

During the War

WORLD WAR 1

THE WESTERN FRONT 1914-1918

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BEF

With the first 100,000 May 15th 1915

Aldershot and Eastbourne

I was put on a train with a lot more young men. No one had any idea where we were going but, after a long train journey, we arrived at Aldershot. We were marched to the barracks, then marched into a room with a few privates and three officers sitting at a table. They then called out our names, one by one, to step up to the table, where we were given our numbers and pay books. Then we were marched to the quartermaster's stores for our army clothing. The sergeant took one look at me to get an idea for my size, then threw the suit at me! We had to get into our uniforms straight away, parcel our civilian clothes and dispatch them home. My uniform didn't fit too badly.

We were then given our rooms in the barracks. There would be about 12 to a room, which was very clean; so we picked the beds for the short time we would be staying there. Then came the bugle for the cookhouse. One of the young men in the room was made 'orderly', and he went to the cookhouse, coming back with a big can of stew. We all took one look at it (it was green on the

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top), and an old soldier who was in charge of this block of billets said that it was a curry. I told him that I had never heard of it before, but he said that I would just have to get used to it. However, I didn't have any, and went into the town where I had egg and chips. For tea we had bread and cheese.

There was a Scotch boy I had travelled down with who was in my billet. He was a nice young man and we were soon great friends. I think 'lights out' was at 9pm, and I slept well on my first night, only to be awakened by the bugle at Reveille (7am, I think). We had to be on parade at 7.30am then, after roll call, we were dismissed for breakfast - a piece of bacon and a slice of bread. Afterwards, it was 'fall in' again with a corporal in charge. After we had answered our names another corporal took charge for four hours' square bashing. It was a rather big barrack square, and we were marched round and round, about turn, left wheel, right wheel, and at the double. I had my new issue of ammunition boots on and they felt like a ton weight. The corporal was nearer 7 feet than 6 feet tall, and had a voice to match. I had a week of all this square bashing and, if I remember right, I think I had one route march.

When the 7 days were up, I took all the drill in my stride. I couldn't complain about the food, and the sleeping quarters were good - so I had no complaints. A batch of us had to fall in one morning ready for moving out, with what equipment we had been issued, and we were marched to the railhead. They had made one man acting lance-corporal to take charge. It wasn't a very long journey. We arrived at a camp on the outskirts of Eastbourne, a camp composed of huts. It was quite a good camp, and we settled in well. We got plenty of food, but it was the same routine drill. We had only been in the camp a fortnight when we had to move again. There had been a rush of recruits (the result of Lord Kitchener's appeal for 100,000 men; of which I was one of the 100,000), and they were rushing to get new camps as they arrived. So they moved us into houses, and the lady of the house had to feed us, but we had to keep our part of the house. My landlady was quite a nice person.

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We had to 'fall in' in the street and be marched away for drill as usual, and I think we were there for about three weeks before moving again. This time we were put under canvas on Beachy Head, which was quite nice. I think the batch I came with brought the unit upto full strength, so I had to get used to the men already in the camp.

I was now in the 64th Field Ambulance so, from now onwards, we drilled as a unit with new NCO's and officers. The sergeant-major was a regular: he looked every inch a soldier and I knew he would let us know that we were now in the army. On my first morning on parade I was told to get my hair cut, along with a lot of the others. He looked us all over and didn't miss a thing. Reveille was at 6.30am after which we were dismissed for breakfast, followed by another parade. Then we were marched away for a morning's drill - the sergeant-major making sure we knew when we did anything wrong. He used to shout at us for about 3 hours: it was a relief when he ordered us to fall in for dismissal to dinner, which was meat & potatoes, followed by currant pudding. We then all lay down for a smoke until the bugle blew for us to fall in again.

We were told to 'form fours' and were marched away; to our relief we were going on a route march along the coast of Beachy Head, coming back another way. We marched about 10 miles and my heavy boots didn't give me any trouble. When we got back we were dismissed, and the rest of the day was ours. We had bread, jam and cheese - as much as we could eat - after which we had a wash and clean up, and went into Eastbourne to have a look round. I went down with my pal, Jock, a nice young man who didn't drink, which was all right with me. It was very nice on the prom where there were plenty of people about, and it was warm enough for sitting out. We walked to the other end of the prom to another town (I think Pevensey was the name of the place). We called at a cafe where we had sausage and mash, as there was no such thing as supper at the camp. We had to be back in the camp at 10pm for 'lights out'.

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Morning came and the bugle went for parade again. It was a 7 o'clock parade, but this time we were dismissed right away for breakfast. Afterwards we had to fall in for inspection and roll call. Then we were marched away for another morning of drill (about 3 hours). It was doing us good. The air was fresh, the breeze coming from the sea where we could see warships and merchant ships: some going out, some coming in. It was nice looking out over the water; after living in a town all your life, we enjoyed it all the more. So, after 3 hours of drill, we were dismissed for dinner - stew and a slice of bread. After dinner, it turned out to be another 10 mile route march. The weather was getting warmer and we were marched off Beachy Head to the other end of the prom where we turned off into the country. We could sing on these marches and, if we happened to pass a young couple, we would sing "Hello, hello, who's your lady friend?" or "Who were you with last night?"

We hadn't been issued with water bottles and, as the march progressed, we were all getting thirsty. There was no sign of our getting a drink of water. We passed quite a few farm houses but we had nothing to drink out of. After a while, the officer gave the order to fall out for ten minutes, when we complained to the sergeant that we were all thirsty. He went to the officer and told him of our complaint, coming back with the reply that it was all part of our training, and that was that! So we got out our cigarettes. It was quite a nice march through beautiful country, but we would have enjoyed it all the more if we could have had a drink of water; we just had to wait until we got back to the camp. I was getting quite used to my army boots.

We came out of the countryside and on to the prom again, where we had a good sing-song. We let it rip every time we passed a couple. We arrived back at the camp after about 4 hours marching and, as soon as we were dismissed, we all went for our mess cans to get a drink of water. If I remember right, we all had a pair of kippers for tea - something we never expected. After tea, we had a wash and clean up, then off into the town. My Scotch pal and I went out as usual by ourselves; neither of us

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drank, so we didn't visit pubs like most of the others. There were no cinemas like there are today.

It was a nice evening, so we sat on the prom watching yachts and the ships, and the young people enjoying themselves. I remember that on this evening a middle-aged lady came and sat beside us and asked where we came from. She found my description of Lancashire and its cotton mills very interesting, and Jock told her all about his home town. She had a white Aberdeen terrier with her. She invited us to go and have a cup of tea with her, so we accepted the invitation. She had a nice flat on the prom which had beautiful furniture, silver and other ornaments, and she told us she was a widow. We couldn't stay long as time was getting on and we had to be back on time or be put in the guard tent. She hoped that she would meet us again - but we never did.

We got back for roll-call, turned in for the night, and wondered what was in store for us in the morning. As usual, the NCO would bang on the tent shouting "lights out". As reveille was sounded one had to jump to it for roll-call; then it was bacon and bread and plenty of dripping to dip your bread in. Then we had to wash and shave - army issue: about as sharp as a bread knife. There would be buttons to clean as well as your boots; then parade for inspection by the Regimental Sergeant Major. One had to stand like a statue!

On this particular morning the CO turned up on parade, mounted, and we were marched off with the CO at the head. We were led into the countryside until we came to a big field, where we had to fall into three lines, two deep. Every man was on parade except the cooks who were detailed for guard duty. The CO was in front of his men when it all started - but I don't know what the drill was (I have an idea that it was battalion drill). We started off in three lines, followed by right wheel, left wheel, about turn, half right turn and so it went on all morning. Every one was glad when we were ordered to move to the right in fours, and then we marched: the boys let the CO know that they were happy they were going back to camp because they sang all the popular songs they knew. We got this every morning

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for about three weeks, and the boys nick-named it the valley of death.

After dinner, it was another route march - one every day from now on, a little further every time, but still no water bottle. Everyone had bought chewing gum or sweets just to keep the thirst away. And so it went on. I expect it was the army's way of knocking us into shape.

I quite enjoyed living under canvas and I was quite happy with the boys after a while. At first they thought I was a mammy's boy, just because I did not swear, but they soon got used to me and we became all good pals together.

As I was one of the 'A's' I was one of the first to be paid, and Jock, my pal, was one of the 'C's'. By the time the last man was receiving his pay, Jock and I were in town having a good walk on the prom to Pevensey - quite a long walk there and back. As this was a Saturday, we had a free afternoon, the day after being my first church parade. So I had to use a bit of spit and polish just to please the sergeant major. We had to fall in about 9 am and, when the inspection began, he eyed everyone from his cap-badge to his boots, followed by the back of us. We had to stand there like dummies and if he saw anyone moving his head, he would bawl out at him. Everyone was on parade, and the RSM would shout "Fall out the RC's", after which we marched off to the end of Beachy Head and on to the prom, where a Boys' Brigade band was waiting for us. So we had music and, after the service, the band left us at the end of the prom. After we had finished our dinner, we had the rest of the day free.

Up to this time we had had very little rain, and the day was warm and sunny. I asked Jock if he would like to walk along the cliffs as far as Seaford where there was a military hospital in which there was a friend of mine, and who was a very close friend of your mother's parents. I have just remembered something about Ellis (that was his name); he used to come and see grandad Skelthorne almost every night to study form and

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decide what to back the next day. We found him getting along quite well, and it was a very pleasant surprise for him.

It was a wonderful walk, and we didn't go straight back - going into Eastbourne as we thought we would make it a day. We went into a cafe and had tea: egg and chips, which we enjoyed. We stayed in Eastbourne and had a good rest in the room until it was time to go, but we didn't see the lady we had met. We arrived back in camp not too tired and retired for the night, wondering what was in store for us the following morning.

We had a change. We paraded as usual, after which we were marched off down into Eastbourne and on to the end of the prom - and back. But we had not quite finished. We had to go up a big hill at the rear of the camp, and down again: all part of the training and we were all ready for breakfast. Afterwards we were taken to 'the valley of death', but this time we had about one hour's drill, after which we had squad drill for the remainder of the morning. The training was getting a bit stiffer each time, and the weather was getting much warmer. The usual route march in the afternoon, back again, then told to fall in again at 11pm for night drill. We all wondered what that would be like. We soon found out as we seemed to be creeping about in the bushes and the long grass. I know that when it was all over we felt very dirty. I know that the officers knew what it was all about (perhaps it was part of their training) but we were ready for some sleep with all this drill and marching day after day; I had had about six weeks of it.

About this time, your mother and I made up our minds to get married before I was sent to the front, so I went to see the vicar. I don't remember which church it was for a special licence which I got in about two weeks time. So I put in a request for leave which was granted; I got 10 days, and we were married on the 19th of May. We were married at your mother's church - St Peter's in Accrington - and we went to Bispham for our honeymoon. I was the only one of five brothers who wasn't married in a silk hat.

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It was nice to be home again to see all my family who were still at home, including my mother and father whom I found to be quite well. Tiger made a lot of fuss and I had to take him for a few walks whilst I was at home. After we came back from our honeymoon, I went to a few parties, but time soon passed and it was time to go. I left at 10.30 am and I had to bid goodbye to quite a few friends. But when the train was getting near London it was held up for an hour, and I missed catching my connection for Eastbourne, causing me to be a good many hours late in getting back to the camp. I was over half a day over my leave, so I was put under open arrest. They would not believe my story about being held up. The CO had been in touch with the railway and found out that my story was true, so I was dismissed. I got quite a lot of leg-pulling from the boys!

So, on parade again; the weather was now very hot (it was now June), and it was back to 'the valley of death' and route marches. But it was getting better every day. It got so hot that they cut all drill out and began to take us down to the beach to have a swim (those that could). We had about 2 hours lying about: it was nice to relax with your tunic off, paddling about in the water. Later in the day it became a little cooler, with a light breeze blowing, and we were marched back to camp in a roundabout way. After tea we were free, so Jock and I went down into Eastbourne and sat on the prom all evening where we enjoyed the sea breeze.

Upto now I had been fortunate in that I had not been detailed for guard duty or for cook-house chores (that is, peeling the potatoes). We had a fire alarm this evening after midnight, and the NCO dashed about shouting at us to get dressed and to get out on parade. We couldn't see any sign of smoke or any sign of a blaze. The grass was very dry, and any civilians who happened to be out for a walk and happened to throw a lighted match on the ground could have set the camp on fire. But we found that it was only a fire drill.

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We were taken down to the beach again and the boys got permission to take a football to have a game of water polo. Those who couldn't swim just splashed about in the water.

I must tell you this amusing incident. There was a medium size rock and on it sat two ladies. The officers had been to them and asked them to move: he told them that the men were going to undress and that they had no swimming trunks. So the boys thought that they would move them: about 30 of them started to play ring-a-ring-a-roses round the rock but I don't think they blinked an eyelid as they stayed put. The officers were behind having a quiet little laugh; it's a free country, and they were there first. So when we fell in again we felt nice and cool as we were marched back again. There was a rumour that we would be going to France very soon. There was some truth in it: the next morning we had a foot inspection and, later in the day, a medical check-up. We were being issued with greatcoats, waterproof sheets, and water bottles. the following day we had a kit inspection - everything pointing to the fact that it would soon be our turn to cross the channel. It would soon come.

We were informed that we would have to fall in on the Saturday morning for pay; then we were told that we were being sent on 48 hours leave and that we were to take all our personal things home and to leave them there: we would only be allowed hair brush & comb, tooth brush & paste, writing paper and envelopes when we departed. We were then told we could leave camp any time after 6pm to go to the station and catch our train. They gave us times of trains leaving Eastbourne for London, also times of trains leaving Euston for the North. Leave was counted from midnight on the Saturday and back in the camp on the Monday at midnight. Jock had to go to Scotland, and he told me that he would only have time for a good dinner.

I got home at 8am on the Sunday and left home to catch the 3pm train on the Monday - so I had about a day and a half at home: just time to do a little visiting. Time passed all too quickly. There was just time to have a few hours with my father and mother, and with your mother. It was a nice change being with my own

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family, but my mother was upset as was my father. I expect it was passing through their minds that they wouldn't see their son again. I was the first of five brothers to be in the Forces.

France

On the Wednesday after I got back, we had another kit inspection when we were told that no one could leave the camp that evening. The next morning we were told to fall in (at 4am). All kit had to be packed by 4.30am, followed by a quick breakfast, and be ready to move off at 5am. We were given strict instructions that there was to be no talking or smoking on our march to the station: in other words, we were not to make a sound. Everything was quiet and still; we only saw two policemen. The train was in the station and we were soon on our way to Southampton, where we were marched to a shed and kept there for two hours, being ordered to keep quiet, although we were allowed to smoke. When we fell in again to go on the boat we found quite a lot of troops already on board. After a short delay, the boat pulled out and we were afloat. A short way out, we found that we were being escorted by two destroyers. The water was very calm and, after a while, the destroyers left us. An officer told us that we were now entering the mouth of the River Seine; I had heard such a lot about this river but I never dreamt that I would be sailing on it someday (but at the Army's expense!). It was a glorious summer day and the water was like a sheet of glass. After a while we could see in the distance what we thought was a town on the right bank. As we got nearer to the village, it looked like there were a lot of people about, who started cheering and waving small flags; it was interesting and showed that we were very welcome.

So we went on our way, and the same thing happened at every small village we passed, making us feel that we were very important. There was plenty of room to walk about on deck although I dare say there would be about 1500 men of different units. By now we were getting near Rouen, the port at which we were to disembark. We were all lined up on the quay when we

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were told to put on our packs before marching off. We had to march up a hill to a very large camp overlooking Rouen. We were now in France! Everyone was sorry that such a wonderful sail was at an end - it had been a most wonderfully clear day: a blue sky, no wind, and the water was very calm.

After arriving at the camp, we were soon on parade again and a sergeant major - about 6'3" tall, with a voice just as tall, started reading out the orders. If we did this, we would be shot, and if we did other things we would be shot. We settled into our tents and they gave us tea, bread and cheese, telling us that reveille would be at 6am. Then we were marched down the hill to a railway siding and put into cattle trucks. We were packed like herrings, with hardly room to move your feet about. We had no idea how long the journey would be, but we thought it must be going to be a long journey because they gave us iron rations - dog biscuits and a tin of bully beef. You needed a hammer to break the biscuits. I didn't touch my rations as I had bought some biscuits in Southampton; I was glad that I had as they were a big help.

After a few hours travel, and the first time the train pulled up and stopped, we would run to the engine with our mess tins for a brew up. We just turned on the tap on the side of the engine and we could hardly see our mess tins for steam. The driver was very kind and could speak a little English; he wished us the best of luck. We had no milk or sugar, but the tea was hot and it was better than nothing. So we went on our way until we pulled up at another station at a place called Lillers. It looked like a very large town. Everyone had to get out, so we just put on our packs and waited until someone would come along and tell us what to do.

Two others and I went out of the station to a small cafe and, as soon as the lady saw us, she said "You want food?". She told us to sit down and it wasn't long before she came back with three plates of beefsteak, bread and coffee. Didn't we enjoy it! We asked her how much it was, but she wouldn't take any money; when she wasn't looking we each put something under the plate. As we had to be getting back to the station, we thanked her very

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much and we felt so much better for the food. The RTO was at the station, so we lined up in the separate divisions we were going to join. We had to show the slips of paper we were given at Rouen - I was going to join the 9th Scottish Division and I was to join the 28th Field Ambulance. The RTO explained that we had to make our own way, and I was one of a party of six going to the 28th. We were told that we should try to get a lift on one of the lorries going that way, and we didn't have to wait long, soon getting to our destination.

We found that the unit was under canvas as it was way behind the line. But the guns sounded quite near: it was the first bit of gunfire we had heard so far. We reported to the Orderly Room after which we were put in different tents. Cookhouse was sounded - stew which was quite good as I was ready for it. I got talking to the other boys and told them about the beefsteak we had at Lillers, and how good it was. They started laughing, so I asked what the joke was about. They said "Mate, that was horse-meat". I didn't know then that the French ate horse-meat. I told them that I enjoyed it and if I had known at the time, I would still have eaten it. I was very hungry. There were twelve boys in the tent and I was sure I would get along all right. I had my first breakfast - a thick slice of bread and a small rasher of bacon. I dipped my bread in the fat like the others and I could have eaten a lot more.

So, on parade for inspection to see if one had shaved. Buttons didn't have to be polished, as the boys told me that they would show up when you got into the line if the sun was shining, or from the flashes from the guns at night. I found that Divisional Headquarters were about one mile further up the road, and that the Prince of Wales was attached to HQ. The next morning I saw him pass the entrance to our camp, mounted with an escort of Lancers, flying their little flags. He was followed by a few staff officers.

On this morning I was sent out on a working party with three wagons and twelve men; I was told that we were going to a sand quarry for sand. We just took our time over the job. We soon

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found out the purpose for the sand: there was a farm in our field which had a large cesspool in the farmyard. Some young officers were going to cover it with sand to stop the smell and were hoping that it would keep the flies away. We started to throw sand on it from the sides; then one of the officers called across to me to go in the middle and level the sand out a little. I knew what would happen: I would soon be up to my neck in muck. But I was in the army now and orders were orders. So I took a few strides and slowly down I went; it was just like quicksand. I was almost up to my neck when they threw a rope and hauled me out - but only just in time. What a mess I was in! I was soon covered with flies, so I went to the quartermaster's stores and asked for a new uniform, claiming that I was entitled to one. What a reply I got! He was an old regular officer. He said "Young man, you are not even entitled to your rations in the army, and get out of here quick; you have brought enough flies in with you already. Go and wash it". So I just had to wash it.

It was a nice windy day and it soon dried. I was glad to get into my uniform again but, for a few days, the flies followed me wherever I went. It was a long time before I got rid of the smell. I think the officers thought it a huge joke; for a while the other boys would put their fingers to their noses, passing at a short distance, but it was more in fun than anything.

Faster here

I now learned that the 9th Division had been in the battle of Testabert and had come out to re-form. I also learned that my present unit had four wounded and three killed - and that I was one of the replacements. There wasn't much to do as the Division was now out of the line; they had earned a rest so it was easy going for my unit. In the evenings we went down into the village where there were about three *estaminets* (to put it plainer, beer houses) where you got weak beer and different wines. There were a few Frenchmen talking and waving their arms about, some of whom came across to talk to us. But it was all French to us - we hadn't been in France long enough to understand. So we started to play housy-housy: it is called Bingo today.

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THE BATTLE OF LOOS

I had now been in France about six weeks and the Division was on the move. We moved on and found we were to be billeted in a village on the top of a hill. The village was called Strazeele, and it was now the second week of August. We had to parade each morning to the bottom of the hill, and our exercise was moving stretchers through some trenches. It was tough going: we had to turn the stretchers at all angles. We got that exercise every day.

There was another village very near and we would go drinking and playing bingo. It was amusing when you think about it as bingo wasn't allowed in the army!

We were much nearer the line now. The guns were going more or less all day long and we had the feeling that there was something big going to happen. It wasn't long before we were reminded: it was the end of August and the guns seemed to increase every day. One could see the flashes of all the guns, large and small, as far as one could see to your left and your right; we got it night and day, and we now knew that we would be in the battle of Loos. The guns were softening the German lines and we had this big bombardment for a fortnight. And, in that fortnight, we also had a few bad thunderstorms. We were now near the line, and the troops were moving up. The night before the battle opened, we had a terrific thunderstorm: with hundreds of guns flashing and the lightning and the rain, it was the kind of night one never forgets: it seemed to be something not belonging to this world. Early the following morning we were moved nearer to the line again; we had to go up a sunken road and then marched into a field. It was still pouring down. We had a full pack and our greatcoats on, with waterproof sheets over our shoulders. And we had to stand for over an hour whilst all the infantry had passed us up this sunken road. They were well loaded. Besides having full packs, they had machine guns, bombs (I mean hand-grenades), rations etc and one could hear them slipping and sliding about under their heavy loads.

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So, at last, the road was clear for us to make our move. The officer-in-charge was mounted and he made a little speech hoping everyone would do his duty; and he said that once we had broken lines, we would not stop until we got to Berlin. They were taking him down the lines with shell shock after about two hours.

The ground was in a terrible state after the thunderstorm the night before and we were soaking wet. We took up our aid posts. The troops were advancing and we were soon busy collecting the wounded they carried down in relays. We carried them so far, and then handed them on to another squad. It was very hard work handling a stretcher with a wounded man on and we were walking in mud up to our knees. The shells were whistling overhead, and he was sending plenty of shrapnel over. So it went on all day and there were scores of walking wounded coming down with their own field dressings on; some helping a pal, and some who had caught it in the eyes being led. We all carried a field dressing in a pocket inside the lining of our tunics. We also carried a small gas mask.

We moved up as the infantry advanced, the noise of the guns and the flashes and the shells bursting over our heads. We didn't know what was really happening as we were too busy doing what we had to do. All the boys and I felt a little hungry and tired - made worse by our wet uniforms which were so heavy. But we had to carry on until nightfall when we got a bit of rest and were able to eat our iron rations. We laid down in the shell holes, but not for long: it sounded like it was a German counter attack. There was plenty of old iron flying about, but we didn't get the brunt of it in our sector. We heard a whisper that we were going to use gas. The advance seemed to have come to a halt and we didn't know what was going on. To the right or left of us there were still plenty of walking wounded coming in. I don't remember how many days we had been in the battle, but I do remember that, when we got to the rear, there was a large open space in which there would have been over a thousand walking wounded lined up. It wasn't a pretty sight.

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Our Division had suffered heavy losses. I think our unit had four killed and two wounded, but we arrived back at the village we had started from (Strazeele) where we were able to get dried out. It was a nice change to have some hot stew and a good night's rest. The 9th had suffered very heavy casualties, one of their objectives being to capture the Hohenzollern Redoubt which was strongly fortified. The Division was now out to re-form and we all felt nice and dry as we scraped all the mud off our uniforms. I was put in a squad to go out on a working party with three wagons to get stores to make some horse lines. All transport was by horses or mules; the supply was by motor lorries. There were also staff cars and motor ambulances.

It was getting towards the end of September and there was a cold snap in the air at night. At nights, we had quite an easy time, going down into the village for a few beers and a game of housy-housy. But it wasn't long before my Brigade was back in the line. The Jocks must have had a hard time getting their kilts dry - all the Jocks in our Brigade wore kilts as it was a Highland Division. We went into the line at Passchendaele and it was back to the wet and the mud; but it was quiet compared with the hectic time we had had at Loos. The Jocks made raids at night, and some nights the Germans made raids: there was plenty of shelling on both sides. Our post was in a dug-out and when things were quiet we played cards with the Jocks. Our stew used to come up in a large 'dixie' in a container packed with straw to keep it hot. We managed to get our tea fairly hot as well.

The Germans shelled us quite heavily some nights but there were very few wounded to cope with; so one day was just like another. I think the Brigade was in the line for about ten days, when they were relieved by the 27th Brigade. So we were back in our camp again for a week at least. Then we would go in again, but not at quite at the same place. We could hear the guns blazing away on our left, but the offensive ended at the end of October. The men of the new army did a fine job as they had not had a lot of training: they were men of Kitchener's Volunteers.

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It was getting very cold now at nights, and we had to keep warm the best way we could - just one blanket, and a greatcoat used as another. We didn't expect to have to, but we went back to the same part of the line where I think the plan was to hold it: digging reserve trenches. Thousands of men were pouring into France and getting prepared for the next offensive. We settled in again in the line as the weather got very wet and cold. I was getting used now to the whistle of the shells. I could tell if they were going to pass over my head or to burst quite near. When they sounded as if they were coming for us, we dived into the nearest shell hole. I couldn't help shivering. There was really no way of keeping warm as our uniforms never got properly dry; my shoes and socks were wet and one wondered what it would be like when the snow and frost came. I was hoping that we would be moving away from here now that the Battle of Loos was over, but we went into the line. I think this part was called Hill 60. At this time, whatever part of the line we went into all seemed alike to me. We heard later that gas had been used at Loos, but not in our section. We were hoping that we would be moving away altogether from this part of the line, so we did our spell in this part, then moved nearer Ypres to a camp called Reninghelst. It wasn't a village; just a rest camp on the side of the road, but we were in huts and we were quite comfortable. There was one hut reserved with tables for writing letters - or reading if one had anything to read.

The first morning, after our bacon and piece of dipped bread, I was sent out with a party and three GS wagons to Ypres to get some bricks to make horse lines. Ypres had been badly shelled and the famous Cloth Hall was in ruins. So we started work pulling walls down; we had ropes which we would throw as high as we could, and pull. We soon had the wagons full. It was very quiet so we had a look inside what was left of the Cloth Hall when a military policeman came and told us to get the hell out of Ypres. He told us that "No one hangs about here. Any minute now there could be shells dropping, so finish whatever you came here to do and get out if you want to stay in one piece". We took the hint and went on our way!

During the War

All the transport that had to pass through Ypres used to dash through as fast as the mules or horses could go. It was a lot worse at nights, transport having to pick its way by the flashes of the guns which gave a view of the road ahead for a few moments. If one was on foot, one had to do the same - it was total darkness and there were big shell holes in the road. So one just had to rely on the flashes. It was our first look at Ypres. We hadn't seen any of our planes over the town, but we saw two German planes overhead. There were a few air battles but we didn't see any planes brought down.

We were in the New Year now and it was beginning to get frosty; however much we tried we couldn't get warm. At night we could hear the ammunition columns going up to the guns. We could also hear the supply lorries arriving with the rations for the whole of the Division. At this time, observation planes were appearing in the sky. The Germans occupied the high ground facing Ypres and could observe everything that was going on behind our lines. There was a crossroad that was screened and it was called Hellfire Corner. On this part of the front we were in dugouts on the banks of a canal, the name of which I can't remember. (*Perhaps the Ypres/Comines canal [HSA].*) It was pretty quiet until one day the Germans exploded a mine. Our CO hadn't been with us long; he was a regular officer whom they called 'Black Jack'. He called for volunteers and we *all* fell in. So he came along the ranks and, when he got about half way along the line, he put his arm out and gave an order for the party to left turn. I was one of them. He marched us away, picking up some medical supplies and dressings on the way, and we found that it must have been a big mine. Fortunately, there weren't many in that spot at the time so there weren't many casualties. We dressed all the wounded, some of whom could walk, but the ground was very bad and we were up to our knees in mud. Black Jack kept shouting at us to get a move on: it was easy for him to shout; he wasn't carrying anything. We got back to the aid post very tired.

The next day, the Jocks brought in about half a dozen slightly wounded prisoners who had been out on a raid. Also on this day

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we saw a big air battle - about seven or eight planes; it was the first we had seen and it was fascinating to see them twisting and turning with their machine guns blazing away at each other. But not one came down and there were no casualties. The days passed quietly - just the usual shelling. The conditions were quite good with dry dugouts. We were now getting well into the New Year and it was getting very cold at nights with a keen frost, the cold getting into our bones. It was very hard to walk about: the muddy state of the ground had frozen.

But at last we were told to pack up as we should be moving out the following morning and back to the camp. In that sparse hut I mentioned, there was a large combustion stove, but where the other units who had been here got their fuel from we didn't know. One day, one of the boys had a brainwave: there was a pile of tin containers in one corner which contained army biscuits - so we made a fire with them, and it wasn't long before the stove was white hot; one had to stand well back. Then there was a knock on the door: it was the sergeant major, the CO, and a staff officer. "'shun", the sergeant major called, and the staff officer said we were fortunate to have so much warmth and then, with his stick, he opened the stove and his face changed! He told the CO to 'put these men on biscuits for two weeks', but he didn't carry out the order; he must have been on our side, and knew that the staff officer would be going back to a nice billet at Headquarters.

We were likely to be here for a week at least. The weather was now very cold, with only our greatcoats to keep out the cold. We moved again to just outside Ypres to a place they called 'dirty bucket corner' which was really a wood covered by tall trees. It was very quiet whilst we were there, but we were soon on the move again. We arrived at a place called Poperinghe and were told to fall out. Our field kitchen had got the stew ready on the march and we were put in some buildings that had been hit by shells. We all sat down and, just as we did so, a shell dropped at the back of the building when all the lime that was left on what little roof there was came down on us and into our stew. But we were hungry and we ate it.

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There was a railhead here and a big naval gun used to come and fire a few shells; they used a crane to hoist the shell into the gun which I had seen earlier when we were on the march. We didn't stay here long. As soon as we had finished our stew we were on the march again and, after about two hours, we pulled in at a village where we would be staying. I don't remember its name. There were quite a few aircraft flying about and, on our first night here, there was plenty of anti-aircraft fire. On the following day there were a few air battles and one of our aircraft was brought down in flames: the pilot didn't have a chance as there were no such things as parachutes in this war.

This was a small village and we were billeted in different parts. Our transport was at the other end of the village. There would be about three *estaminets* in which we went to have a few beers and a game of housey-housey. I think we were here for about a fortnight before we were on the march again. We had to pass through Ypres, but it was quiet on our way to a place called 'Plug-street' (*probably Ploegsteert, south of Ypres.*[HSA]) and our advanced aid post was what had been a brewery in which there was a good cellar. This looked like being another quiet part: there was a battery of field guns across the road and a little higher up, but they never fired a shot whilst we were there. Each gun had four shells in a row which just looked like polished brass. At this time there was a big drive at home for more munitions and guns and all kinds of equipment for the war.

There was what was really 'Plug street' which looked quite a big village about half a mile away. We were in the reserve line and, at times, we could have a stroll down the road to stretch our legs. One afternoon, two of the boys and I were walking down this road, the centre of which was solid to the width of a farm cart, but the sides were deep in mud. The farm carts in those parts had very large wheels (about ten feet in diameter) and almost all the roads the farmers used were like this one. So, we were walking down this road and, in the distance, we could see three mounted soldiers coming. As they were getting nearer we had to make up our minds whether or not we would remain in the middle of the road. As they were mounted, only the horses would get their feet

During the War

muddy. They kept coming nearer, and we stuck to the middle of the road, when we saw that they were French officers: we could tell them by their blue tin hats. They were now almost on top of us when the one in the middle shouted to us 'to get out of the blasted road'. I just managed to catch a glimpse of his face which seemed familiar. We could see the whites of their eyes, and the horses were almost on top of us. So we had to jump after all. We learnt a few days later, after talking to the men of the battery, that it was Winston Churchill. He had left his post at home to see a bit of active service and became an officer in the 9th Fusiliers. Whilst he was there, the Germans knew when he was in the line or in 'Plug street' village with the troops. If he was in the line, the Germans gave that part a good shelling. The same happened when he was in the village. He used to shell the village on and off during the day and, one morning, he hit the church tower which seemed to bend over and fall in one piece from where we were standing. The soldiers began to wish that he would go back home.

At about this time, he was studying some plans of a new tank and there was a scare that there might have been a spy (the plans had been lost). He found them in an old trenchcoat he hadn't worn for a time.

We were becoming a little bored: the days seemed so long. There were just a few of our aircraft flying about but no excitement. We were quite comfortable in the cellar; although it was very cold, there was one blessing - our clothes were dry for a change. I think we were at this post for about three weeks when we were relieved. After half a day's march we arrived at a small town called Pont-de-Nieppe which was well in the rear of the front line. It was Spring now, and much milder. We were billeted in a school and we had an idea that we were here for a little rest. It was quite a nice village, with a few shops, and there was a small cafe where we could get egg and chips if we had the money. After a few days here, we had a pay-day which included some back pay, so we could play housey-housey each night, and have a few drinks if you didn't happen to be on guard duty.

During the War

After a few days we had to fall in for a bath parade in a vacated brewery. We bathed ourselves in large vats and we felt quite refreshed. We could also have our clothes washed by some of the inhabitants if we wanted to. We had very little to do, and there were rumours that we should soon be on the move. One morning I heard a pipe band in the distance followed by some troops which turned out to be South African who had recently landed in France. They were to form one of our Brigades in the Division, replacing the 29th Division. As with all troops in our Division, they wore kilts (except for a few minor units) and they were a fine looking lot. They all looked to be about 6 foot tall - gold prospectors, bushmen and businessmen. There must have been between two and three thousand of them.

The Battle of the Somme

In about two weeks we were off to the Somme. We were marched to a railhead at a place called Nieppe where we were packed into cattle trucks like sardines. Some could just manage to sit on their packs. The horses and mules were loaded into trucks, then all our transport wagons. A detachment of the Signals Corps joined the train, by which time it had become a long train. We travelled through the night until we disembarked at a small wayside station. After helping to unload the horses and the transport, we formed up and marched again into the night, until dawn. I am sure that at times I was marching asleep. We arrived at a place called Bray, tired and hungry, our billets being huts, and we didn't have long to wait for tea, bread and jam.

The Somme offensive was going to begin. I think we were here for about two weeks and, one night, there was a military tattoo. All the pipe bands turned out, marching up and down the road. Then they packed their pipes away at their headquarters until they came out of the line again. But there were always some pipers missing after a battle.

During the War

The next day we were moving nearer the line. As they moved, so did we, but we were caught in some heavy shelling. The Germans knew. They began shelling the roads; at one point it was so heavy that we left the road and went down what looked like a stone quarry. It was even worse when we had got well into it: it was four big howitzers that the Germans were trying to knock out. There was no one else. We were penned in and we found three gunners who had been hit. The shelling finished as suddenly as it had started, so we got back on the road again and we had to go through a hedge [?HSA] to get to our post. We didn't know when 'zero hour' would be, so we kept moving. After a while we were told to fall out, but we didn't know what was going to happen. We hadn't long to wait. Our guns had been blazing away for a fortnight and the Germans had begun to shell behind our lines. He was shelling the roads and going after our ammo and supply dumps. There was great activity: there were sometimes as many as twelve air battles or more; many were brought down on both sides. The anti-aircraft guns were at it on and off all day. So we just had to stay put where we were. We had quite a few shells drop quite close and we didn't know where the next ones were going to drop. We could tell by the whistle of the shells if they were meant for us, and we could take cover. The shells you couldn't hear were those from the howitzers; they were fired straight up in the air and came almost straight down without warning, when it was too late to take cover. One burst one day and blew our water cart straight up into the air. It was that kind of shell burst we didn't like.

At this time I knew the battle was going to start in earnest and from now onwards we were going to be in for a rough time. Everything had been building up behind the lines. All the way down here from the North the men were building dumps for shells and trench mortars. There had been a big drive from home for more and more of everything. There were thousands of troops moving almost every day ready for the big slam but, unlike the Battle of Loos, we didn't have to cope with the mud and the rain; we were nice and dry.

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A very heavy bombardment had begun as far as one could see to the left or the right, and the Germans were shelling the roads very heavily. We saw two big fires which must have been caused by the Germans' hitting a dump. So we were pinned down waiting, and the nights were almost as light as day with the flashes. Sleep was a thing of the past. So we went on waiting as it got near to the big moment, wondering what surprise the Germans had for us. We played pontoon quite a lot just to take our minds off what was going to happen. The Germans were keen to find out what was happening behind our lines, and one day we shot down four observation balloons. Observation planes came over but not all of them got back, quite a few being brought down in flames.

The French were on our right with over twenty Divisions, and we had about the same number. Once the big offensive started there would be thousands killed and wounded. It wasn't a pleasant thought and we were going to have it rough; I was in it and had my fingers crossed, hoping for the best. The bombardment kept on day after day and all night. The idea, of course, was to knock out his guns and to smash his gun emplacements & machine gun nests, as his machine guns played so much havoc on our troops. The Jocks made a few raids on his lines to take a few prisoners if they could, for information. His gunfire was very heavy: there were shells bursting all over the place. Behind us we were building narrow gauge railways and laying water mains to make sure of drinking water for the troops once the offensive started. It was also necessary to get ammunition as near as possible. The ammunition columns were hard at work all day and night keeping up the supply of shells for guns. The sappers had been busy, along with the troops, making dugouts for shelter. Our unit was in a dugout which had just been made, so we were just standing by, waiting. We passed the time watching the air battles in the sky, and the observation balloons coming down in flames. The Germans must have lost quite a lot of them, and so had we. We saw some thrilling air battles: some days the sky was full of anti-aircraft shells bursting, and the Germans were sending over a lot of shrapnel. We kept under cover - we had to with all that old iron flying about!

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We had been pinned down almost a week - ending on the last day of June. I think it was the biggest bombardment we had had so far: we must have been using all the guns, large and small. It went on all night. We made sure it would come in the morning, so we played cards all night; it was no use trying to sleep with all that noise going on. Then, at the first light of dawn, the guns lifted and the troops went over with fixed bayonets. But they were caught in the cross-fire of machine guns and suffered heavy losses. They were moving forward behind a smoke screen, and we moved up behind them. We had our hands full with quite a lot of stretcher cases and quite a lot of walking wounded with their own field dressings just dabbed on. It was a lot easier carrying the wounded compared with the mud at the Battle of Loos. He was sending shrapnel over and, upto now, a lot of the troops hadn't been issued with tin hats; we hadn't either. So there were a lot of head wounds and, if I remember correctly, we had used gas - my gas mask being a piece of fine gauze in a small tin: it would be useful if needed.

The troops were still pressing on, and the Brigade's objective was a town called Longueval; the other Brigade - the South Africans - were on our right in Delville Wood, a plantation of tall trees, and they were being held up. It was a strange day, with battles going on in the air, the shells bursting, the ammo columns dashing up, and the mules stumbling: it was a wonder they didn't topple over, but they stop at nothing. We couldn't know how things were going on our left, it was bad enough in our sector. We had two of the boys hit by shrapnel, but only slightly, and they carried on. We were too busy by this time to notice the shell bursts, but we were now feeling hungry and wondering when we should get something to eat. We kept moving up a little; the infantry were moving up past us in single file to relieve the first wave of troops. The fighting was intense now in front of Longueval and Delville Wood on our right. The gunfire was very heavy, with ground gained and then lost. On some days it was a little quieter on our front and then Delville Wood would get the brunt. And so it kept going, with us pegged down but still getting some gunfire.

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The South Africans were relieved about the middle of July. They had been having a very bad time, the Germans having poured thousands of shells into the wood. I believe that their strength had been reduced by half. At the height of the struggle they had been fighting night and day for seven days and nights. The wood was filled with very tall trees and, when the South Africans left, they were just bare trunks: it looked just as if it had been swept by a forest fire.

The 9th Division (my Division, that is) was also relieved, to go to the rear for a rest. We had been constantly under fire for about three weeks but the infantry needed a rest more than our unit, after what they had gone through. It felt nice to have a good wash and clean up, and to have regular meals; we were also able to do our little bit of washing and to get a good night's sleep and to write some letters. The mail was given to us, and I remember that there was one from your mother as well as food parcels. She timed it very well. It was an unwritten law in my unit that one treated one's close pals: there would be, perhaps, a nice big sweetcake, cigarettes, tobacco and sweets. We didn't have much to do whilst we were resting; the gunfire was more distant and didn't stop us from getting our sleep.

We went back into the line again, this time at Delville Wood. The battle had been raging for almost three weeks, and I think it was the Seaforth Highlanders who went to the help of the Africans who had come back after a rest. Thousands upon thousands of shells were being poured into the wood, where my unit had its post on the edge of the wood. We had to keep going in to pick up the wounded; it was a terrible place to be in, and the air battles went on all day long. You would see them every now and again coming down in flames. The Germans had been trying for almost three weeks to recapture the wood, but the Africans held on. But one day, the Germans did capture one part of the wood - but not for long. The Seaforth Highlanders had very heavy losses. The boys and I were too busy to think about food, but we had our water bottles and the water helped to keep the hunger off. And so it went on day after day. The other Battalions were fighting in front of Longueval which was taken in late July;

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Delville Wood was captured a few days later. The Division had suffered very heavy losses; I think we lost about a dozen, but we were only a small unit. I had been in this sector almost a month and it had been a hectic month. The ground was by this time all shell holes, with not a tree trunk standing.

As we followed the advance day by day, we came to the old German trenches and dugouts - or what was left of them. There were a few dugouts that had escaped and the boys and I explored them. They had been very well made and we found that the dugouts were linked to each other with tunnels. I don't know the date when we were pulled out of here (the Somme), but I remember that we were told to be on parade one evening in full marching order. It was going dark, I remember, and to my surprise I was going to have a ride for a change. We had done a lot of boot slogging! Then some French covered motor lorries (but open at the sides) pulled up outside our headquarters and we were packed into them, moving off into the night. We didn't know where we were going, but we could tell that we were going Northwards. We could hear the guns and see the flashes from the battlefield we had just left - and that was a big relief until we got to another battle area.

We had gone a few miles along a winding road and, when I looked back, it looked just like a long snake following us on the ground. As the lorries had small lights on I could see that there must have been a very large number of them. I think they were moving the whole Brigade as, very far back in the distance, I could see those tiny lights; it was very fascinating. The convoy travelled through the night until we came to a village to the north of Arras, which we found to be rather quiet. We were at this village for a few weeks whilst the Division was brought up to strength. Our unit got a few replacements for the few killed and wounded. Then our Brigade moved up into the line, north of Arras which we found rather quiet after what we went through during the Battle of the Somme.

The infantry were making night raids on the German trenches to take prisoners and gain information. There were the usual bursts

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of shell fire at intervals during the day and at night. There was also a lot of activity in the air with many air battles being fought - planes coming down, ours and theirs. They were very brave men: there was no chance for them as they had no parachutes. We had a few observation balloons up, as did the Germans; they were hauled down if any German planes came over. When the sky was clear, they would venture over, but they were soon chased back again by our anti-aircraft fire. Then the balloon would go up again.

In my unit, we didn't have much to do: just a few casualties. Each day, we had good dugouts; they had been well made and we felt quite safe in them. Our stew came up each day at a regular time, and our tea was nice and hot; the cookhouse was only a few dugouts away. We heard that there was something big coming off: we were building dumps such as large petrol dumps. Petrol was in two-gallon cans, and there would be thousands of cans in any one dump. They were also laying pipes for water supply, and making new roads or repairing old ones and laying lines. About this time we had imported hundreds of Chinese to work on road building. They wore light blue uniforms, and we called them 'chinks'. There were lorries passing to and fro loaded with shells, trench mortars, hand grenades etc. They were also building miles of railway lines and narrow gauge lines; things were very active everywhere behind the lines. We saw a lot of it before we went into the line.

After a few weeks in this part of the line, we were moved to Vimy Ridge the night before the battle. So far I had witnessed a lot of heavy bombardments but none so great as this one. The ground shook and the sky was lit up by the gun flashes. A few mines exploded giving a big red glow. The Germans had sent out an SOS all along the line with star shells of all colours - the sky seemed to be full of coloured stars. And so it went on all night with the noise and the flashes: it was something one could never forget if one came out of the line. I remember that the weather was dry, but there was a cold east wind. Our unit was just waiting and wondering if it would be worse than the Somme. We wouldn't have to wait long. It would be tough, as the French had

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failed three times to capture Vimy Ridge. But we were now much stronger than the Germans in gun fire; by the sound of it, all the guns on the Western Front were firing at the same time. The cold wind had brought snow which made it difficult to get guns into position. The sudden change of the weather to snow and cold made us stamp our feet and swing our arms to keep warm.

The Canadians were in the brunt of the fighting, and it was quiet in our section. But soon it was our turn and our boys went forward capturing over 3000 prisoners and many guns and ammunition. The other Brigade - the South Africans - had a big success and got a little of their own back after the terrible time they had at Delville Wood on the Somme where they were badly cut up. When a party of Germans came out with a white flag, and then opened fire on the South Africans, the fight went on. Two Brigades would advance and capture some strong points, and the Canadians would advance and capture part of the line. There were shells bursting all over the place, with big air battles being fought over our heads. It was the shrapnel I feared most, and there was quite a lot of it. We were getting a lot of snow, heavy at times, and it was becoming very bad on the ground.

Our Division had to advance through a snowstorm which acted as a smokescreen. They captured a very important village which had been well fortified. Our unit moved, and we got to the first line we had captured. We found that he had some very strong dugouts: our shells having made hardly any impression on them. We had to pick up a few German wounded which had been left behind, and we had been very busy for almost a week. It was hard work: the state of the ground was such that it took six of us to a stretcher - and still the shells were bursting, with a lot of shrapnel.

We had now been issued with steel helmets and we had been using gas. I have just remembered that the village our Division captured was Fampoux. One only knows what is happening in the sector you are in; one hadn't time to worry about what was happening elsewhere. Things were hectic where we were, the gunners dashing past, the drivers of the mules riding with their

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heads down. I forget how long we had been in the line here; the Divisions were taken out and moved nearer Arras. We arrived in the suburbs of Arras in some decent dugouts - it had the name of St Julien and we were there for the battle of Arras. There were many planes above - German and ours - and there were many air battles. There was a large pond close by, and if an airman had been hit and came down in flames he would make for the lake; but they didn't always make it. Where our dugouts were, there was a main road passed close by, and all day and night ammunition columns were going up to the guns. One day a tank appeared; it was the first I had seen, but a few of them had been in action near the end of the Somme battle. This tank had to turn up a narrow road and it was something like a learner driver trying to park his car; it was holding up the convoy and there was quite a long jam on the road. Officers and NCOs came to see what was wrong - and we learned that officers could swear just as much as the men! I don't know how they would have moved it had it broken down.

We were watching an air battle one day when a plane swooped on us. We just scattered, but one got a bullet in his foot. On another day, one of the boys and I were opening our mail at the entrance to our dugout when a shell burst outside and a piece of shrapnel landed between a pal from Bury and me. We were standing not more than two feet apart: it was a lucky miss. The pal was Harry Hamer from Bury. Harry and I were very good friends right up to the end of the war. He and his wife paid us a few visits to Cecil Street, and we returned the visits. I also found out that another of the boys came from Blackburn. Whilst we were waiting to go forward, a few of the boys and I had a stroll into Arras. It was quite safe to go in at night - we were told he would give his gun positions away in front of Arras. There was a large square with merchant warehouses all along one side, and they had good cellars: from one cellar one could go down into another cellar. I also found out that the 'Pals' Battalion from Accrington and District was there. I saw, and had a chat with, Captain Fred Heys from Oswaldtwistle; he was the son of my old schoolmaster. One morning whilst here, we had six observation balloons up, and the Germans came over and shot all of them

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down in flames. The bombardment was getting heavier every night: the commencement of the battle would not be long now.

The Battle of Arras

The Battle of Arras was really a continuation of the Vimy Ridge battle. We moved up to our advance posts where the objectives were, first, the Yellow Line, then the Red Line. Early in the morning the bombardment lifted and our Brigade - the 28th - moved forward and we were soon through the Yellow Line. Now he was sending plenty of shells over as the troops were pushing forward to the Red Line. My unit followed close behind. The infantry had captured plenty of prisoners and they were being marched back behind our lines. The boys and I didn't know if we would be doing right if we made some of them help to carry the stretcher cases of our troops. There were a few hundred prisoners, with lots more being brought in. Many of them had head wounds, others arm and leg injuries. They looked tired and hungry, and a lot of our soldiers looked just as bad: what can you expect - under fire day after day plus the tension. Some can stand up to it more than others. One gets that feeling 'if I could only have a lie-down', but one just has to keep going. So, the prisoners who looked the fittest we had carrying the stretcher cases and the wounded.

Whilst the boys and I attended the walking wounded at our advance dressing station, it started to snow heavily and, with the prisoners bringing in the wounded, we couldn't cope. We had to lay them on the ground in the snowstorm: it was pitiful to hear the groans. As the morning advanced we had further to bring them. We kept the prisoners busy until lunchtime when they were taken further down the line with an armed guard. We were kept busy. There were plenty of stretcher cases - which were hard going in the snow.

There was cavalry waiting behind to be brought into action. The advance had slowed down a little - advancing a little here, and

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being repulsed there. It was like that day after day with heavy bombardments at different points along our front, a lot of air battles and anti-aircraft shells bursting which seemed to fill the sky. Our Division advanced and captured a little town which had been well fortified and, for a while, progressed slowly. At that time our quarters were a well made dugout and it was just as well that they were well made as the Germans opened up with a terrific bombardment: the shells were falling all over the place; the boys and I were glad of the dugout. But as soon as things got quiet, we were busy with the wounded; they were mostly shrapnel wounds. The weather was still very cold from an east wind, and the ground was hard and slippery. We made that dugout our quarters for the next few days. We had been at it night and day now for over a month: all these battles each day; one can't really grasp the magnitude, everything is on such a big scale. When things became a little quiet on our front, the bombardment would be going on to the right or the left.

I think that about this time our Division was taken out and sent to another small village. We were there for about a week and then we were on the move again. After a day's march we pulled in at a little village north of Arras. It was July and we were informed that the Division had to have what was called the 'King's Rest'. We had been in and out of the line since the Battle of Loos, and had marched many miles from one end of the front to the other: all the Division were due for a rest, and the weather was sunny and warm. We didn't have much to do so we played cards almost all day; we played brag and, one day, we were in a field in a dozen different parties when a staff officer and the CO appeared. We all jumped up to stand to attention, but he just said "Carry on, boys". It was very nice of him.

We used to walk to the village for a few beers and a game of housey-housey, but one of the wise boys who had just come back off leave brought the game of 'crown and anchor' which was a proper gamble. I stuck to Bingo. The lady of the farm was very kind; some days she would make us a salad, and gave us a few eggs now and again. Whist we were here we were issued with shorts, which would be a nice change in the hot weather. Our

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Brigade were all 'kilties' so it was a matter of falling into line. We were also issued with two silver thistles - one to be worn on each sleeve on a circle of blue cloth. It was the Division mark and looked very nice. They were on all the transport, and all the Division had been issued with them whilst out resting.

By now, we had become known as the 'Flying Division'. We were quite happy here but we were soon on the move again. However, just at this time, my ten days' leave had come through, and I was ordered to go to the Orderly Room where they gave me my ticket and a lot of back pay. They told me to make my way to the railway the best way I could, and it was easy to get a lift from one of our own transport. When I got to the railhead, I saw the RTO who told me the time at which I would be leaving. It was a long train composed of about eight carriages. I was surprised. In place of the cattle trucks I had expected, the troops were going home in style. We were bound for Boulogne and one was liable to be searched to see if one had anything in one's pack that shouldn't be taken home. They were mostly looking for letters which you might be taking home for some of your pals, to post when when you got back to England: they might contain valuable information which might give away the name of your unit, and the part of the line you had just left. The boat was crowded. I had bought a bottle of special wine to take home to celebrate.

The channel was very rough and we had an escort of two destroyers: it was so rough that the destroyers disappeared under the waves and would then surface; it was like that all the way across. We arrived at Southampton and caught the boat train to Euston. In the station, on one of the platforms, there was a long table, the length of which was piled up with sandwiches and cakes and cups & saucers - and we could help ourselves. It was nice to hear the ladies speaking: it seemed strange to me at the time, as I hadn't heard any ladies speaking English for a long time.

I caught the midnight train and arrived in Accrington at about 8am. I was feeling very tired as I walked up a steep hill with my

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pack feeling heavy; I had to have a rest half way up. Your mother lived at the top of the hill in Willows Lane; she was waiting but she didn't know what time I would be arriving. It was a nice feeling to know that you were home. I was able to have a good wash and a good breakfast of bacon and eggs - what a luxury! I felt much better so, after a couple of hours, I was on my way to my home which wasn't very far away through the fields.

My father and mother didn't know I was coming home, but my dog Tiger knew the night before. He was up and down the stairs all night and kept going to the front door and scratching it, and whining. My dad got up as he thought he wanted to go out, but he stayed behind the front door. When morning came, he kept walking backwards and forwards when, all of a sudden, he got really excited. He must have heard my footsteps at the top of the street and, when I got to the door, he would have broken it down if he could. When I opened the door, I got a hero's welcome: he jumped up and put his front paws on my shoulders and licked my face for a few minutes. My dad told all of what had happened during the night. I had been away for eighteen months - they say dogs have a sixth sense; he was a fine dog.

I found my parents quite well, except that my mother's hip was troubling her. But she was able to carry on with the housework, and she didn't show that she had been worrying all these months. She had five sons in uniform and it must have been a strain for her. I stayed for dinner, then went to her parents, after which we went visiting and seeing friends and relatives.

I heard that quite a lot of local lads had been killed and many wounded. They were in the local 'Pals' Battalion; there were lots of the boys I knew in my schooldays and there was gloom in the town.

So, after a day of visiting, your mother and I went to Bispham for three days. As soon as I got out of the train at Blackpool I was stopped by a 'Redcap' who asked me if I had a pass; so I took out my paybook and showed him a piece of paper which read: 'This is to say Private Atherton is free from scabies'. He said "On

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your way!", so I replied "The same to you!". He turned and stared at me and I thought he was going to come back - he perhaps would have done if your mother hadn't been with me. We had nice weather at Bispham. There were plenty of soldiers, and I got fed up with saluting officers. We went to a variety show one night. I had been home almost five days, so we decided to go back to Accrington and a round of visiting and a few parties (with a few English beers). We went to church on Sunday, but time soon passed and it was time to get packing. I was taking back more than I came home with - cigarettes, sweets and other such things that would be very useful: I couldn't get another thing in! So it was time to say goodbye to my father and mother; it was hard to leave them. My mother said a few times that she would not get us all back: it was a big strain on any mother to have five sons away.

I think that I left at about 10.30am and there were quite a few to see me off. They were mostly friends of your mother and four of her sisters. So I said my goodbyes and, this time, I knew where I was going and what to expect. I managed to catch my connection at Euston and arrived at Southampton in time to catch the boat. The channel was calm and we had an escort of one destroyer this time. When I got off the boat, I had to see the RTO who told me to get off the train at St Omer. It was a big station and the RTO there told me to go to a station close to Poperinghe where I was told that my Division had moved close to Ypres. So I had to thumb a lift and arrived at our headquarters on time.

I was soon in the line and, once again, to the sound of gunfire and shells bursting. I found myself at a place they called the 'road post': it wasn't a dugout, it was just a galvanised shelter well covered with sandbags (the ground was too soft for dugouts). It was a spot beside a sunken road with a footpath composed of duckboards. They were very dangerous, and some parts were always getting blown up by shells. It was rather quiet, as the fighting was further to our right. We used to get a few shells at intervals during the day. There were about fourteen of us here and, one morning, the others had decided that they would go across the road behind some ruined buildings, as they thought

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it would be safer than the tin shelter (as they called it). I tried to talk them out of it. I told them I would stay, and that it was a very serious offence to desert your post leading to a Court Martial. But they said that none of the officers would be coming to the bottom of this road which was 'Hellfire Corner'. The ammunition columns came up as fast as they could, as did the pack mules with shells, but the columns couldn't get through. The Germans were shelling the spot heavily: I felt very sorry for the drivers and the mules as they kept getting stuck in the mud. Later in the day, the Orderly Officer came round and asked where my mates were. I made an excuse for them, saying that they were taking cover behind the old buildings across the road. He said that that was all right, and gave me two packets of cigarettes. But it was lucky for them that I stayed at my post.

3rd Battle of Ypres

It was a desolate post, nothing but a few tree trunks, and a few trunks that had been knocked out by tanks. There had been heavy fighting here in an earlier battle. Coming up from St Omer the roads were packed with troops, transport and guns making for the battlefield. At our post we heard rumours that there was a big battle pending: it looked as though it was going to be in the Ypres sector. There was a big bombardment going on and there was plenty of activity in the air. The Germans knew what was going to happen very soon, and he was shelling behind the lines and shelling the roads; he also had a few observation balloons up. But we were only getting slight shelling. We had been getting quite a lot of rain for almost a week and the ground was just like cement: what shells dropped in our sector just went into the ground, burst, and sent up a shower of mud. There had been wounded and killed in the fighting earlier in the war who were just swallowed up in the mud and reported missing. One couldn't imagine a worse scene: looking out on that sea of mud.

I think I was here about three weeks when we were relieved by a unit of another Division. We went a short distance behind the lines for a short rest, after which we were moved into the Ypres

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sector where we found the conditions shocking. We had been ordered to parade in our trousers and to leave the shorts we had been wearing. It was raining and the bombardment was getting very heavy; shells seemed to be falling all over the place. Things were as bad as they could have been: one was wet and covered in mud and wondering how long we would have to be here before we were relieved. There must have been thousands of shells a minute going over to the Germans, and of course he was also sending a lot over. The dugout I was in was on the side of a lake, and there was a big white house on the other side of the lake. A large part had been knocked down and there were thousands of rats; one could see their eyes shining in the dark. It was Zonnebeke lake. After about three days we were moved further to the right and told to stack all our packs. We were told that we would have to lie out during the night. They were going to take six hundred yards up towards Passchendaele; the ground was awful. That night we joined the Camerons in their dugouts and spent the night playing pontoon; I remember that I got the 'bank' and couldn't lose it - I was coining money. After the Jocks had been losing for a while I was thinking that that they were wondering if I was a bit of a card sharper. We played the biggest part of the night and I had won a lot of francs. When we had finished I counted my winnings and threw a lot of notes on the floor and told them to share it between them.

In my unit, we always had a game of 'brag' or pontoon and you tried to lose your money, for when we were going into the line our winnings may never be any use to us: one never knows. Just before dawn the Camerons were ready, and so were we; so we got moving. The bombardment opened up (it was a creeping barrage) and the Jocks moved forward. The ground was awful and we were soon busy. It took six to a stretcher and, when you put your foot down, you were upto your knees in mud. There was an officer with us called Captain McGrath and he was shouting at us to get a move on. We took no notice of him: I think we were lucky to be able to move at all. We went into a dugout that the Germans had just left and found half a loaf; we called it brown bread, the Germans called it black bread. Upto now there had been no shells flying about but we knew this had to come after he

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had recovered from the shock. By the time we were through, the Jocks won their objective. It had been raining and we were wet and covered in mud; it was pretty quiet for the remainder of the day and, when it was getting dark, the officer told us to make our way to the dugout. But by the time we thought we had found the area where we started from, we found that we had been walking to our right. Then, suddenly, there was a flare up of guns opened up, and so had the German guns: the sky was full of star shells of all colours. We didn't know what was happening; the ammunition columns were dashing up to the guns and they could only see their way by the flashes of the guns. No one seemed to know whether we were attacking, or the Germans. So we got out of that area and tried to find our dugouts and the packs we had left stacked. But we found that a few shells had landed nearby and shell fragments had made holes in a few of the packs - but mine was at the bottom.

We had lost touch with our officer, so we were on our own. Now we didn't know where we were so we started on our way to find the other part of our unit. We were wet and hungry as we hadn't had anything to eat since early morning. We came across a german 'pill box' (a round one), so we thought that we would have a lie-down. We just filled the 'pill box', all our feet meeting in the centre and, in less than five minutes, it looked just as if you were boiling water with the steam rising from our feet! We were shivering, and didn't stay long. We went on our way, kicking the ground to see if there were any stray tins of bully beef and, at last, one of the boys found one - so we had a party! There wasn't much for each of us but it tasted good. (One of the boys and I used to write to each other for two or three years after the war, and we always passed a remark like 'do you still like bully?'.) We had been walking quite a while, as the guns were going off behind us and, looking to our right, we saw two lines of soldiers walking. So we made our way towards them and, as we got nearer, we saw that each soldier had his hands on the next man's shoulders; they had their eyes bandaged - about twenty of them in each line. We found out from their escorts that they had been almost blinded by gas - so gas must have been used in that flare-up. We had trouble finding our headquarters as we wandered

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about for quite a while. We stopped a lorry with a Divisional mark on it, and the driver told us that the Division had moved further back. So we had to report and to explain where we had been; they accepted our explanation and we arrived just in time for dinner - were we ready for it! We had only had that little bit of bully we had found. Afterwards we got busy scraping all the mud off our uniforms, but our uniforms were still wet. We spread our greatcoats on the ground and walked about shivering until we were almost numb.

When night came, we started to do what we generally did - we took off our shirts and, with a candle, we went through the seams killing the lice and destroying their eggs. That had been one of the troubles of the war - scratching - especially when we got down for the night: they prevented you from getting to sleep. The next morning I washed my shirt; it was now freezing and, after a while, my shirt was just like cardboard. When I had to put it on I crumpled it up and got it on the best way I could: it soon thawed out.

After a few days here we were on the move again, further north of Ypres. We made our headquarters in a small ruined village and, the next morning, my unit (which had been increased in numbers) moved forward into the line. We had to go up a sunken road which was very rough. We had to halt for a while at the beginning of this road as you could only go up the road in the dark. We had to carry everything we had. We had to help the cook with all his stuff, and there were other such things to be carried, like medical supplies. As we had a full pack, it was very difficult, especially as there were a lot of stones in the road which was about a mile and a half long. On our way up, we could hear the bullets striking against whatever they hit: this was the roughest I ever walked on and we had to leave the road and go across country for a little way. Then we had to do the remainder of the journey on a duckboard path. But, at present, the ground was pretty dry and we were glad to have arrived at our quarters. We found that we had relieved the Canadians, and we also found out that we were the tip of the Ypres salient: it was called Maple Cops; I expect that the Canadians had given it that name. So we

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found our dugouts, and we also found out that there was an ammunition dump - a rather large one - in the next one; it wasn't a pleasant thought having that next door.

It had been quiet so far. The officer-in-charge had a dugout a short way from us. The cook made some tea of bread and jam, after which we got down for the night. It was a quiet night and we were up at about 6.30am. The cook got busy and made a fire. He had just put the water on to make the tea when we had to lie flat on the ground quickly. The water went over: it must have been a large shell as it sounded just like an express train coming through a tunnel. It must have passed just over our bodies as we lay on the ground. If it had been any closer I would not have been writing this now. The shell fell into the next dugout to ours and killed seven Royal Engineers: it was an awful sight and we had to bring them out. Their pals came and took them away to be buried close by. The officer asked us if we had seen a sign on our way from the dugout and told us to look out the next time. It read 'Don't show your head if you want to see Blighty again'; so we had to creep on our stomachs to reach our dugouts.

Being the tip of the salient, we had rifle and machine-gun fire. One could hear the bullets pinging on and off in the daytime, and at times during the night: we were all scared of going to the latrines at night. I thought about the dugout with that ammunition inside; we thought about it when we got down to it at night. But he was only dropping a few so far; apart from a few shells, it was very quiet. The heavy fighting was still going on at Passchendaele, which was quite near on our right. I think it was our Division's job to hold the two flanks of the salient. Our own guns were very quiet and we had very little to do. We could even play pontoon some days, and the officer was a good sport. Our rations were very good; we seemed to get a little bacon in the morning and more bread. The stew was nice and hot, and we had more bread and jam for tea. We could have our meals out in the open - just like a picnic party - but, one day, he gave a quick burst of shelling and, of course, we had to make a quick dive for our dugout. But some burst very near. We were troubled by rats and, one night, a cheeky rat pinched my bit of candle; as

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soon as I had blown it out, it came and grabbed it - before that little bit of red at the top of the wick had gone out.

We had been here three weeks when we were told to pack up and get ready to move out after dusk. I think we were relieved by the New Zealanders. I was glad we were getting away from that ammunition dump. When it got dark we had to go down that rough stoney road again, and it seemed worse going down. We got back to our Headquarters and I found that I had quite a big mail waiting for me: two parcels and about half a dozen letters; so I had quite a nice tea that day with cakes. I had a tin of salmon in the parcel from your mother; I also got a supply of cigarettes, writing paper, shaving soap, pencils etc. I treated a few of my pals to the sweet cakes.

The day after arriving here we moved still further behind the line, and the day after it was a full parade, which was the first for a while. We were told to have a good clean up. The transport had got busy cleaning the wagons, and cleaning & shining the harnesses: they put the chains in sacks, shaking them until they looked like silver. We wondered what was coming next. We were informed that there was going to be a march past the King of the Belgians; so we were marched off into a big field in which there were a lot of 'brass hats'. The parade was led by a pipe band, followed by the Battalions of the three Brigades, the transport coming last. It was quite a nice turnout. There were three pipe bands, one for each Brigade, and it was a fine day and no German aircraft came over. After the parade we marched back to our Headquarters. We were now a good distance behind Ypres, but the Battle of Passchendaele was still going on with the guns blasting away for a few days.

Then we were on the move again. A corporal told me that we were going south; that was good news: I was glad to be getting away from the Ypres sector - with all that mud. So we marched off early in the morning. The weather was fine (it was about the middle of September 1917) and all the boys were in good spirits. Two of the boys had mouth organs and a little music makes a lot of difference. After a long march the field kitchen was smoking as

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the cook was getting our stew ready. We halted by the side of the road and had our stew. We had about an hour here and saw another Division passing us from the other direction. On our way so far, we saw for the first time the number of dumps, and all kinds of supplies. We saw one field full of cans of petrol and drums of oil. New sidings and railway lines had been built, as had new roads. It just shows what it takes to keep an army going.

Well, our rest was over, and it was 'fall in and off we go again'. The boys with the mouth organs started off with an old army song 'Oh why did I join the army?' and, after about two hours, we halted for ten minutes - just time for a cigarette (we had an issue of cigarettes before we left). And then it was time to fall in again; no one had fallen so far. After another two hours we halted again for some tea and an army biscuit. By this time we had covered many miles and our packs were feeling very heavy. We were now going into open country, and we were told that we were going across the ground we had won during the Battle of the Somme. We hadn't gone very far when it began to be heavy going: it was all clay and very wet. It was harder than walking on hard frozen snow and we were soon slipping and sliding; when you took a step you would slip back one. But we had to keep going and we were all getting very tired. The officer was mounted but he still kept us going. If we halted, there was nowhere to sit down except in the wet clay. The officer had to let us have a little rest, so we sat on our packs and had a smoke. Then the corporal told us that we didn't have far to go: just a few more miles. I had had enough. For many miles, I just wanted to fall out and all the boys felt the same. It was no joke marching over slipping clay, but I kept pulling myself together. We had marched well over twenty miles when a corporal came alongside and said "You see that little village in the distance? That's the end of the march". When we got there and were shown our quarters it was early evening, and I just threw my pack on the floor; I think I fell asleep before I touched the ground! I had been too tired to eat, and slept until the morning. I remember waking up feeling refreshed and ready for my little bit of bacon and dipped bread.

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We found out that we were well behind the line. We were out on parade early, but we were given an easy day. I think we were at this place about a week; there were two small beer houses where the boys got the bingo cards out. The following night there was a pleasant surprise: there was to be a film show. It was held in the open and the film was being shown on the gable end of a house which had been whitewashed. It was a Charlie Chaplin film, but I forget its name; all the boys enjoyed it as it was quite a change.

The Battle of Cambrai

We moved a little nearer to the line and learned that the Battle of Cambrai was in progress. There was now much activity and the bombardment was getting very heavy. The observation balloons were up but I think that, from where we were, they could have been German. There were gun battles going on above, but we didn't take part in this battle; I think we were brought here as a reserve Division. It was only a short battle, lasting about two weeks. So things went very quiet and we just settled down in some old buildings. It was getting very cold (it was now about the end of October). The NCO's quarters were pigsties which, when cleaned out, looked very comfortable. We didn't do so badly either - we were in an old barn which had the biggest part of the roof still on. The job now was keeping warm. The next day we were put on trench digging; each man had to do so much and, when he had done his stint, he had finished. We had the same job every day for a while, then we were put to sawing old tree trunks.

March 21st 1918

The expected German offensive opened

We were sawing these tree trunks to certain lengths: they were for defence purposes. This was going on all along the line. The troops were making night raids to capture prisoners for any information they could get from them. The generals knew that a

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big attack would be launched in the Spring, but not just where it would be. So the troops were building trenches all along the front: we were digging trenches and sawing trunks all through the winter. It kept us warm and, at nights, we played cards - mostly 'brag', a real gambling game. There was nothing else to do as there was no village nearby we could go to. I had the gamble of my life. There was a school of eight or nine in the round and they had all 'passed' after a few calls, so there were only two of us left - myself and another of the boys - and we kept on bragging. It went on and on, as all the boys in the unit were spectators. I had three Queens and we had both put about a hundred francs in the kitty. When he called me, he had three Kings: he was all of a tremble and his hands shook when he picked up his winnings. I was broke then, so I borrowed ten francs from him; it was an exciting game!

On or about March 19th we were told to get packed up. the boys and I had our washing on the line and it was as hard as boards as there has been a keen frost during the night. So we had to take them and thaw them out by the cookhouse fire. We moved out after lunchtime and we were on our way after the longest stay in one part of the line. On the way, we passed the Division that was relieving us and we arrived at a pretty little village which hadn't been touched by the war. I remember that there was a nice church with a tall white steeple which looked very inspiring. It was going dark as we reached what were very good billets. After a wash and a little rest we got our tea of bread and jam. We had a look round the village and found a few *estaminets*; we didn't play Bingo but went for a stroll round the village where we came across an outside film show similar to the last one on the side of a house - another Charlie Chaplin. I think they showed these comic films to cheer the boys up.

The next day we had a kit inspection and, the morning after, just as I was getting my piece of bacon, the German bombardment started: the Spring offensive had begun. It was like a few thunder bangs rolled into one; the ground shook as we could see the shells bursting over the area we had just left. One could scarcely hear one's own voice: we had only just got out in time as we had

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only left the area two days before. How lucky the unit and I were to have escaped being captured, killed or wounded. The shells had not reached the village, so we were ordered to pack up as quickly as we could and we were ready about lunchtime. We had our stew and were on the move. I don't remember how far we had marched as the sound of guns faded away. It was beginning to get dark and we halted for a short while. Looking back, there were fires everywhere; the army were burning all the dumps as nothing had to fall into German hands. It was just one big glare in the sky; as far as one could see to the right or the left there were fires. It had started to rain as we moved off again and, after a few more miles, we pulled into a field. It was just pouring down and we were ordered not to take off our shoes or puttees, and to be ready to move off at a moment's notice. We didn't have to stay long: we had to move out quickly.

The Somme river flowed past the bottom of the field into which we had pulled off the road, and the Germans were making their way along the banks of the river; they were not very far away. So we had to get away quickly into a wide road lined with tall trees. All down one side of the road were Bengal Lancers - hundreds of them - ready to go into action. We marched along this road for quite a long way, and still there were Bengal Lancers. Some of the roads in France are between twenty and thirty miles long (they were built after the 1870 Franco/German war for military purposes). There were still more fires and it seemed as if all the country was on fire. We turned off the road to find a large YMCA canteen blazing and it seemed as if hundreds of troops were helping themselves to anything they could salvage. But we had to keep moving. By this time the German aircraft were bombing the roads which were now becoming congested. We passed a wagon which must have had engine trouble: it was just tipped into the ditch. A column of lorries was loaded up with as much as could be got on - with soldiers singing.

We could see two main roads - one on our left and one on our right, in the distance, with transport moving at a very slow pace. And all the time we could hear the bombers above, and the

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bombs bursting, so we were moving slowly, everything going one way. The rain had now stopped. I was feeling tired, with a full pack and a waterproof ground sheet on my shoulders. The fires were still burning and we could hear ammunition dumps being blown up. That night, we pulled into an empty cotton mill - only a small one - for the night. We heard bombs being dropped close by but we were too tired to take any notice. The sergeant called "Show a leg!" very early and, after a little bit of bacon and a slice of bread, we were off again. The road was jammed with all kinds of transport making it slow going; we kept being held up by someone with engine or tyre trouble. Our transport was composed of horses and mules, and they didn't seem to like being hemmed in amongst all the transport. Still we kept moving slowly when we could and, looking back at this stage, most of the fires had died down; the sky seemed to be full of smoke. We seemed to be moving in a straight line along the two roads I mentioned earlier - one to our right and one to our left in the distance. We came across a lot more transport dumped in the ditches and, after a few more miles, we left the road and took a narrow sunken road. The CO must have known what place to make for and, after a few miles, we put into a field for the night and, by this time we were ready for tea of bread and jam. We had to sleep in the open: our uniforms were still very damp but I got to sleep. During the night, four big Howitzers had pulled into the far end of the field and opened fire - that was the loudest alarm clock I ever heard.

There had been a frost during the night and everywhere was white. The boys and I just looked as if we had been covered with flour, and my body was numb; I couldn't feel that I had any feet, so we had to do a lot of stamping of feet and swinging of arms to get back the circulation. We were ready for a cup of tea and our bit of bacon and a slice of bread - just one slice: the way things were at the moment that was all we got. We always carried iron rations, of course, just in case: three dog biscuits and a tin of bully.

Those four Howitzers kept firing away as we got ready to move off by dawn but, for some reason, stores belonging to the

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officers' mess had to be left behind. I think some stores had been picked up from the burning canteens we had passed during the night. I remember that we stopped for a little rest and a smoke near one of these canteens: they would be the supplies for the following day. Another of the boys (who came from near Aldershot) and I were left behind with the stores and a can of petrol, and instructed to burn the stores if the wagon didn't return for the stores. So there was nothing to do but wait. We felt too cold to sit down, so we kept walking up and down the road. We could only hear the guns faintly now, and it was very misty and frosty; everywhere was white. We had been waiting quite a while, and feeling hungry, so we decided to have a look at the stores: it would give us an idea of how the officers lived! They were able to get extras when anywhere near a town and we found a tin of rabbit - that was something the Tommies didn't get. So we sat on the side of the road to eat it; everything by this time had gone quiet - not even a bird in the sky. One could almost hear a pin drop: it was a strange feeling - as if the whole world had come to a standstill.

There was no sign of the wagon, the Germans were coming nearer, and we were just two lonely souls with a tin of petrol and some matches. It was a very serious position to be in. We kept thinking 'supposing all the field ambulances had been cut off by the Germans'; we didn't know what was happening or how near the Germans were. Would they advance up the road or come across the road where we were? We kept looking to see if there was any sign of the wagon. We could be captured, or shot trying to get away. We could also be court-martialled for cowardice if we had fired the stores and then the wagon came and found the stores had gone up in smoke. We would have to wait until we could almost see the whites of their eyes. Higgie (that's what they called my pal) unscrewed the top of the petrol can to be ready when, looking up the sunken road, we saw the wagon coming down at a gallop. Higgie shouted "It's about bloody time! In another five minutes there wouldn't have been any stores for you". Ever since, on a frosty day when everything is white, I think of that day when two of us stood and waited between two armies.

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They came with what we called the box cart - what the unit used for bringing the mail. It was like a heavy hand cart which, when loaded, left no room for Higgie and me. So we sat down again at the side of the road to have a smoke and, looking in the distance across the road, we saw something like horses moving. Could it be a German patrol? Or Cavalry? It was no longer trench warfare; it was now open country and anything could happen. Then we could hear rifle fire, faintly at first, but becoming louder and louder. Then there seemed to be a line of horses coming towards us. As they got nearer we could see it was a battery of field guns. They pulled up quickly, unhooked their horses, turned the guns round, and fired just six rounds from each gun. Then they turned the guns round, hooked up the horses again, and, at a gallop, dashed down the embankment across the road and up the other side - just to the left of Higgie and me. It's a wonder how those guns kept on four wheels. It all happened so quickly and, looking back, the dash of the battery across the road would have made an exciting shot for a cine camera: so full of action.

So now we could tell by the sound of the gunfire that the Germans were getting very near, and we didn't have long to wait, for in the distance we could see a line of infantry coming towards us. They turned round and lay flat on the ground, fired a few quick rounds, got up, crossed the road and shouted to us "Come on mate!". Then another line came in sight and did the same - a few quick rounds before crossing the road; they were fighting a rearguard action. We couldn't see anything else in the distance, but now we were alone between two armies and Higgie and I decided it was time to go, so we followed the infantry but keeping well to the right of them so that we wouldn't be in their line of fire. We were lost: we didn't know where our new headquarters were, so we kept on walking. It was moorland with not a building in sight. The area was called Combles and it was so quiet here one couldn't think there was a war; yet it was so near. Two soldiers of the Corps of Signals asked us what was happening and told us that they had a post there. We told them to get moving as he wasn't far away. There were lots of posts like this one belonging to the Signals Corps, for some are a long way behind the line and they only hear the rumble of the guns. This

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part of the country was like the Yorkshire Moors. The two signal men thought we were joking.

We had lost touch with the infantry and everything was so quiet now you could have been going for an afternoon stroll. We went on for a few miles, when we saw a soldier coming towards us. We could see he was an airman, and he asked us what was happening. It's a small world - it was my brother George! We had dropped on an airfield and we were very glad to meet each other so far from home. He didn't know me in my tin hat. We had a few minutes with him and, before we parted, I told him I would tell mother, who would be very pleased. He asked us if we had any cigarettes, so we gave him a packet of American ones. We said our goodbyes and we were on our way again.

In the distance we could see the town of Albert: we could see the church or cathedral tower with the golden Madonna hanging from the top upside down. At the time, there was a widespread belief that when it fell, the war would come to an end. As we got nearer to the edge, it was like looking down from the edge of a cliff and we saw a remarkable sight: the guns, large and small made a large semi-circle almost round the town. By the look of it we didn't intend to retreat any further.

Thousands of American soldiers were now trained and ready for the firing line - the German target being a big rail centre at Amiens. We didn't go down as we now had to find where our headquarters were. In the distance there was a crowd of soldiers and, when we got nearer, there was a notice chalked up 'Stragglers Post'. The RTO (Regimental Traffic Officer) told us the way, and we had another six miles to walk. We were given some tea, bread and jam and it tasted good - we were ready for it as it had been almost fourteen hours since Higgie and I joined at that tin of rabbit. It was almost dark when we arrived, and we had to report on what we had been doing and to explain our absence. They simply said "Very interesting. Dismiss!" Some of the boys had found a few bottles of wine in a house that had been evacuated, but the CO confiscated them; they ought to have kept it dark.

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I forgot that Sergeant Wilson, whom I mentioned earlier, was wounded during the retreat.

I didn't know how things were going - whether the Germans had got through that semicircle of guns I mentioned. We didn't stay in this village long and we were on the move again going north. I was hoping that it wouldn't be the Ypres sector; I had had enough of that place with its mud. We didn't stay long in any part of the line: we were always going further north and, one evening, we pulled into a field for the night behind Dunkirk. The drivers were told to sleep as near to their horses and mules as they could, as the Germans came over bombing every night. But he left us alone and we were off again early the next morning.

We guessed that we could only be making for the coast, and we arrived at a place called Nieuport where we were marched into an open space in front of a large hotel which looked as if it had been bombed a few times. We thought it was going to be our billet, but it was only for the officers. We were dismissed by the sergeant and told to fall out; and we all dashed up the sandhills to have a look at the sea. We had just had a peep at the sea when six or more shells burst around us - so we came down faster than we went up! The sergeant-major came towards us and gave us a good ticking off for not obeying the notice that no one had to show his head above the sign. We were told to pick up our packs and were marched to some huts away from the front. The officers and NCOs were having the hotel as headquarters.

By now, the cook had brewed the tea and the orderly man drew the rations. We were all ready for our tea - the usual bread and jam, after which we had the remainder of the day to do as we pleased. Three of us had a walk over the sands away from the coast. There were a lot of houses which had been boarding houses in peacetime. We were now on the left flank of the battle line, but the Division hadn't been brought here to play with their buckets and spades. Up to now we hadn't heard how things were going further on our right; we could only hear the sound of guns. Before 'lights out' we had a game of cards. There were more huts than men and, that night, I had one to myself.

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I hadn't been in bed long when I felt that there was something wrong. I got up and shook my greatcoat. I lay down again, but I still wasn't satisfied. So I made a proper search. As I touched the bottom of one of my greatcoat sleeves I felt something soft: it could only be a rat that had got inside the lining which had come loose at the shoulder. So I got one of my boots and felt where its head was before giving it a good hammering. I left it there until morning when I found that it was a large rat. Outside, there were a few running about and we soon found out that the place was alive with rats. One of the boys had been round to see what he could find; he found some cordite gun charges, and we had a brain-wave: we would go ratting.

We got some petrol from Transport, and whatever paper we could find. There was a road close by with steep banking on each side. We made a search and soon found plenty of rat holes which we made wider. We pushed in the gun charges as far as we could, soaked the paper with petrol, and set light to it. We stood well back to watch the result; it blew the rats out at another hole. They came out bald: it had taken all the hair off them. We carried on until we had finished all the cordite; it was quite a joke.

Another night we came across four infantrymen, two of them on guard with fixed bayonets. They called out "Halt!" and we soon got chatting. They told us it was an observation post from which they could see everything that went on in Ostend. One of the boys bribed them with a packet of army issue cigarettes, and they told us that we could have a good look next day when it was light. It was very interesting, but they told us to keep our heads down. We could see the Germans on the promenade. The post was well hidden and they let us look through the binoculars, through which we could see the Germans walking about, some of them with a lady friend. They looked just like they were on holiday: it was a nice clear day.

The following morning, we were on the move again. I heard that things would be different soon: Ostend was going to be attacked from the sea, and there was going to be a big battle in which our

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Division would be on the extreme left flank. Our unit was stocking up with medical supplies, so I didn't think the Germans would be in Ostend much longer. Then we had to move further inland, this time being billeted in some empty houses. As I suspected, there was something big going to happen: there were loads of bandages and splints, etc. Things had been very quiet for a long time on this front (we had relieved the Canadians who had expected the waves [*? - Not clear in written text*] to relieve them, it had been so quiet). There was very heavy fighting away on our right, and I expected that it would be spreading our way. We were being pushed back further south, and there were thousands of troops engaged: British, French, American, and Canadian. The only news we got was from one of the boys who had just returned from leave and had brought a newspaper with him. He said the people were eagerly following the news from the front; there was no radio then, one had only the newspaper.

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There was very heavy fighting all along the line and we would be advancing at any time, as the Germans were now being pushed back in the south. So, we were getting prepared and ready and, early one morning, the German guns opened up with a big bombardment which didn't last long. Our Brigade was in the line but we only had a few casualties. Two or three German observation planes came over but they were soon chased away. The Germans were on Kemmel Hill and I expected that our Division would have to take it. The guns were getting busy; he was sending shells all over the place. We had had quite a lot of rain, but the ground wasn't too bad. However, it was getting a little colder - and we were still in our shorts. We were now bringing in more wounded; as they were now advancing, we had to move up with them. He was now sending a lot of shrapnel over as the Brigade continued to move forward. We had to keep our post which we made in a dugout in a bank at one side of the road: it was deep and quite big and had been evacuated the day before.

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The boys were beginning to wonder if the Germans were retreating, but the next day he launched a counter-attack and we were soon busy. The officer (all officers in the Medical Corps were doctors) sent me back with a message that he wanted one of the ambulances as he was crowded out with wounded. As we were going back, a battery on our right must have had a direct hit as we saw a few men lying on the ground. But we couldn't stop and, as we got further along the road, we had to turn to our left as there was a Belgian armoured car.

Two soldiers stepped into the middle of the road and called out "No passe". He had put a real barrage on the road - it was almost like a hailstorm - so they put out their arms and tried to stop us. But our driver, Jack Gapper, who came from London, got going again, as fast as he could, with all our fingers crossed. Just as he pulled in at the dugout, some shrapnel went through the bonnet and hit something (I can't remember what part). So we went straight in and, at the end, a shell burst right over our heads; but it was a dud and just sent down a shower of sparks. We waited until things had died down outside and, when we got out, we wondered where all the soldiers had sprung from. I remember seeing one side of the road with motor cycles: they belonged to the motor machine-gun sector.

The Belgian soldiers who tried to stop us were the first Belgians I had seen. We couldn't stop as we were under orders and on active service: you have to carry out those orders no matter how great the danger. If the shell that burst over our heads had not been a dud, I wouldn't be writing this. Jack Gapper, the driver, was awarded the Military Medal. He was a nice, jolly, chap, but I didn't envy him although we were both in it together; if he is alive today, he will think of me many times.

The Germans were still sending over plenty of shells - both shrapnel and other types - and the Brigade was still advancing, although we were in the dark as to what was happening elsewhere. They took Kemmel Hill which had been a good observation post. We kept moving up as the weather continued

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to be good to us - so far very little rain - but it was getting cold (it was now mid-October).

I think it was about this time that we were relieved by the New Zealanders and we went back not many miles to a small town that the Germans had held before the battle commenced. We were billeted in an empty school and, whilst we were here, we were issued with a new lot of underclothing which we used as a pillow for the first night. In the morning, the clothes were alive with lice - big green ones; the Germans had used this place and they must have been very lousy. So we had to get rid of the lice, going through all the seams and hanging the clothes from the ceiling until the day we moved out.

We hadn't long to wait before we were off again. We had quite a few miles to march before we came to a canal which the Royal engineers had built a pontoon bridge across. There was a steep bank on each side of the canal and, with our transport being horse-drawn, we all had to give a hand to pull the wagon; at the other side, we all had to put our shoulders to it. A party had been detailed to get the wagon across. We were given a few minutes rest and a smoke. Our aircraft had been very busy, and we could see them going over the German lines, pinning their aircraft down. But a few sneaked over very low, machine-gunning the roads as we advanced. We were almost caught in the line of fire. There happened to be an open space in which there was a small building (in peacetime it could have been a cab rank) and this plane, which was flying very low, kept firing at us. We kept circling round this building out of his line of fire. He meant to have us, but either his bullets ran out or he got fed up: if that building hadn't been there he would have had us.

So we fell in and moved on. The Germans were retreating fast now, moving their guns back, and we were not getting any shelling. It was near the end of October and there were rumours that there was going to be an armistice. We put in somewhere - it was a small village. We were ready for something to eat and the cook had the stew almost ready in the field kitchen. We then had a good rest before exploring some of the buildings the Germans

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had just left, leaving nothing of value. It looked as if we were in a farming area; other troops were passing through the village (mostly artillery) and, after a good look round, it was time for tea: bread and jam. In the evening there was nothing to do but play cards. All the time I had been out there I had never been detailed for guard or cookhouse duty (such as peeling potatoes). I don't know why; I suppose I must have been lucky.

We were soon on the road again early the following morning and our next stop was at a place called Hulle. We were billeted in a small building which stood by itself in the middle of a field. I had promised one of the boys who came from London to make a sketch from memory of an old building we had occupied earlier. So I made him a little picture of it: he then had a picture of the place where he was wounded (he was sent to a hospital down the line and had rejoined us). I had to do it by candlelight. After I had finished it I went out and joined some of the boys outside, when we heard a plane which was flying low. I didn't know how he could see us, but he came just over the top of the building opening up with machine-gun fire. We scattered and fell flat; it was all over in a minute, and the next morning there was a notice up at Headquarters to say that there would be an armistice at 11am that day.

Armistice

We didn't move that day and, that night, I went down into the village. There were few houses, but there was great excitement. There were four of us and we were grabbed by half a dozen women who took us to one of their homes where we had a few bottles of wine. We couldn't understand a word they were saying - except *merci* and *tres bon* and *comprez*, but we had a jolly time. They were all middle-aged and they were now looking forward to seeing their sons. They didn't want us to leave, but we made our way back to our billets. At the next village we marched through there was more excitement: they were throwing flowers and some of the girls threw their arms around us and kissed us.

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We had to push our way through before we could get to the village.

We pulled into a village and a sergeant told us that the Corps General and a few staff officers would be taking the salute on the village green. There was an *estaminet* close to the green, so we went to have a drink where we heard quite a few men speaking French. When we went outside we found that it was the village band - about six or eight bandsmen with hats that looked as though they had been kicked about. And their uniforms looked as if they only had a few buttons on; their instruments all seemed dented. So we went back to have another drink until the 'brass' arrived. In about a quarter of an hour they arrived in a big staff car which was flying the Corps flag. When they all got out, the band opened up with the National Anthem. They played three lines, and then played them all over again. The General and staff officers stood at the salute as they played the lines over again, but they got fed up and stood at ease.

We then heard a wonderful sound in the distance. It was the pipers! We could hear them coming nearer and nearer and the officers stood at the salute until the pipe band and the infantry had passed. Then, in the distance, we could hear another pipe band very faintly. It was wonderful to hear the sound approaching; the officers stood at the salute again until the Battalion had passed. There were another two battalions to pass with full pipe bands: it was a wonderful sight to see such a smart body of men. They looked so clean, with their kilts swirling as they marched past. One couldn't imagine that they had been fighting a short time before; some of them had been fighting for three or four years, and I knew what they had been through.

Then we were on the move again. As we moved along we saw German guns in the fields - large and small - hundreds of them parked in neat rows. The same thing was happening all along, and at last we arrived at Cologne. The German civilians just stared at us. We had to pass over the Hohenzollern bridge (the bridge in the pen drawing in the dining room). General Plumer took the salute at the entrance to the bridge. It was a wonderful

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bridge and was very wide: the troops had to 'break step' half way across. I didn't see much of Cologne but, from the bridge, it looked a nice city.

So on our way we went for about twenty miles to a town called Oligs; it was the Sheffield of Germany. It wasn't a big town but it was nice and clean. We were billeted in a school room (the staff and scholars must have been moved to make room for us). We had orders that we must go out in threes so, on our first night, we had a walk to the centre of the town. The elderly people just glared at us, but the younger ones were quite friendly. We came across some who could speak English and they asked what part we came from. We called at an hotel for a lager which was quite different from our beer at home. It was quite a posh hotel and the landlord was very nice to us, but the customers just stared at us: we may have been the first British soldiers they had seen. We went round and looked at the shops which had hardly anything on view. The civilians seemed to be wearing some kind of clogs. Our blockade had played havoc and our submarines had prevented almost any supplies from getting to them: they were almost starving.

After a week, the ban was lifted: the army thought it was safe to go out alone. We had a good look round the following afternoon and we found that they had a large swimming pool in which a lot of teenagers were enjoying themselves. We couldn't go far out of town as it was out of bounds; it was very pleasant in the suburbs and it seemed a nice country. In the distance, the swimmers kept shouting to us to come and have a swim. There was a refreshment bar on one side but the only thing they had was beer; they had hardly any food for themselves. We thought it strange to find them swimming in November but it was a mild day: we felt rather cold and thought that they must have been keen.

We were given our duties; one was to act as orderly man: keeping our billets tidy. The rest of the day was ours. We heard that they were giving the infantry peacetime drill, but the Jocks decided they were going to have none of it, one of their

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battalions laying their rifles down - and I didn't blame them; they just wanted to relax and get home. It was only natural after what they had gone through: they just wanted their demob papers to come through. It was more like being on holiday for us as we passed the time away.

One day I had a run into Cologne for supplies for the officers mess with one of the NCOs and, whilst going, he waved a little piece of paper saying "I think we'll spend this". It was a two hundred mark note which, as he waved it, blew out of his hand and into the river. I didn't ask him how he managed it, or what happened when he got back to Headquarters. Another day we were told to fall in with a day's rations, and we found out that we were going for a picnic and a sail up the Rhine. There were a few hundred of us and it was a nice frosty day. We went to a place called Slosschberg where there was a large castle at the top of a hill. There was a guide waiting to show us around, and the first thing we saw when we got through the large doorway was the Kaiser's family tree which finished at the other side of the large room with the present Kaiser: there wasn't room for any more; the present one, who had fled to Holland, was the last. In another room there were paintings on the wall, none of which would be any less than 15 feet x 16 feet. One of the paintings had a few horses on, and the guide asked us if we could find anything wrong with it. None of the party could, so the guide pointed out that the artist had painted one of the horses with only three legs. The other large rooms were well decorated with wonderful furniture, and with portraits on the walls - it was more like the stately homes of England, and it was all very interesting.

It was time to get on board again. We passed a few castles on the banks of the river amid beautiful scenery and we enjoyed it all. These excursions went up the river every day for other parties of the Division and, at our billet, men began to come round trying to bargain with us. They would bring knives, razors and cases of cutlery around bargaining for exchange with a piece of soap, or bread or any scraps of meat we had. I got two razors and two pairs of scissors, and I could have got a case of cutlery for a chunk of butter or a bar of soap. They had nothing, and the

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German mark wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. We felt sorry for them.

Before the war, they flooded this country with cheap goods, made in Germany, and, in this town (which was known as the Sheffield of Germany), we learned that they used to take work home to finish off knives, scissors etc. Not long after this, there had been so much flogging of goods that the army went round with lorries searching houses: they recovered hundreds of blankets and other goods that the troops had flogged.

About this time we had our first fall of snow, but not much. Concerts for the troops were being given in the local music hall and I went one night; it was quite good. That weekend, three of us went a long way out of bounds: we thought we would risk it although there was a little snow on the ground; it was more like a Spring day. We heard music in the distance so we went to find out what it was. It turned out to be a German beer garden and, as we stood at the entrance, they waved for us to come in. They brought us beer, and we stayed for a while. They all seemed happy; I expect that they were some of the wealthy class, but they had all been very nice to us. When we thought it was time to leave, we wished them goodbye.

Mr Hamer from Bury went out with us this night (it was the first time, as he had been tied up at Headquarters, as he was the despatch rider). Two amusing incidents happened. We went into a small beer house and, whilst we sat having our drinks, we saw a few people going up some steps. So we went up to find that it was a concert room. There were two comics on the stage - the old-fashioned ones with red noses - so we sat at the back. The people in front of us (men with their wives) got up and walked out when they saw who we were. Then others walked out, followed by more and more, until there were only the two comics left. We couldn't understand it, unless they thought that we were going to cause trouble. So we left.

Later that evening we went into a small hotel which was nice and clean. As we sat round the small table having our drinks, a nice-

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looking young lady was waiting on. When she brought the next round of drinks she put her arms round my neck and kissed me, saying "My little angel". She was tall and blonde and the man behind the bar stared at her: he must have been her father. We went back the next night, but she wasn't there: her father stared at us!

At about this time I think we had seen everything of interest in the town, and more snow had fallen. It was getting near Christmas and the children were enjoying themselves tobogganing: it was great for them as it wasn't very cold; the weather was nice and sunny. The people in the houses were making a great show for Christmas - almost every house had a small decorated Christmas tree in the window. In peacetime they celebrated more than we did. Some of the troops had route marches with their pipe-bands leading; I expect the marches were to keep them fit. I think that we had boiled potatoes on Christmas day, and meat and vegetables and pudding in the billet. We passed a lot of time away playing cards.

I started to draw cartoons, putting them on the order board and making fun of the officers. The orderly used to smile when he came round. I have forgotten to mention my drawings. I bought a bottle of Indian ink, some black crayons and a sketching pad, and since coming, if we got into a billet with a good white-washed wall, I used to put pictures and draw a frame round. So, every time we got to a new billet, they used to ask "where is the artist, and come along and get some pictures on the wall?". I also drew a few pictures on my pad. I had to do it on the quiet as it was against army rules; if I had been caught I should have been for it. Every day now we could see soldiers with full packs on their way home with their demob papers. Some of our boys had already gone home and we were all waiting for the day. We just went for walks in the daytime when the weather was good. A few of us would go out early round by the bathing pool and the girls in the houses opposite used to wave to us. We went out of bounds many times, trying to go somewhere fresh each time.

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Harry Hamer's demob came about two months before mine; so did Sergeant Wilson's from Blackburn. Then, after a long wait, mine came through in July. It was hard saying goodbye to the boys, after enduring so much together; we had lost many. So I said my goodbyes and went on my way. I didn't have to travel in cattle trucks this time: we had nice railway coaches which we boarded in the town, going over the famous bridge on our way to the coast. The train pulled up at a big rail centre in St Omer for about half an hour. I bought a bottle of their best wine to celebrate when I got home. We arrived at Boulogne and went straight on the boat, which was away in a very short time. The channel was calm but we had no escort this time and we very soon arrived in Southampton.

I began to think about what had happened since I left as a recruit and returning as a veteran. We caught the boat train which was at one of the platforms on which there were tables with cups of tea and sandwiches. We were soon on our way to Euston, and more tea and sandwiches. I had to wait a few hours for the midnight train to the North, and it was very interesting watching all the groups that were rushing about catching their trains. As usual during the war, there were a lot of loose women outside the gates at one end of the station who were shouting to the soldiers "come and have a night's lodging"; I couldn't see if the soldiers were taking any notice of them. I put my pack in the left-luggage office and had a look round: one wouldn't have thought that there had been a war; there was no shortage of anything and there had been no rationing of any kind. I would have liked to have gone to a show but I was afraid of missing my train. I had a look at the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace, and Whitehall. It was the first time I had seen them and it was quite an interesting stroll. I called into a cafe and had egg and chips - I had almost forgotten the taste of them, but I enjoyed them very much.

So I strolled back to the station where there were a few hundred Tommies waiting for the same train as I was. The biggest part had brought bottles of beer with them and, as the train moved off, there was plenty of shouting and, on the way, there was plenty of

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singing. I remember one of the songs (an old one) 'We all go the same way home'. As we went along, the singing died down; I expect that they were as tired as I was: it had been a long day. In the early morning the train stopped and the RTO called out "All going to this place and that place to leave the train". I had only a short time to wait when I was put on another train, this time to Oswestry. I didn't know why until I got there. Many at a time were marched into a building where they gave me a little bag to put all my money and other things I had in my pockets. I was then told to take off all my clothes as we were to be fumigated to avoid taking any lice home. We hadn't to wait long before our clothes were ready, and I got all my things back - and that was the end of my life in the army.

I then had a long wait for the train, but there was a canteen - nothing free, I had to pay for what I had: a cup of tea and a sandwich. I got on a train and was told to change at Bury. There was an old gentleman on the platform who took all our little party into the bar on the station to have a glass of beer. He kept saying "fill them up again" until, at last, we had to say no more, and thankyou; if we had carried on we would have had to be carried out! A porter told us that he had been doing that kind of thing since the war began; it was a nice hobby for him, a pleasant old man. Now it was time to leave and we thanked him again. My train was at the platform and I left on the last stage of my journey.

What a day. What happy memories I was leaving behind and wondering if I would meet any of the boys in the future, for we had gone through so much together: always cheerful no matter how tough the going was. We joined up with each other's parcels and it had been a wonderful experience. A lot of my unit were left behind, others were wounded, and anyone coming home sound in limb and health could count himself fortunate. I was going home to a family: a blond curly-headed little boy, Geoffrey. Your mother had a house furnished at 13 Cecil Street, where my Aunt Linda had lived.

During the War

Now the war is a thing of the past. It was an exciting experience, full of danger, when anything could have happened: one could be killed, wounded, or maimed for life. Or you could have been posted as missing - as a soldier, you just took your chance. Your health could be ruined for life with the conditions we had to put up with. Your uniform was never really dry in the winter: you had to sleep in your clothes in frost and snow; you never saw a fire, as one lived outside in the open air. The lads took it all in their stride and kept their peckers up. We made our own fun when we had the chance - going down to a village beer-house and having a game of bingo.

I thought it then, and I think it today: the British soldier is the best and smartest in the world.

There was a wonderful comradeship among the soldiers; I was among the Scottish and I liked them very much - to this day nothing thrills me more than when I hear a full pipe-band on the march. As I see them on TV, I think many times of the pals I had in my unit. I hoped some day to have the good fortune to meet a few of them and have a drink together, but I never met one of them. When I had the shop, and the Scottish holidays started, I would meet a few of the 9th Division, but I was unlucky, for they were a wonderful lot of men: I liked to hear them talk, but now it is just a wonderful memory of the 'fighting 9th'.

I joined the 'Kitchener's First 100,000' and marched many hundreds of miles. I was in every part of the line on the British front, and finished up on the extreme left of the 'front' on the coast; from there we started to move on our advance into Germany.

But there is one thing I saw which I have not had the chance of seeing since. That was three countries: France, Belgium and Germany. I would have enjoyed just going back to have a look like a lot of the soldiers who have been able to go.

But I am proud to have been one of the Fighting 9th Division.

During the War

"One day the German Emperor had stopped some officers of the Scottish and South Africans of the 9th Division captured the previous April in the struggle for the Messines Ridge and had told them he was glad that there were not two 9th Divisions in the British Army: he said that he couldn't have made headway if this had been so"

This is a copy of a notice in our billet in Germany.

I don't think I mentioned it (although I may have done) that Bert Owens, Fred Whitehead and I decided to join up at a friend's house. But we all joined up on different days. I was the first, getting the 'King's Shilling' a fortnight later; the other two were drafted. Bert Owens was sent overseas to Salonica, Fred Whitehead to a hospital somewhere in France. I wouldn't have wanted to be stuck in some hospital, and I was glad that I was drafted to a front line unit and see what war was really like. And I got my wish! It was a big experience. Your mother's eldest brother also joined up, being drafted to a hospital somewhere in France. I met him one day when our Division was on the move, and he told me that he didn't like where he was and was going to transfer to a Field Ambulance. I told him that he didn't know what he was going in for, but he transferred. The next thing I heard was from your mother that he had been blown up by a shell and buried; he was in hospital for a long time and couldn't walk. The doctors worked on him and got him walking, but he wasn't the same lad afterwards.

There was a common saying after the first world war: "What did you do in the Great War, daddy?"

After all this, you know!