardment and heavy pressure seemed to be over, beaten back. We ourselves were in the trenches again, having relieved "C" and "D" Companies.

NOTE ON THE 9TH ARGYLLS

With this dramatic sight the 9th Argylls passed out of our life. We heard later that they had suffered heavily and that Colonel Clark, our old Colonel, had been killed, and the news touched us all sorely.

Many a night as we marched up the road in the darkness we had met them coming down, a dark, indistinguishable lot of men. "Who are you?" "The 9th Aargylls" came the imitable drawling response of the west country, till it came to be a standing joke of both battalions. We passed always in the night, or handed over our trenches to them, so that their faces were quite unknown, but there was a great friendliness between the two Brigade Territorial Battalions.

One classic story is told among us at remembrance of the 9th Argylls. One day in the worst of the storm of shells, as we cowered in our dug-outs, and it rained iron chips, a 9th Argyll came running up, haste and desperate anxiety written on his face. 'Has anybody here seen Jock Baxter?' he gasped as he came opposite the entrance to our dug-out. "Has anybody seen Jock Baxter?" and our sore-strained imaginations leapt to a possible tragedy, a brother or a pal lost in that welter of shell and smoke never to be seen again. Inwardly moved we said, "No; haven't seen him. What's up?" But the Argyll was off, and, turning, he hurled the explanation at us fiercely, "I've got to find Jock Baxter deid or alive, for he's awa' wi' oor Section's Maconochie!"

They made a last great exit from us that day at Hooge, adding honour in victory and death to a much honoured name, and we think kindly still of the 9th Aargylls.

3. STILL IN THE TRENCHES. MAY 10 - 22

We went up to the trenches that night none too cheerful. We had said good-bye to our well-loved Platoon officer, Lieut. Urquhart – leaving us reluctantly, going home for family reasons – whose cheeriness and happy temper had, times without number, helped us through trying days. Him also we trusted completely, and thought ourselves fortunate in our officer.

Worse was to follow. His successor, Lieut. Macfarlane, was shot dead next forenoon by a stray bullet, after being only twelve hours with us – a very tragic occurrence. Lieut. Stewart, of "8" Platoon, left too at that time injured – all the officers of original "B" Company, by some curious fate, were gone, Bell, Urquhart, Stewart. The Company was left with two officers – but they of the best – and "7" Platoon was officerless for many weeks.

We remained in the fire-trench five days (May 10 – 15) and then went to the reserve trench close by for a week (May 16 – 22). It was not nearly so idyllic as before. The weather – and consequently the trench – was wet; the enemy had evidently found their bearings on the ridge in front, and it was no longer safe to wander about behind, or go by day for water. For forty-eight hours fires were not allowed, lest wreathes of smoke should

reveal our position, and we endured without hot meals through two miserably cold days. Lighting fires without smoke became a perfect art, for the Sergeant-Major had an ever watchful eye and a great gift for "telling us off." He was, in his own phrase, "a hell of a man for deesciplin."

Rations, too, were short, and parcels were still held up down the line. We heard later of "the Ninth's parcels," stacked six feet high, in some village back of Ypres, and our mouths watered. At last we were told that a few parcels would be brought up, and excitement ran high that night. Four came up, one a large one, and the lucky owner and his section gloated as it came along the trench. Alas! It contained – mufflers! and our mouths were left to water for another twenty-four hours.

The early morning division of rations became a sad entertainment. It was really ludicrous to see a worried sergeant reduced to working fractions – one-twelfth of a small tin of butter, one-sixth of a tin of jam, one-tenth of a Maconochie (excellent stew, with vegetables, enough for two), and one-tenth of a half-pound loaf per man. The obvious inadequacy of it gave way to the humour of the division, and we made the best of it. Another day's rations – noted specially – came to a tin of jam between four, two whole biscuits and crumbs, one small piece of cheese, one slice boiled ham, one tin bully beef, with three packets of cigarettes, a tin

of tobacco, and one box of matches! All this for twenty-four hours! It was a case of asking for bread and getting – cigarettes.

Though we could see nothing of the enemy, from the position of their trenches on the high ground, their fire into the wood, whether stray or aimed, became very annoying, and never a day passed without several casualties. Both in the fire-trench and reserve trench we suffered severely, losing three of our best sergeants, besides many men. Our numbers became depleted, and our little graveyard in an open space beside our dug-outs grew and grew. At night on ration parties or fatigues through the dark forest lanes the bullets seemed to play hide and seek with us, and always some were caught.

Behind us, too, night after night, was a sight to make us weep. After the bombardment, as though in petty anger at their failure, the Germans had set fire to Ypres with their shells. For the whole fortnight we could see through the trees a great glare over the doomed city – burning, burning, burning. In all wars one reads of cities sacked and burned, but somehow with Ypres it seemed different. It had not been captured – proudly the road had been barred and dourly held – but in mean revenge (so it seemed to us) it was being destroyed when no longer attainable. That nightly glare steeled our hearts, and made us long to come to close quarters with such fiends.

But it was not to be. Rumour followed rumour of relief and a long rest, but still we stuck on. Messages from Joffre and French, and from our Corps and Divisional Commanders were passed along the trench thanking us (as part of the Brigade and Division) for the stand we were making. We appreciated these, but they always seemed to postpone our relief for just another day or two. And so a long fortnight passed, until, finally, one Saturday afternoon (May 22) we heard that guides had been sent off to lead up the relieving battalion, and the order came to hand in all extra ammunition. "Looks like relief" was our one comment, and we began to prepare.

This time our hopes were not to be disappointed.

IV. THE NIGHT OF RELIEF. MAY 22 – 23

After relief seemed sure we wondered whose fate it would be to be killed with the end in sight. So easily morbid do men become. The lot fell hardly. Late in the afternoon word came down from the trenches and passed like wildfire that Pearson, the Rugby International and the most notable of the men still remaining in the ranks of the Ninth, had been killed.

We were relieved at 10.30 by a Yorkshire battalion. It was a night befitting the occasion. Rain had fallen and the sky was inky black. Vivid lightning outrivalled the star-shells in lighting up

the darkness, and the rumble of the thunder and the guns blended till we knew not which was which. The rifle fire, too, was incessant, and the wood seemed full of bullets as we stumbled along the path; a groan here, a man lying there, told us that Sanctuary Wood was taking its toll to the bitter end.

As we passed a corner, a flash lit up dimly the little group of wooden crosses, two officers and some twenty-five men, resting in ground in memory forever ours, as we bade them silently farewell.

Once out of the wood and over the open bullet-crackling field we breathed more freely, and settled down for a long, slow march to Ypres and beyond. The 1st Royal Scots were with us in one long line, wearily marching.

As we drew near the corner by the Menin bridge, always a mark in our minds of so much of the journey done, we began to wonder. It all seemed strange and unrecognisable. What were these rubble-heaps of brick and plaster piled high by the road till it appeared like a railway cutting? All that remained of the pleasant villas on the outskirts of the town. And over the Menin bridge the full extent of the tragedy revealed itself. Ypres no longer burned, for there was nothing left to burn. We passed the houses and saw they were but empty shells, burnt, blackened, roofless. At dead of night our footsteps sounded loudly in the empty streets; but it was not the silence of the

night only. For the broken pinnacles of the Cloth Hall, with its battered, mutilated arches revealed by the lightning flashes, looked down – sadly, proudly yet – on a dead city. In all its long history was ever scene like this? We hurried through, sick at heart, even our voices out of control. The very air reeked of blood and fire and death.

A mile beyond Ypres motor buses and transport wagons were drawn up. The one took our packs to our great relief, and the other those who could walk no further. And in a field near by we found the field kitchens and a most welcome mess-tin full of hot tea and a sandwich ready for us. A great idea, we decided, this half-way halt and refreshments.

It was growing dawn as we started again and passed our old resting-place at Vlamertinghe. Still further on we passed through Reninghelst, and by this time we were getting very weary. We had walked the night through and now it was day. The road went interminably on and we got all the wearier. Five o'clock found us legging it mechanically, keeping up a good pace in sheer desperation, in no sort of order, but grouped behind Lieut. Wardrop who, to our pride and admiration, stuck it out with us. And at last, at long last, we turned off to a hedged field and saw the preparations of a camp. It was a beautiful Sunday morning and we dropped on the grass and gasped.

We had left our last "rest" on April 22nd;

this was the morning of May 23rd. Between lay thirty full days and nights, if not "in the trenches," always there or thereabouts; days full of storm and stress. Many who went out from Vlamertinghe had not come back, for we mustered scarcely four hundred now, and as we looked round the small enclosure it was plain how the battalion had shrunk.

Strewn about the field were our parcels, accumulated in the thirty days. All that was perishable *had* perished with a vengeance and some sorry messes were ruefully unpacked and removed. But tinned stuff and clothing were unharmed, and for once it was clothing and not food we thought of first. Oh! the joy of that first wash and the unforgettable feel of a clean shirt and a warm, dry pair of socks! After thirty day!

For the rest of the day we lay and broiled in a sun too hot for sleep, loafed and ate and washed again. Drinking water was very scare and there were no "pubs" near: otherwise there was no flaw. Then we prepared for our first full and undisturbed night's sleep for weeks. Our troubles were over - so we thought.

V. THE LAST ALARM. MAY 24 – 25

As some of us turned drowsily over about 6 A.M., we saw an orderly hurry into the enclosure and deliver a scrap of paper. A few moments later round the camp came the incredible murmur –

"Stand to!" Guns were going hard in the distance whence we had come, but we, just relieved, after thirty days, a weary, footsore battalion, why should we be called on again?

But the order was there, and we stood to. It was an unrestful, trying day, full of wild surmise and many grumbles, and at last, at 4.30, the order came to march off. Packs and greatcoats as usual, which meant the leaving of nearly all that we *had* saved from our parcels, for we knew we could not carry much.

It was a desperate ordeal from the first. The men with bad feet began to fall out ere we had gone a mile, and the long dusty road to Vlamertinghe broke the hearts of more. We hardly made a mile an hour, and at nightfall when we found our appointed place behind a hedge near Ypres we were short of more than fifty men. And the rest had gone on only straining out their very last ounce of fatigue.

We lay the night there, cold and weary, on our waterproof sheets, with packs for pillows, and next forenoon we got word that we were not required and might go back. The march back in a blazing sun was almost as bad, only there was hope. At one rest pails of glorious water were handed down the lines – and by the officers, tired as they too were. Finally we got to the permanent camp on the Vlamertinghe road and rested there, rushing the canteen for all its stock of tinned fruits! Here,

at four o'clock, motor buses picked us up, and we rode for the first time back to rest in a patch of wood not far from our old quarters. We were "done" – absolutely done.

Two more days we spent in the wood, pleasantly resting, interspersed with a bath parade to Poperinghe, a deserted but not destroyed town, and a welcome "parade for pay." We were visited also by Major-General Snow, commanding the 27th Division, and heard from him that the Division had earned a good rest, and was to be shifted to another, "more healthy" part of the line.

And in the early morning of the 28th the battalion marched off, leaving Ypres and its memories, forth to new ventures and fresh service.

(See Appendix, p.92, 4th Letter.)

Appendix

LETTERS OF ANOTHER "B" COMPANY PRIVATE

I

A DAY IN THE MUD-HOVEL AT DICKIEBUSCH

(Published by the "Evening News" – March 26)

I am to try to give you an impression of a typical day for us at the Front.

Probably we have been out at night on the usual "Fatigues," arriving at the encampment about the time when the first little bird begins to herald the dawn. After a snack and a tot of rum we have curled ourselves up in our blanket as best we could in the small space allotted to us or fought for by each.

On waking up at mid-day we usually find ourselves in the exact position we were in when our heads touched our packs. We sleep so well that there is every chance of getting cramp. A short sleep and a sound one is the best thing in life; and though our tempers are roused by the

insistent orders for "men to draw rations," and for orderlies to dash the sleep from their eyes and look alive for tea, yet, on the whole, we are heartily obedient.

As I have said, it is each man for himself. Hastily springing from lethargy, a gaunt, half-dressed "Highlander" will disentangle himself from half-a-dozen pairs of legs that seem to belong to nobody in particular, pull on his boots and make a dive through the doorway, followed by the benedictions of the poor wretches he has "stampeded." Here he gathers together, with no respect for eighth commandment, as large a multitude of dry sticks as he can (usually five or six), and places them in the mud fireplace outside of the hut. This done, he must needs then wake the remainder of the huts' occupants by a tempestuous search for matches.

Then begins the day's scramble. Dixie-lids are piled high upon our little flame. If anyone is lucky enough to get some bacon fat produced before the blaze has proper right to call itself by the name, he finds it – politely – adopted as a remedy. He only smiles.

The meal over to the general dissatisfaction of the company, one "cleans up." This consists in polishing your rifle till it shines, and, if you have any energy or inclination left, your face at a farm half-a-mile away. I believe one of my Gillette blades has done me for two months. You see I make a

special point of using other people's! As for a bath, I have had one, in a cold pond, since February 22nd.

The best order of all is "Orderly corporal for letters" – sweeter even than "Orderlies for dinner." The dinner consists of everlasting stew; the mail – ah! the mail consists of words and thoughts from home, the very bread of life to men who may never see the old country again. With what ear-stretchings does one await the distribution of those letters and parcels and newspapers. What joy when a large parcel like a huge Christmas stocking is opened and fingered and distributed, or what depression falls when this, the third or fourth day, passes empty of home and seems full, instead of war and tumult and agony, of solitude!

This is our mid-day. After opening of those letters our sun declines. Tea is good or bad according as the mails are full or empty; life is rich or poor according as one has written letters of thanks or letters of suppressed condemnation.

Then come orders for parades, and cancelled orders for ghosts of parades, and rumours of no parades, followed by no rumours of any parades, till perfect nonchalance takes the place of perfect exasperation. The result is, of course, always the same – parade in the middle of tea, with no water-bottles filled, out to the Voormezeele road in the silent night, and soon we are working steadily among the flying bullets.

II

NIGHTS AT VOORMEZEELE - FACTS AND REFLECTIONS

(Extract from a Letter written March 21)

I promised to give you an idea of our life at nights. We have two lives – that by daylight and that by starlight, our sleep comes in between somewhere. And I can speak merely with regard to the doings of our own company.

At seven, or thereabouts, we stumble into our equipments and cap-comforters, seize our "best friends" by the small of their butts, and make a hazardous journey across mire and tree-stumps to the parade-ground, a shallow lake of water between the wood and the roadway. Having loaded up with five rounds, secretly committed our lives into the keeping of our Maker, we turn to the right and lead off in file along the war-torn cobbles. All the main roads are cobbled in the centre. What splendid roads they must have been to start with! What quagmires, what shell-pitted apologies now! Stumbling, and often, on account of the pitch darkness, literally staggering, we pass the commands from mouth to mouth along the entire line, and do our best not to blunder down upon the man in

front when the line suddenly draws up, or to put anger into the heart of the man behind by swinging round and butting him in the eye with our slung rifle.

There are long minutes at the village corners under the pale stars wearily waiting for the order to advance, and get the work of the night begun. How do we spend them? Staring with the eyes of our souls at the silent passing war-worn battalions, at little parties of two or three carrying muffled figures on stretchers, at lumbering transport wagons and rattling artillery limbers, at the drivers swaying and cursing, or sitting rigidly smoking and pensive, with a sort of cynical humour on their lips.

Then on into the real danger-zone round the corner of a place that was once the acreage of God, but is now two gaunt gables and a heap of outraged tombstones. More insistent comes the injunction, "Keep to the right, please; make way there for the stretcher," and another fallen hero sets us sadly wondering.

Next across the fields, jumping ditches and evading shell-holes, and sometimes getting lost (for the guide's work is difficult), and lying flat on our faces in a turnip-field listening to the beat of our hearts, and the swish of bullets across our heads or the thud of them in the clay beside us. In time we grow callous like the rest and work peaceably at the sandbags or dastardly wire entanglements.

Each of us experiences these things for ourselves – the night teaches us, for suddenly at odd moments the whole atmosphere of the thing forces itself upon one's consciousness and the terrible madness of it all makes even the strongest of us as if faint from sheer sorrow. It is at such moments that the war is real and horrible and wrong.

The greater part of the strain on the men out here is purely mental. We are many, but each of us is alone, and our heroship is co-existent with our individual patience and grit. Our men are suffering in a way that seems to me nobler than anything I have ever seen or heard of.

There is a smell of evil in the battle area, a gruesome clinging odour that wreathes the fields and houses and penetrates to the souls of men and takes up its abode there. Nothing can throw it off. The sadness and desolation, too, is terrible. Whole streets of naked houses seem wanting to tell tales that would freeze the fire of hell.

But when we come back and the candle is flickering from the log in the hut and we sit opposite each other smoking, thinking of the old folk, there is after all but one opinion – that none of us would have it otherwise, that none of us are sorry to have left peace and safety and embraced instead discomfort and danger and suffering. We are "the Dandy Ninth" no longer; we have passed beyond that into something more *solid* and cruel, yet withal into something more manly; we have

passed, as it were, from a dream into life, and often here in the wood you may see men look into each other's eyes and say in the same breath, "This is *the* life." Strange that it should be so, but it is true.

III

TRENCH 71

(April 19 – from the "Evening News")

There is positively no more charming place on this wide earth at the moment – a sunny, peaceful moment – than just on top of this ammunition box at eight o'clock of a spring morning. Not a fleck of white disturbs the perfect gray of the sky. At my back, out of a wood of birch and fir, comes the incessant love music of a thrush; from time to time the metallic whirr of an aeroplane draws one's gaze heavenwards in rapt contemplation of the evident futility of anti-aircraft science.

Suddenly the lazy dome across the world seems rent in two by a wild, half-determined, half-reluctant chromatic scale. For a moment one's heart leaps in apprehension; the next it subsides in inward merriment. It is so laughable – hurling huge pieces of metal at fellow-mortals through huge pieces of metal at fellow-mortals through space. Indeed, it is a sad warfare this. Here am I, behind a wall of sandbags with a pleasing enough prospect mainly of upturned fields and wrecked homes, with here and there a tree, a rude, wooden cross marking an almost forgotten grave,

and, in pathetic groups, dead blue-coated things that ought to have had graves long ere this.

A moment, please! An enemy sniper has just been kind enough to strike a sandbag to my left, and cover me with a shower of earth. We have been having some "sport" with this same sniper. By means of a bayonet-periscope we spotted his loop-hole, and have been taking more or less unaimed shots at it. He indicates a miss each time by waving a spade from side to side. We do the same. And this is all the fighting we do for King and Country throughout the entire day. At night – well, at night, we sit and watch the star-shells, and occasionally pull the triggers of our rifles aimlessly to prove the fact of our awakeness to the general situation – the most questionable proof of any I have ever experienced outside Euclid.

We are all turning into Spaniards at the instigation of the sun, and there seems every likelihood of our being frizzled up completely before the summer is much advanced. A good many of us have already been supplied with Balmorals in place of Glengarry; they afford far better protection.

If it were not for the danger and the lack of personal freedom (especially the latter) this life would be perfect – for a month or so.

IV

IMPRESSIONS OF LIFE - AFTER THREE MONTHS

(From the "Scotsman" – May 18)

The "Dandy Ninth" have had a pretty varied experience of things. Within five days of our departure from Edinburgh we were within ear-shot of the almost continuous war of heavy artillery. One gets so accustomed to the noises of warfare that one seems able to forget about them altogether, and finds oneself instead suddenly startled by the humming of a bee or the moaning of some lonely owl among the tree tops.

It is not true that birds are never heard near the firing-line. From where I lie at the side of a rude but cosy "dug-out" the British trench is a mere ten minutes' saunter through the fir-wood, yet I have never heard a more insistent spring rhapsody than is now being rehearsed for the thousandth time since the warm weather came by our little friends the sparrows and the irresistible, ever-enchanting thrush. It makes me long to be back home again, walking the meadow paths and the country lanes, where that peace reigns which we get so little

of here – which indeed, we are out here to maintain undisturbed.

When we drilled in the old playground we little thought of ever engaging in a warfare where drill is the rarest things that happens. For we have been doing what most healthy fellows with a certain amount of obedience and a fair capacity for patient, enduring cool-headedness of action could have done. Bravery, whatever that may be, doesn't come into it at all; whatever one does, even the most heroic things I believe, one does out of a sense of duty, enforced either by the will of your superiors or by an inward prompting to a certain original line of conduct. You go into action amidst a storm of lead and hurtling shell, simply because you're part of a machine, a drop in a tide, and you *must.* Thinking it over afterwards, you begin to imagine seriously that though your heart is in University or city life, yet you seem also to have become by some mysterious occurrence a soldier and a hero. That is why the life is great; it is so astonishing what it makes of one.

To say whether we enjoy ourselves is difficult. To be wakened up from a deep sleep at three in the morning in order to "stand to" in the cold and damp of dawn till the sun is risen, and a possible danger passed, is not over-pleasant; nor is it exceedingly delightful to spend the nights of a whole week in digging trenches and putting up wire entanglements just behind the firing-line, where

all the stray bullets fly. Or to march all night, and in the early morning to dig one's wearied self into a hole in the ground that we may not be *altogether* blown away by shrapnel; or to spend days at a stretch without any proper wash, and to simply have to exist on ship's biscuit and bully beef so salt that often it is better to go wanting it rather than make too terrible an onslaught upon one's meagre water supply.

Yet, for all this, there are compensations. There shines out above everything, like a new star in the expanse of night, the glamour and romance of being an actor in the greatest drama of the world's history. No matter how hard a thing it is to endure, no matter how utterly miserable, no matter how dangerous and cruel, it is something we wouldn't miss for worlds.