

## ACTIVE SERVICE DIARY,

OCTOBER 16<sup>th</sup> 1915 - DECEMBER 25<sup>th</sup> 1916

-----

On October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1915, we paraded at 4.15 am and marched to the G.N. Station, en route for Southampton. The men had been confined to camp the previous evening, had roused about 3.00 am and some, due to a mistake had had no breakfast, yet, such is the British Tommy, every one was cheerful and no one grumbled. The whole town seemed to be up to see us off and many little presents were given to the men by the many friends they had made; many kisses also by the young lady friends, who, tradition has it, do the same for every draft that goes. Kissing, apparently, is a hobby of the Newark girls. After many hours and wanderings over several railways, we arrived at Southampton Docks at 12.45; detrained and paraded in the shed, whilst rations were served out. The men were confined to the dock, but the officers could go to the South Western Hotel for lunch, an opportunity that all took advantage of; during the afternoon another draft joined us, making our total 510, including officers. At 4.30 pm all marched on board the "King Edward", a small River Clyde pleasure steamer, which was to take us across. Whilst waiting, every man had taken his opportunity of writing a last word to his wife or sweetheart or friend, a rather pathetic sight, when one remembered how many of them would never return. However, once on board, all were cheerful, and accept for a short time when just losing sight of land – our last view of England – were cheerful all the way across. As soon as we were out of the Sound lifebelts were issued out to all, and put on, as a precaution against submarine attack; at the same time our escort of torpedo boat destroyers picked us up; at 6.30 pm all the men were ordered below, a guard and picket of 20 were placed about the boat, and all lights that were at all visible from outside were put out. After a meal, all sought out as comfortable a place for the night as possible and settled down; my own bed consisted of some rolled up valises, with a shelf for a pillow. Never-the-less, most slept well all night, and so calm was the sea no one suffered in the slightest from sickness. The following day found us at anchor outside Le Havre, waiting for the tide to rise before we could enter the river; at first nothing was in sight but thick mist, but later this lifted and we could see land and the bay full of boats of all kinds.

### Sunday, October 17th

About 1.0 o'clock we got going again and entered the Seine enroute for Rouen; the decks had been well cleaned down and the men had spent a considerable time whilst waiting, in washing and shaving and generally putting themselves neat and tidy – an occupation which probably soldiers of no other nationality would have troubled about under the circumstances.

The trip along the river was interesting for several reasons; the scenery itself was very beautiful indeed, in most places, the villages and little towns, with houses fresh apparently from a toy shop, were a novelty and of great interest to the men, who never tired of waving handkerchiefs and hats in response to the shouts and cheers from the banks; this enthusiasm of the people on the river banks was the most noticeable part of the trip; everywhere people rushed from their homes and stood waving flags or anything handy, cheering our Tommie's; "Vive L'Anglais" and "Vive l'Angletere", were heard at almost every yard. Another remarkable point was the entire absence of young men; the country at any rate would seem to have emptied itself and sent all available men to war. Towards nightfall the men made up a band of flutes, mouth-organs, and empty tins for drums, and the river became noisy – sometimes musical – with all the latest English ragtime's, or the sentimental songs beloved of Tommy Atkins. "My little Grey Home in the West" was sung as well as anything, probably because in the quiet Sunday twilight it appealed to the men and reminded them of where they were going and what they were leaving.

At 7.0pm the men having got all their equipment on and paraded on deck, we berthed at the Quai de Rouen, then, to everyone's disappointment, we had instructions to sleep on board and march to the camp, 3 miles away, in the morning. The Officers, fortunate again, were allowed in the town, but the men were confined to the ship; after a thorough good dinner at the Hotel d'Angletere we returned to the boat to sleep feeling that we ought to share some of the men's discomforts at any rate; (we had permission to sleep at an hotel if we wished). A good night on the top deck under the stars brought us round to:-

### Monday, October 18th

Parading at 7.0. we marched off to the camp at Bruyere, 3 miles out, which is partly camp, partly hospital and convalescent home, hundreds of acres in all; after breakfast at 9.30, we handed over the men and found that no breakfast had been prepared for them, due to some misunderstanding; our indignation could do nothing and so the poor fellows had to wait for a meal till dinner time; possibly it was good practice for when they go up the line.

We ourselves were free now to settle into our huts, four to a hut, and generally make ourselves at home; having greeted men of our own Chatham Officer's Class, who had arrived a few days before, we had lunch and then went out to explore Rouen. A bad reputation had reached us, but personally, the town struck me as being a good one, with some fine buildings and magnificent churches; morally, at present especially, it is no doubt an evil place, but as a town it is fairly attractive, and the docks are of great interest. A picture show and tea at a beautiful little café filled up our time till we returned to camp for dinner at 8.0 o'clock. My French, though rather lacking in vocabulary, was useful and seemed easily understood, so I got along all right; quite possibly my English would usually have been understood better, but why speak English in a French town?

### Tuesday, October 19th

Most of the day was spent trying to instil the rudiments of Army Drill into the heads of the miners belonging to the Tunnelling Companies, an almost hopeless job. In the evening, to Rouen again, with a farewell dinner to a friend who was off to the Front, at the Hotel la France, a homely little place, with good cooking and cheap. Afterwards, a couple of hours at a concert - free and easy would describe it better - and then a taxi to camp, the last tram having gone earlier in the evening.

### Wednesday, October 20th

The morning was spent in censoring letters, an interesting but somewhat pathetic job, so many married men in the ranks, practically all feeling the parting from wife and family very acutely and all looking forward to returning home again, although ready and determined to do their best at the front. One or two sad letters in my batch, as for instance one son, who had written 17 cards and letters up to date, to his home and relatives, and sent presents and money, yet had not a single word from anyone in return; he had, apparently, done something for which his family would not forgive him. In the last letter he begs for forgiveness and for some kindly word to cheer him up - a lonely soldier if ever there was one. I thought of adding a note myself, but decided it was not a censor's business. Still plenty of humour in some of the letters; many relate their experiences in trying to speak French; nearly all complain of the poor quality of the French beer, which one man states "costs 20 centimetres a litre"; also of the wine, which "will burst you before it makes you drunk"! One and all speak gratefully of the Y.M.C.A., which is their one standby for leisure hours, and a real home and shelter to them all. No one can estimate the enormous amount of good the Y.M.C.A. does in France and England, and elsewhere amongst the troops. They provide a home, games and amusements and cheap meals, and should be helped and encouraged in every way possible.

In the afternoon to Rouen again, pictures and tea and back to camp for dinner at 8.0.o'clock. It may seem that we have a gay life, with so many trips to town and amusements, but life in camp is so deadly and the mess so very ordinary and unsuitable, that we are bound to go out a good deal and have as jolly a time as possible; the time may come any day when we shall move up top the lines and have to put up with all the misery and discomforts of the firing line, so we find amusement and pleasure while we have the chance.

### Thursday, October 21st

This day, I was in charge of a fatigue party of 150 Engineers, took them down to the docks, and here they were utilized for unloading timber boats, stacking the timber in the yard, working on a railway line etc. Once the men were handed over to the A.S.C. my own job consisted of occasionally going round to see they were all right, so I had some hours to myself. Lunch and tea were provided for me in the A.S.C. mess. In the afternoon I spent some little time in the Cathedral, a most beautiful and historic building, dating from 1200.A.D. It was interesting to see the people, good Catholics all, coming in to offer their prayers to the Virgin Mary, and, most of them, to their Patron Saint, Joan of Arc. First on entering the Church they go to the Holy Water near the entrance and cross themselves, then they each seek their favourite shrine, perhaps light a little candle in front, and then pray in all sincerity for - whom? Perhaps themselves or for loved ones in the firing line or for France herself; their earnestness and faith should surely have some effect in this awful war. The heart rendering thing in both Church and town is the appalling number of young widows and of mothers and sisters in black; France is certainly sacrificing herself to the utmost; every man one sees, except the very young or very old, is in uniform.

### Friday, October 22<sup>nd</sup>

An easy day, with little to do, in the morning I spent some hours getting part of the camp made clean and tidy, ready for the big inspection that is to take place. After lunch, to town with some friends, shopping and exploring, tea at the Normandy Café and later dinner at the Hotel la France, and afterwards a show, and taxi back to camp.

### Saturday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>

Camp Orderly Officer. Only means inspecting tents and cookhouses, guards, sentries, etc, but keeps one confined to the camp all day. About tea time my marching orders arrived, telling me to join the 57<sup>th</sup> Field Coy. R.E. at once.

The camp had been specially cleaned up and put tidy for a big inspection, but after going into the adjoining hospitals, the King drove straight past and so we did not see him.

### Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>

The morning was spent in packing up and gradually getting ready to move; after lunch we had further instructions – the 30 of us who were leaving to join different Companies – and were told to report at the station at 8.30 p.m. We therefore went into Rouen to do a little necessary shopping, had tea at the Normandy, spent an hour at the Pictures and then to dinner at the Hotel de L'Opera, our last “civilized meal” for we don't know how long. Finally we reported at the station, found our train, put our luggage into a very comfortable compartment, and prepared for our long railway journey. The train was made up of coaches and cattle trucks for the Tommie's, wagons loaded with timber of all kinds for use at the Front, and luggage vans.

At 9.30 p.m. we started and in our compartment immediately removed boots and prepared for as good as sleep as possible; being a troop train, following dozens of other troop and war material trains, we could only jog along at 8-10 miles a hour, stopping very frequently for no apparent reason whatever.

### Monday, October 25<sup>th</sup>

Waking at about 6.30 found us still jogging along; cold breakfast, a “dry wash” and general tidy up, passed the morning along; to make things less pleasant for the beginning of our “Great Adventure”, it was pouring with rain and very cold and miserable. Such, however, being the sort of things we expect on active service, we made the best of it and spent the time smoking and reading; the ‘romance’ of war seems to have got lost somewhere.

After reporting to the Railway Transport Officer at two places, the first being Hazebrouck, we eventually reached railhead at a place called Poperinghe at about 4.30 p.m. and were greeted by the sound of guns in the distance. Three brother officers very kindly met me with a car, and so, after a 3-4 mile drive through pouring rain and about a foot of mud, we arrived at the little camp of the 57<sup>th</sup> Company, [see map] in a little wood, which is about 3 miles behind the firing line, and within easy shelling distance. Here we have a jolly little hut for mess and sitting room and a tent each to sleep in. The greatest acquisition of the mess, however, is the cook, an excellent fellow who is able to prepare good, well cooked meals at apparently any time of the day or night, so with the help of things from the B.E.F. Canteen at Railhead, parcels from home, and articles bought from local farmers, we live exceedingly well and are thoroughly comfortable and healthy

A few guests happened to be coming in for dinner, so a specially good meal was ready for us about 7.15 – soup, joint, sweet, dessert, coffee and liqueurs, also wines and spirits (including in the former – Champagne) for those who liked them, and cigarettes and cigars – quite a good attempt for a meal on active service, with big guns banging away all the time in the distance. After dinner, the table was pushed to one side, and with the aid of a piano taken from the Germans, who had previously looted it from Ypres close by, we had songs and an impromptu dance. To see Colonels and Majors and junior Officers, with big cigars on and coats off, dancing and jumping about the hut to the strains of the latest ragtimes, all the time roaring with laughter, showed that, no matter how terrible the war, it is possible to forget it. Being a little weary, I slipped off about 10.30 and went to bed to the accompaniment of ragtime's and waltzes, mingled with the bang of big guns, and the rattle of maxims and rifles, with an occasional star shell lighting up the whole country. Despite the absolute newness and novelty of things, I soon fell asleep and slept without dreaming.

Tuesday, October 26<sup>th</sup>

A momentous day, being the one on which I received my “Baptism of Fire”. After a sturdy breakfast of porridge, eggs and bacon, toast, marmalade, and coffee to fortify my courage, and having put on an especially big pair of boots for my heart to sink into, Captain Turner and I mounted and rode off across country towards the trenches. To an only moderate rider the run across the fields was quite exciting, necessitating as it did, charging across ploughed fields, jumping ditches, breaking through hedges, and occasionally being caught on telephone wires, stretched just high enough to fetch one off one’s horse. First we visited Divisional Headquarters, for an introduction to the General and so on; [Divisional Headquarters](#)



**Divisional Headquarters**

is in a beautiful country house, 2 miles behind the line, now filled with sand bags in many parts, and with the beautiful garden spoiled by dugouts. Then on again, through a village bombarded to little pieces nearly, and yet with many civilians, men, women and children (and cats galore!) still struggling along in it, across fields again, seeing “Wipers” only a little way off on the right, until we got too near the shells for the horses to be safe; so, tying them to some trees, we continued on foot, past a little soldiers cemetery – a sight to wring one’s heart, remembering that it also means widows and fatherless children and broken hearted girls somewhere in England – across the Canal on a rough bridge, and so into the communications trench.

The next two or three hours we spent wandering round the whole of the trenches in the section for which the Company is responsible – miles of them apparently, each with a local name, such as ‘Colne Valley’, ‘Rotherham Road’, ‘Wellgate’, - an obvious key to the county from which has come the Infantry that is holding the section. My own impressions of being under fire were somewhat disappointing; my boots still remained too large and only in one spot, where there was no parapet and we had to crawl along a trench only 3 feet deep, in full view of the enemy for 50 yards, was I particularly anxious; the shells were dropping away far to our rear, and rifle bullets were only a few and far between; luckily perhaps, we passed only one casualty, a poor fellow who had just been sniped and was waiting to be buried.

So we wandered about, taking note of trenches in need of repair, - including one old German trench, captured some time ago and lately disturbed by a shell, leaving a small portion of a Boche sticking out – and making mental notes of the lie of the trenches and the quickest way about, for as our work is practically all done at night, it is necessary to be perfectly familiar with the place and be able to get about in the darkness. Eventually, crossing a bridge, which is in view of the Germans, a fact which did not encourage me to linger admiring the view, we came out in the rear of all the lines, and examined the little railway we are building, until a shell fifty yards away, scattered mud round us and sent us fairly quickly to our horses; a quick ride brought us back to our lunch at 3.0.o’clock. The morning had been beautifully fine, and I had spent some time watching our aeroplanes being shelled, the blue sky, white puffs of shrapnel smoke and the aeroplanes making a beautiful picture in the sunshine, despite the fact that it is war. Yet, despite the sun, the mud, thick and slimy and inches deep, is everywhere and covers one up to the waist, and now the weather has broken it is unlikely to dry up till next March, a cheerful time to look forward to.

About 5.0.o'clock, I went out again, for my first experience of night work. Mounting, we rode off in the dark to Solferino, [[\\*see map](#)]



**Solferino Farm**

a ruined farm, splashing helter-skelter through the deep mud, rushing past transport wagons, guns being moved under cover of the dark, infantry marching to the trenches, horses and carts and all the usual impediments of War; frequently having only one yard of greasy road to ride on between the wagons and the ditch. Fastening up the horses at the farm, we continued on foot, the most dangerous part of our work, for the roads and fields for the last mile to the trenches are swept in every direction by stray bullets, - all that do not find their billet in a man or trench at the front, come whizzing past, hitting houses, trees or anything that happens to be in the way. Machine guns, some trained on the main roads purposely, occasionally add to the excitement and make one dodge behind shelter or lie down in the mud; on very "bulletty "nights it is necessary to go further round and take advantage of an incomplete communications trench that comes part way towards us.

Arrived in the trenches, all that there is to do is to set the men on to the work that wants doing,- necessitating frequently having men on the parapet, a good target for the enemy's machine guns, when the star rockets go up, as they do nearly every minute. About 10.o'clock, depending on the work that wants doing, one turns homewards, a less risky journey as things have usually quietened down by this time; so a sharp walk and then a good 3 mile trot or canter brings one safely back to supper and bed.

Wednesday, October 27<sup>th</sup>

The men work only one night in two and rest the other night, so that this day is a quiet one, devoted to writing letters and generally doing odd jobs; in the evening our friends come into dinner and an impromptu concert completes the day.



Thursday, October 28<sup>th</sup>

A wet, boisterous and cold day, unattractive in any way; however, after a quiet morning, we mount again at 4.0'clock, and having explored a certain amount of surrounding country, shells being quiet at the time, we arrive again at "Solferino". The walk is comparatively quiet and safe this time, for the Boches do not yet seem to have finished tea; but the pouring rain and mud, frequently up to one's knees, do not make for comfort, so one's temper is not very sweet when the trenches are reached. Gum boots, oilskin waders, mackintosh, muffler, gloves and waterproof cap cover, barely suffice to keep out the wet and cold, and my own memory, very annoyingly, would turn to the dinner and drawing room comforts that London used to supply me with at this time. However, the War has to be won, and the work finished, so we tramp up and down the trench whilst the men work – risking their health and their life for one or two shillings a day, a fact which makes one marvel at the strangeness of human nature. These hours spent in the trenches, marching up and down, give plenty of time for meditation, and there are plenty of subjects; the bravery of the men and their cheerfulness amidst most horrible discomforts; the wickedness of war and the appalling waste of it, in human life and brains and money; at the back of my own mind is the fact always outstanding, that it is absolutely unnecessary, and so strictly opposed to all the laws of God and Nature. Men were never intended to spend their time in a muddy ditch, knee deep in clay and water, killing and being killed. If only men were less childish and more Christian, such things as guns and trenches would be quite unnecessary; Christianity seems a long way off, when one is standing behind sandbags, and little pieces of lead are flying past or spitefully knocking lumps out of the parapet. Yet, it shows itself daily in the generosity and kindness of the men to each other; and in the care that is devoted to the little graves of those who have finished their fight. One meets these little graves and cemeteries in every part of the country, and they are the saddest part of all the misery and sadness of War.

The wettest night comes to an end and so we make our way back, pick up our horses and splash our way homewards in the rain; - to find a good fire and supper waiting in the hut, and a good bed afterwards.

Friday, October 29<sup>th</sup>

Just an ordinary sort of day; spent the morning writing letters, etc, at 5.0'clock set off again for the trench that my section is working on; a fine night but dark, and the road quite sufficiently "bulletty" to be unpleasant. However, we reach "Wellgate" safely and after setting all the men to work, I spend the next 4 1/2 hours wandering up and down watching the men working and admiring the stars, the natural ones and those sent up by the Boches; a machine gun on one side spotted an infantry party on top of the parapet, and three times they had to drop flat to escape; luckily no casualties. Half way through the evening the Boches sent half-a-dozen shells over our heads, dropping them about half a mile away. Though one knows that one is perfectly safe, it is decidedly unpleasant to have the wretched things tearing and roaring their way past; very little damage was done, and our own big guns replied threefold, greatly to our satisfaction. This life is decidedly exciting, but it is somewhat wearying to the nerves to have to walk slowly along the mile to the trench, in the face of bullets; casualties however are remarkably few. The particular sector we are in was the scene of the first gas-attack and the famous fight of the Canadians; shells have therefore an unpleasant habit of turning up Canadians, French, English or Boches indiscriminately. War is horribly insanitary.

At 11.0'clock we finished and made our way homewards; a quick ride ended in supper, and bed about 1.30 a.m.

Saturday, October 30<sup>th</sup>

An easy morning lounging; after lunch I mounted my "fiery steed" – an ancient cab-horse, I fancy – and trotted along the 4 or 5 miles to Poperinghe, the railhead, a quaint little town that has been frequently bombarded. Consequently, most of the houses are boarded up, and only a few civilians are left, making a precarious living selling picture postcards, cigarettes etc, and providing cheap meals for our Tommies. The place was thronged with motor vehicles of every description, - ambulance wagons, lorries, transport wagons, motor cars with Staff Officers, motor cycle scouts, gun wagons, forage carts, and all the multitudinous accessories that war demands; mixed up in them are the quaint 3 wheeled Belgian Carts and some small milk carts drawn by dogs; an indescribable medley of mud and men and noise.

In one place some poor wretched looking civilians were being served out with free rations, and badly they seemed to need them; the love of home must be very strong to make them stay in such a place.

After spending a couple of hours shopping, I trotted back to a quiet evening in camp, it not being my night out. The roads are in an abominable condition, the heavy traffic having torn up the pave' and made deep holes everywhere; in addition everything is covered inches deep in mud; consequently horse riding is a thing to be indulged in only when necessary.

Sunday, October 31<sup>st</sup>

A quiet day, with a Church Parade in the morning in the [wood behind the Camp](#);



**Wooded area**

it was a new experience and rather a solemn one to sing, with the men, hymns like “Fight the Good Fight”, and “Jesus Lover of my Soul”, to the accompaniment of shells, bursting in the distance; yet one felt a peculiar sense of security in the little gathering, as though it were quite impossible that harm could come to us there; many of them are Churchmen – many, of course, are not – and they show it frequently in their letters, committing themselves to God’s Care, and their wives and children also. Censoring letters is always an interesting occupation, especially if one knows the men; there are many lessons for us to be found in them – their determination to fight their hardest, their thought and consideration for those left behind; their surprising politeness to their own sisters and relatives, and through nearly all the letters runs a vein of affection and good heartedness that makes one respect the men tremendously.

In the afternoon the Company had a football match (except for an occasional service, there is no Sunday at the Front,) on a somewhat small ground and in pouring rain, but never the less all seemed to enjoy it. A quiet evening finished a quiet day.

Monday, November 1<sup>st</sup>

A very ordinary day, especially as regards the weather – pouring rain all the time. We set off as usual about 4.30 and rode to “Solferino”, where we always put the horses up; then came the usual mile walk in the midst of rain and stray bullets; after working in the downpour for about 1½ hours, all the men being soaked to the skin and very little work being done, I stopped them and we returned to camp. To realize what the men go through, critics should be out with us on just such a night, when the weather is more objectionable than the bullets; the men have very few clothes with them, so have to stay in bed on the next morning while their clothes are partially dried; they then have to put on their damp things and again return to the trenches, where they are usually knee deep for several hours in mud and water. Meanwhile, the men holding the front line are in still worse condition, for the wet and mud is deeper and they have to keep their clothes on for 4 days; in one dug-out 2 officers, a sergt.major and three Tommies

were trying to sleep, propped up against the muddy walls; the dug-out was flooded, so that the water all the time was half way up their legs. The only consolation is that the Boches are in equally bad or worse conditions, without the moral effect of feeling "top-dog".

Tuesday, November 2<sup>nd</sup>

A fine day, for a change, so we managed to put in 5 or 6 hours good work; one day is very much like another so this diary will probably become very monotonous before long.

Wednesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>

A busy day in camp, spent writing letters and doing various odd jobs; owing to the weather, tents are particularly objectionable just now, everything being damp and sticky, moreover, all sorts of insects seem to have decided that this large canvas place was put up for their benefit, and they are consequently coming in and settling down for the winter. One wakes up in the morning to find a large hairy spider swinging from the roof within 6 inches of one's face, waiting to say "Good-morning". Moreover, some field mice have discovered that chocolate is good to eat and so make raids on mine when I am asleep; to save it, I have suspended it in mid air, so unless the mice have aeroplanes, the chocolate should be all right now.



Thursday, November 4<sup>th</sup>

A particularly annoying, though exciting day; on the way to the trenches a machine gun was suddenly turned on to the road, necessitating a quick “flop” into the mud; in doing so, the Sergeant’s muddy heel went into my mouth! Having arrived at the trenches, and settled down to work, with a particularly big infantry party this time, greatly to my annoyance, for it means so many more men to look after and so much more chance of casualties – we carried on steadily for about 2 hours, when I accidentally stepped off the trench boards and filled my gum boots with water and mud; then just as I was remarking how pleasant a war this is, the Boches suddenly dropped 12 or 15 H.E. Shells right on the top of the trench; by a miracle no one was hurt, though 2 or 3 were knocked over by the concussion and 3 men were blown to pieces in the next trench; we quickly got into the bottom and spread out under cover. If shrapnel had been used the casualties would have been heavy. Though I have several times dodged shells in the open, when on foot or horseback, this was my first experience of being under direct shell fire in the trenches. One’s feelings are varied and numerous; the sound of something approaching, tearing and shrieking through the air towards one, is quite nerve straining to begin with; will it drop here or go over? Crouched down on a tiny corner of the bottom of the trench, trying to cram 12 stone of bone and meat into about 2 square inches, one waits, apparently minutes, though actually only 2 or 3 seconds, till with a flash and a bang, the earth shakes, mud flies everywhere, and one is free, unless hit, to get up and listen for the next. It is hard to describe how helpless one feels; it needs only for a shell to drop in the trench instead of the parapet, and then one’s name is in the next list and there will be no funeral, there being nothing to bury. A man the other day tried to open an unexploded shell that dropped half a mile away from here, with a hatchet; all they found was his gum boots in another field! Working parties have not the excitement of battle to keep their courage up and make them take no notice of things; working parties simply wait in cold blood and take their chance. In this case, the men were not anxious to get out onto the parapet again and I was not too cheerful, so sent the whole party home and returned to “Solferino” myself.



**Solferino Farm**

Here was the last straw, for my horse had broken loose and I had to ride back on a very bumpy wagon, which improves the liver at the expense of the temper.

Friday, November 5<sup>th</sup>

Another ordinary day, fairly fine, permitting several hours steady work at the trench and drains. For the first time I had a casualty in my party, a nice little “Blighty”, as the men call it, through the side. The derivation of “Blighty”, as far as I can make out, is as follows: - in Indian language, “Bi-Li-Ti” means a foreign place; to our Tommies in India, the word came to mean England and so, altered to “Blighty”, it came over to here. Following it

further, gradually a wound which sent one to Blighty, came to be called a "Blighty" itself, and for heaps of men, the ambition is to get a jolly little Blighty which will send him home for 3 or 4 months, out of this mud and rain. Who can blame them? Incidentally, on the road we go to the trenches, is "Blighty Corner", (see map) for there one is likely to get hit in the legs, not a serious matter but sufficient to send one to England.

The casualty had another effect on me, an insane desire to rush into the Bosch trenches with my revolver and "pot" every man I saw. Usually, I feel a sense of injustice when a man three miles away sends a shell, or another aims a rifle at my head, for, as men, I have no grudge whatever against them; but let them hurt one of our men, or hit me, and naturally one's feelings change from comparative indifference to almost hatred and a desire for revenge. So one can understand men, in the heat of battle, seeing their comrade's fall, rush into the thickest of the fight, heedless of wounds, only anxious for slaughter and revenge. One does not fight for one's self but for one's friends.

#### Saturday, November 6<sup>th</sup>

Another quiet day in camp, spent in the usual way writing letters, etc. In the evening we had a guest night, a good five course dinner, and a dance (?) and sing-song afterwards.

#### Sunday, November 7<sup>th</sup>

Up to the trenches again in the evening, with a big infantry working party; work went on steadily for 5 hours and there were no casualties. Another Officer of this Company however, working in an advanced position, had one or two men hit.

#### Monday, November 8<sup>th</sup>

A fine day, and a good night for working; during the evening quite an interesting artillery duel took place between our guns and those of the Boches, the latter 3 miles in front of us, our own 2 miles behind. For a considerable time, dozens of shells passed over our heads and went shrieking away into the distance. One was glad to be under cover! This same evening, the young officer just spoken of, working in an advanced post, was shot through the thigh, - a clean wound giving little pain, but meaning 3 or 4 months in England. He was envied! He was taken to the dressing station by two sappers, one a Corporal; these two were told then to go back to camp, but the Corporal asked to be allowed to return to work, so both went back. On the way, a German sentry half a mile off, fired his rifle haphazard, and the ounce of lead, flying through the air, arrived at a certain part of the road at the same time as the Corporal, and the lead won, for the man, shot through the heart, died at once, a clear victim of Duty. That is called "war" by the General Staff, but to a one time civilian it seems more like murder that men should be made to face such risks day after day. He was working happily away in camp in the morning, just outside the mess hut, and I had stood watching him once or twice; in the evening, in the dark and rain on a lonely road, his life suddenly ended; one has to suppose that the British Empire is safer and better for it, but 'tis hard to understand.

#### Tuesday, November 9<sup>th</sup>

A cold, wet, blustering day, giving little inclination for out-of-doors, but work has to be done. At 4.0'clock the Corporal was buried, the most pathetic service I have ever been at; as an officer of the Company I felt it right to attend, but would rather have stayed away. A dark, cloudy November afternoon, in steady rain, with a cold wind blowing the leaves off the trees of the little wood, and making the pools of water in the deep mud of the roads full of little waves; then on the side of the road a little hole in the damp slimy clay, with a few of his pals come, bareheaded, to pay their last respects to him. As they brought him from the camp across the road, the white haired old Padre began the words of the Burial Service, and never before have had they sounded so solemn and so full of meaning, as on that dark afternoon, in a scene of terrible desolation, with guns booming away in the distance. To one or two, perhaps, too used to such scenes to find anything solemn in them, or perhaps too callous to care, the service was simply so many words and then a shovelling of earth. But too many of the men, obviously touched, it was a reminder that, in war time especially, Life and Death are always walking hand in hand, and his fate today may be theirs tomorrow. For my part, I found it necessary to turn away and stare carefully at the little wood; an officer is not supposed to show his feelings! So, shrouded in a blanket and carried by four of his friends, he was buried, far away from his home and from friends and relatives, who probably still think him alive and well. And he is only one of the millions who have given their very life to satisfy one man's ambitions. What earthly punishment can satisfy and suffice, for such wholesale murder? So, the service over, off we went to the trenches, and in pouring rain, worked steadily for 4 or 5 hours, helped by the knowledge that the work we did was some slight protection against the Death we had just seen. Some more infantry were wounded, and one killed, but the work does not stop and cannot till the war is finally over.

Wednesday, November 10<sup>th</sup>

A pouring wet day again, but a rest day; as the 57<sup>th</sup> is over staffed now, a new C.O. having been appointed, I have been “lent” temporarily to the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> West Riding Field Co., who are very short of Officers. [My new billet is an old farm-house \\*\(see map\)](#) about ¼ of a mile away from the camp; a real Belgian farmhouse, with quaint rooms and big open fire places, pigs galore and nearly as many children as pigs! However, we have a big room to ourselves for mess and a cosy little hut each when we want to be quiet, and for bedroom, The section of line for which the West Riding Field Co. is responsible is on the right of the 57<sup>th</sup> Coy. Section, and is similar, but easier to get at; consequently I do not now have that mile-long “bulletty” walk, for which I am very thankful. It is possible now to ride right up to the Canal and then go to the front line in communication trenches the whole way. The Officers are all Sheffield men and have the Yorkshire man’s usual good nature, so things ought to be very comfortable here.



**Farm billet**



Thursday, November 11<sup>th</sup>

To find out the conditions of the trenches etc, I have been with Captain Neill today along the whole line of the front trenches, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile in all; the mud and water are really terrible and how the infantry keep well is a wonder; yet they all seem cheerful and look very healthy, though of course covered in mud from top to toe. We ploughed our way along, through the trenches comparatively good, through others more than knee high in mud, and through others where we had to go practically on hands and knees, the parapet having broken away and the trench filled up with mud. Past machine guns, past "Sniperscopes" (rifles fitted with periscopes, so arranged that one can fire without exposing one's self) with one of which we spent some minutes trying to "bag" a Boche –without success! – past "gas horns", motor horns which are blown when gas or gas-shells are coming, to warn men to don their gas-helmets; past men on duty, others trying to sleep, curled up on the driest spot possible, with blankets wrapped round heads, their feet in the mud and water; past alas! - bits of men where shells had exploded in the trench, in fact, the whole way, we passed things of interest, though commonplace to the poor fellows who have to live in the trenches. In one section, a lot of trench mortaring was going on, but, luckily for us, it stopped before we got there, and did not continue till after we had left; quite a gentlemanly act on the part of the Boche, If he had known we were there! Finally, after about 4 hours mud-plugging we arrived back at Brigade Headquarters, covered with the slimy stuff from the waist down, and explained our plans for renovating and re-constructing the front trenches, a job which General Dawson wants me to supervise; after lunch, at the General's Mess, we waded in a stream to clear some of the mud off, did one or two odd jobs and then sought our horses again. Both going and coming back, it is necessary to go through two villages, which the Germans shell every day, though they are already practically nothing but heaps of bricks and mortar; the one or two houses that are still inhabited by civilians, dirty and miserable looking people who refuse to leave. Perhaps they like the idea of living rent free, for it is not a healthy spot for rent-collectors, or perhaps they fear the risk of starvation in another part of the country, more than the shells which batter the houses about them into rubbish heaps. One advantage the shells had, they made my lazy horse decide that it would pay him to hurry – we did.

I met and spoke to still another Padre yesterday, whilst he was on his rounds visiting dug-outs, they all seem very good, kind-hearted men, who cheer the men up and look after them like fathers, one or two go up even into the front line, amongst the mud and bullets and shells, and risk their lives every day, to speak a kindly word to the men and remind them that war is no the end of all things; their visits apparently are greatly appreciated.

Friday, November 12<sup>th</sup>

A quiet day, spent in doing odd jobs, writing letters and making out plans for the new work \*(see map) we are going to do behind the front line. This work means that everything must be done at night, for we are in full view of the Boches; luckily the moon is on its way to full, so we shall be all right for about a fortnight.

Saturday, November 13<sup>th</sup>

At mid-day we went up to the trenches and prepared to mark out the work for the Infantry to dig at night; the first thing I did was to step too deep in one trench and so filled my gum boots right up with water! Poured all the water out, but of course socks and so on are soaking wet and most uncomfortable, especially as I shan't get back to the farm till after mid-night; however, under the circumstances it is a small detail.

With two N.C.O's I crept out of the trench and on to field where the work is being done; as the Germans, 350 yards away can easily see us, we lie down and crawl through the grass like a hero of one of Mayne Reid's Indian tales; in place of a knife between our teeth and a revolver in each hand, we carried an axe and a bag of small wooden pickets. I personally am thankful to be fairly slender for a "corporation" would raise one so high above the ground! Having reached the spot, we crawled about, measuring with a stick and driving in our pickets, taking cover all the time in the long grass. Having marked out a good piece, we came to an end of our pieces of wood and deliberated; should we fetch some more from the ruined farm behind us, or continue marking at night. I decided to continue at night, so helped by one or two bullets, which seemed to show that the Boches were getting suspicious, we crept away and had only gone fifty yards, when whizz' bang' came a small shell on the very spot that we had been on; the next shell landed in the farm!! Surely there is a Providence that looks after one! The Boches seemed, in a few minutes, to have wakened up and they commenced their daily "strafing" of the communications trench and open ground, so we had to wait half an hour until their 'Hate', as the Tommies call it, had cooled down; then we found our way back to the Canal and made arrangements for evening. Then finding our way to a cosy little dug-out, we had tea with some Infantry officers, and waited till our Infantry arrived. Each night we have about 200 men to do the work for us whilst we and sappers direct them and do the especially skilled work. The party arriving about 7.o'clock we picked up a lot of stores and went this time across country, to the working place and quickly got the men digging. After 5 hours we knocked off, returned to the Canal and then back to supper and bed, quite satisfied with the night's work, and in my own case, delighted to get wet boots and socks off.

Sunday, November 14<sup>th</sup>

The usual sort of day and off to the trenches about 6.o'clock; the Infantry always come in big motor-busses, so we waited and jumped on as they passed; bicycles are very little use on these roads and it is hard to put the horses up safely, so we usually go on the busses. Occasionally we get a lift on a "Blighty Express", Tommies name for the fleet of motor ambulances that take casualties from the dressing stations behind the line to the various Clearing Stations away back, whence the men are sent to "Blighty". Coming back, we usually contrive to get a lift on the busses, for they pass quite close to the farm; many of the drivers are original drivers from London, and the busses have been doing 14 months and more service out here, surely a fine testimonial to the makers. The night passed as usual, with nothing interesting to record; to bed this time about 2.o am.

Monday, November 15<sup>th</sup>

The day time spent as usual, writing and lounging, and watching aeroplane flights which occur nearly every day; despite the scores of 'shells' that the anti-aircraft guns send up, the Boches fly calmly about and do not seem a bit disturbed; probably because the shells are rarely near them! Our own aeroplanes sometimes join in and they have a machine gun duel up in the air, 5000 ft above our heads; up to date however I have not seen one brought down. To the trenches again in the evening, carrying on as usual; as we dig deeper, we come across all sorts of strange things; the ground we are on has been the scene of the fiercest fighting of the war and the ground is full of French, Germans and Canadians, and heaps of equipment of all kinds. It is no unusual thing to dig into a battlefield cemetery, and if the line cannot be altered, one has the unpleasant job of reburying men who died perhaps 6 months ago. Occasionally one finds men who have been overlooked and not buried; as for instance in one big shell hole, a fine Canadian, his head bound up, and his pockets still full of letters and so on, showing that we are the first to discover him. A little imagination can easily picture him fighting splendidly, as all the Canadians do, against terrible odds, for this is where the Canadians had their wonderful fight, when the French retired and left them, and where the first gas attack took place. Wounded in the head, he had it roughly bound up, and went on fighting like a hero, until perhaps with the pain or because of the gas, he found the noise and blood and confusion too much for him and stepping back, anyway and anywhere away from the awful battle, he fell into the shell hole, and being too weak to climb out simply lay there and died, perhaps another of the countless unnoticed heroes. In another hole a Canadian, headless, but otherwise unharmed, and how he got there is somewhat of a mystery.

Such things as these, make our work in the dark and amidst many bullets, almost too exciting and unnerving; one may perhaps get used to such things, but to anyone with feelings of sympathy for sufferings and imagination enough to realize the suffering, the whole business is one long drawn out cruel murder, and murder of the finest and best men in the world, for it is always the best that war demands, that is one of the saddest things about it. The world loses not only its men, but all the various blessings those dead intellects might have given it, - invention that would increase human happiness, books and poems that would have gladdened many a day, perhaps statesmen and business men such as the world has never known. Who knows, but God? Anyway, there the men lie and their loss is infinitely greater than the paltry millions that the materials of war cost, they can be replaced but the men - never.

Tuesday, November 16<sup>th</sup>

As there was to be a small attack in the evening, we could not start work till 11.o'clock, p.m. and so had a chance of a comfortable dinner. Again, the nights are so cold, one needs to be well fortified within; as regards clothes the men, as well as ourselves, are well supplied; big rubber thigh boots, sheepskins, woollen jerseys and leather coats - enough for the Arctic Regions, and yet none too much to keep out the damp and cold [in this water logged country](#).

Starting work at 11.o'clock, we went steadily on without disturbance; bullets of course, came along fairly often, but they do not stop work, and luckily on one was hit; towards 4.o'clock we stopped and turned homewards, glad to get into bed about 6.o a.m.





**Flanders field mud (referred to above)**

Wednesday, November 17<sup>th</sup>

Up in time for lunch and then an ordinary afternoon. One is usually awakened at daylight by the noise and vibration or the guns, which shake the hut and all in it; everyday one lives amidst a continual noise, the short, sharp crack of the guns close at hand, and the dull 'boom' of the guns further away; mixed with these is the tearing noise and bang of German shells, bombarding the little village a mile away. The other village we go through en route for the trenches is being bombarded daily now, and it will soon be a mass of bricks like this nearer one. A few civilians are still existing in it, but are now being made to leave; little kiddies of about 2 years old, too young to understand their danger, rather like to watch the smoke and see the flash of the shell, but others a little older, stand terror stricken not knowing where to run; it is pitiful to see them.

We worked the same hours as the night before and got to bed again at 6.0 a.m.

Thursday, November 18<sup>th</sup>

For some reason or other our infantry working party got lost and so we had only sappers; they had gone up and we went along to Brigade Headquarters to make enquiries about the working party; a cosy mess, a talk with General Dawson, and a cup of coffee kept us till 10.0'clock, so finally we did not leave the Canal Bank at all, and got home about mid-night; quite a respectable hour!

Friday, November 19<sup>th</sup>

German aeroplanes, about 5 in all, flew over our heads this morning, and dropped bombs on a rest camp and the small town of Poperinghe, just behind us; luckily they did little damage, though they killed one civilian. It seems almost impossible to stop this sort of thing, for the aeroplanes fly so high, they are a mere speck in the air and it is impossible to hit them.

This and tomorrow evening, being relief nights, when one Brigade relieves another in the trenches, we have no working parties to help, but only sappers to work, so we have a quiet time from 8.0., - 11.00., our only disquiet being the fact that 3 infantry have just been hit by a machine gun, on a road down which we have to return, and on which the gun is still firing!! However, Providence seems always on our side and we get safely down again and so home.

Saturday, November 20<sup>th</sup>

A fine day, frosty but dry; breakfast at 10.a.m. and then lounging round till bedtime, for we are all indulging in an evening off, having worked 7 nights in succession.

German aeroplanes again flew over and dropped bombs on a rest camp half a mile behind us; I heard the explosion while I was in bed. Only one bomb did any harm, which dropped near a tent where about 15 men were resting, having come late from the trenches. Four were killed, and all the rest seriously wounded.

This kind of warfare, is, I suppose permissible, but it is the cruellest kind, except perhaps gas, that it is possible to make use of. One has no escape, it is not possible to know where or when the bombs will drop and when one is dog tired and fast asleep, it is impossible to waken quickly and run for shelter when the whistling noise of the bomb is heard; moreover, men are not merely killed, they are torn to shreds and those unfortunate enough to live through it, will be, no matter how strong they are now, simply wrecks of humanity for the rest of life. Would that one could find a way to bring down every hostile aeroplane that fly's overhead; personally I would have no mercy on the occupants, if bombs were found on board.

The nonconformist Padre came in at 6.0. for a little service, as he could not come on Sunday; we had a very short one in the recreation room, but no address, as the Padre, poor fellow, was tired out and sore at heart, having come first through the village that was being bombarded and then had rushed to the scene of the bomb explosion to give what help he could. He is a fine fellow, and is one of the Padres I spoke of as going up into the trenches every day. It is to such natures as his that the brutality and cruelty of war is so prominent, and his feelings suffer accordingly, as he sees such scenes as yesterdays.

The luxury of bed at 9.30 ended a restful day.

Sunday, November 21<sup>st</sup>

Another very ordinary day, consisting of the usual letter writing etc in billets, with the usual work in the trenches at night. The particular trenches we are building are from a design that we have thought out, consisting of a combination of drain, trench and breastwork, enormously strong and built with special intention to get rid of the water, which floods this wretched country everywhere. The amount of work that is to be done is tremendous, and as it is being built in the dark, every man has to be carefully watched, to prevent mistakes. However, there are odd minutes when we can get in a quiet corner and think of the usual things, - one's home and relations and friends. On this night particularly, the contrast between this and one's usual mode of life is very striking; ordinarily one would be now walking gravely to Church, with clean collar and shiny boots, and mood suited to the occasion; here one stands knee deep in slimy mud, in nearly pitch darkness, leaning against muddy walls of trenches; it is raining fast, and always our friend the enemy, not very far away, keeps us alive by trying to shoot us dead! Bullets here and bullets there, until one gets quite bored with the monotony of the Crack and whiz! That means death if it hits you. This life at any rate finds out the men and quickly gets rid of the weak ones, in body or spirit; occasionally men have to rest, their nerves being unequal to the strain of always being in danger. I personally, have no doubt whatever that one can be quite as close to God, even in the midst of the mud, as those who are even now singing hymns to Him and praying in a warm, well lighted Church. Seeing, as one does every day, men killed and wounded, one's idea of the value of human life tends to become less and less; a man is killed, then bury him and carry on with your work! Wounded; take him to hospital and put another man in his place! The world and the war go on just the same and one is forced to realize how completely a man becomes just a single bit of a huge machine, quite insignificant really. So, those few quite minutes, now and again, are a great help and encouragement, for one has a chance to remember that, to the Almighty each man is of great importance, not for others, but entirely for his own sake; he is not just a unit but a child of God and loved as such. How small and how silly all this wretched fighting and digging seems, just like quarrelsome children in a nursery, squabbling over some tiny matter, that their Father, if they ask him and listen to him, can be put right in a minute; but usually, children quarrel and fight before they ask their Father's advice, and very often in defiance of it. Well, the war will be over sometime and then for clean clothes and plenty of baths, - one's usual idea of luxury nowadays! Meanwhile, it is a case of every man to the wheel, so at it we go, digging trenches, throwing up mud, driving in frames and pickets and all the usual devices, to help one to kill without being killed.

Monday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>

I have remarked before that the Infantry is the hardest worked and the worst paid of any; they themselves appear to think so, for some Companies have composed a verse, in reference to their hard work, and the special pay that the Royal Engineers get, as special workman:

“The little bee works hard all day, and the farmer takes the honey,  
The (So and So's) do all the work, And the R.E's take the money”

But their cheerfulness and good spirits are quite inextinguishable; the other day a Company which had been some days in the trenches, up to the waist in water, came out to rest. Once clear of the trenches, they calmly removed their soaked trousers, slung them over their shoulder, and wrapping their ground sheets round them as kilts, a la' London Scottish, marched the few miles to camp, preceded by a man with a mouth organ and singing all the way!!

Another soaking wet day, men snug in warm dug-outs were surprised to hear a familiar shout of “Fish, fresh fish for sale”; curiosity fetched them out into the rain to find a Tommy pushing a barrowful of broken bricks, the said Tommy delighted to see someone else get wet as well as himself!

All these little anecdotes are simply to fill up space, for the day is exactly like the other six of the week, consisting of the day in billet and work at night.

## Tuesday, November 23<sup>rd</sup>

In the evening I was standing near the Canal, waiting for the infantry party to arrive; opposite me was a huge tree, hit fair and square by a shell, which knocked about 20 feet of it down, leaving 15 feet or so of splintered trunk standing. Some men passing made cheery remarks about it, not printable as they were uttered but, censored, something like this; one youth intelligently remarked that “something must a ‘it it”, but his friend corrected him, “Naw, lad, its t’ Engineers ha’ muscled it over that bit o’wire on”. – the bit of wire being a telephone wire that the Signals had slung across; the idea of an engineer climbing up and solemnly breaking off a 3 ft trunk, so as to put a piece of wire on rather took my fancy.

Talking of wire, it is everywhere; it takes your hat off, trips you up, catches you round the waist and generally gets in your way wherever you go; everywhere Headquarters is connected up with every other one, and they to the Artillery, and they to other ‘Artillery’, and so on, till the whole of the trenches and dug-outs and surrounding country is one mass of telephone wire. It is, of course, necessary; for instance, Bay No. so and so in the front line is being worried by bombs or trench-mortars; they put up with it for a long time, but when they think the Boche has amused himself enough, they telephone Brigade Headquarters and they to the Artillery, and a few nice little 6” shells are dropped on the offending trench-mortar, to show him that he can’t do what he likes.

The work progresses fairly fast, but it is a big job and is going to take some time to complete; but it is interesting to be given a piece of land and told to build a defence and have about 100 men to do it; and can take a pride in making a sound job, working out one’s own ideas and seeing them gradually grow, despite rain and dark and bullets; it is certainly more interesting than doing a job in daylight in perfect safety.

## Wednesday, November 24<sup>th</sup>

Another ordinary day; that is, late breakfast, letters or other little jobs, till lunch and then till tea – all of course, as usual, to the accompaniment of guns and bursting shells in the distance; then “Baby” the ‘gee’ and the trenches till any time from 10.p.m. to 2.a.m.

## Thursday, November 25<sup>th</sup>

There is a striking instance in this farm of how much depends on luck for some people in war time; if this farm had been a mile nearer the Boches, the farmer would have had to leave his home, which would probably have been broken to pieces and would have had to depend on charity till such time as he could get another farm and start again. As it is, that one mile makes all the difference; he carries on his work as usual, lives in his own home and in addition is paid quite a considerable amount every week as billeting money for this Company that occupies part of his land, so altogether, he makes money by the war instead of losing it – thanks to the few mud stained men, standing in deep water in narrow trenches 3 miles away.

His family consists of 2 girls and 3 boys, plus numerous farm labourers, scores of pigs and several dogs, and altogether, when they really let themselves go, they make noise enough of a 12” gun. The farmer is an oldish man, rarely known to smile, who takes life very seriously and is always afraid that the Tommies are helping themselves to his things – as they do sometimes when nights are cold and coke is handy!. Madame is masculine looking, medium height, but decidedly broad in the beam and with a deep voice like the siren on a River Clyde Steamboat; Georgina, about 20 years old, follows her mother in build, speaks a little English and flirts with the mess-cooks. The other girl is, outwardly, very quiet and shy, perhaps because she is only about 14; is the image of her sister and will soon be as broad as long! One boy of 16 works as hard as his father and is presumably the heir; the other two boys are very small, and merely a compound of dirt and noise. Where they all sleep is a mystery; apparently Pa, Ma, and the girls occupy one big room, whilst the boys and farmhands sleep in the loft with the rats. At any rate, at 5.30 punctually every morning, they all rouse and then the noise begins; their idea of cleaning and tidying being to throw the chairs across the room, run a brush along and then throw the chairs back, all to the accompaniment of a chatter, like the aviary at a Zoo.

The principle dish in their menu appears to be a big pot of coffee, continually on the stove, never cleared out, but made thicker by adding coffee every day, until it looks and feels like brown paint, and probably tastes like it. We are lucky anyway in being able to have a roof over us.

### Friday, November 26th

The work is beginning to look finished at one end and we have now a cosy bullet proof shelter to retire to if necessary. I am only afraid, however, of not being long left in peace; as soon as we get more done, the Boches are fairly certain to shell it and bring it tumbling down; then of course, we have to start again! If, however, they only drop on the finished part, they will have to work hard to destroy it; and one hopes they only fire in day-light, not when we are all busily at work. Up to date, my party has been very lucky and has had few casualties.

### Saturday, November 27th

My remarks of yesterday were just in time; this morning a Boche aeroplane sailed backwards and forwards over our work for a couple of hours, taking photographs, so probably their Artillery has now registered on our work and is waiting its opportunity. Perhaps not, it may have been chance, but anyway they dropped a shell slap on Captain Neill's work, in the next section of trench, 150 yards from me. The shell dropped right in the middle of the men, but no one was hurt, for which one is grateful; they also have got a machine gun opposite us, where I have not heard one before, and made us all jump for shelter several times, however we have a good protection in one finished bay, so we are all right; they can send bullets into that all night if they like.

Whilst marking out for wire entanglements a few yards in front, I found another war victim – a poor old horse! It was probably a good animal 6 months ago, but now is somewhat thin and bony, in fact, he seems now all outside and nothing within; I hope it won't be necessary to move him because of our work!!

It is a creepy sensation exploring this ground, - that has been fought over so much, - on a moonlight night; one sees something lying there, glistening with the frost, and lying so very still; and to walk up closer and see eyes looking at you!! There is a small trench in front, either a drain or a hasty grave, if it comes in our way and has to be dug through, it will be necessary to explore it-so jolly in the dark!

Still, it is all in the day's work – or nights rather and one gets a little bit callous after a time, but I don't think I shall explore that trench by myself.

Today has turned into a rapid frost and the ground and ponds and pools are all covered with ice, making it difficult to keep the horses on their legs, but freezing is better and healthier than rain, so we don't mind.

### Sunday, November 28th

I woke up this morning to find my wash bowl an inch deep in ice, and a wet pair of socks, taken off the night before, stood up by themselves. To this was added another of the 'Minor Horrors of War' (Daily Mail!) Certain removable parts of the inside of my mouth are always placed at night in a glass of water; this morning they smiled at me through an inch of ice! Not being able to wear the glass as well, I had to spend a little time carefully chipping the frozen water away. Then, not having much to do, I decided to stay where I was, and so the faithful Eades (my batman) brought breakfast round and I dressed at leisure in time for lunch. Active Service is not always so dreadful as it sounds.

After lunch we had an enjoyable game of football with the men, made more interesting by another of the numerous aeroplane flights that took place nearly overhead; six aeroplanes took part, circled round and over each other, but without damage to either side. As usual, not one of the scores of shells that the "Archies" (anti-aircraft guns) fired were anywhere near the mark; it seems an almost impossible thing to hit an aeroplane, and those that are hit probably the result of a lucky shot.

About 6.30 the Padre arrived and we had another little Service before dinner at 8.0 and the luxury of early to bed; as it is relief night, there are no Infantry parties and so we are giving the sappers and ourselves a well earned rest.



Monday, November 29<sup>th</sup>

My own section, No 2, has been living on the Canal Bank for some time and has returned to the farm today for a rest; they have been without an officer for several months and so everything has got more or less mixed up and I am taking the opportunity of “unmixing” them. Today for instance has been spent in turning out the tool-carts and limbers, sorting out and cleaning tools, and making up deficiencies – it is surprising the number and variety of tools that a field section carries, from a 2” nail to a 600 gallon canvas trough; the instruments also include a large telescope – No 2 has been more or less neglected and there is a lot to be done to get it right up to date. As soon as we started today the rain began and continued all day and most of the night, making our work very uncomfortable. In addition, the Infantry working party was 2 hours late, and the night was so dark, we lost a number of men on the way up; the men, some of them, are ‘old soldiers’ in more ways than one, and they find it easy to get lost and only appear in time to get the busses again, when it is time to go home! So, altogether, that night was not a very satisfactory one.

Tuesday, November 30<sup>th</sup>

Most of the day was spent in making out lists of tools, etc, and generally trying to get things ship-shape. At 4.0 o'clock we started for the trenches again, ready for a good night's work, the Infantry parties were somewhat mixed again, but we got on fairly well, undisturbed by shells or bullets. Mr Boche, however, about 8.30, started a heavy bombardment of poor old “Wipers”, trying to blow up the transport wagons, of which there was a lot about; it was quite interesting to hear the guns, sending over some very big shells sometimes and watch the flash of gun and bursting shell; shrapnel bursting high up in the air over the roads, to stop Infantry parties moving about, looked quite fine in the dark, seen from a distance.

The bombardment made our usually quite ride back quite exciting for us; after going through [Brielen](#),



**The rebuilt village of Brielen**

we saw and heard shells bursting in the village of Elverdinghe in front of us, so slowed up to a walk and discussed what was the best thing to do. As the shells were coming only at intervals of about 5 minutes we decided to go on to the village, wait for the next shell, and then make a dash for it; so we went on till the outskirts, then waited. Sure enough a shell came, we saw it before we heard it, but when we did hear it, we bobbed behind the horses' neck, because the shell was coming straight for us where we were standing! Shells being faster than horses, it was no use trying to move, so we waited and by good luck the burst came high in the air, 30 yards away, sending the pieces flying over our heads. One being enough, we whipped up and all four of us, - Captain Neill, myself and our orderlies

– galloped madly through the village, not stopping till we got the other side near our farm. It would have made a good picture for a “Sphere” or “Graphic” artist, with one difference; he would probably have shown shells bursting round us in all directions, whereas actually the next shell arrived when we were half a mile away!

Wednesday, December 1<sup>st</sup>

My remark yesterday about seeing the shell coming may seem strange, considering it was night, but as a matter of fact, it is easier then than in daylight. In daylight one is too busy dodging to try to see one, and if not, it is almost impossible, except with big, slow-moving shells, but at night, the fuse seems to glow or perhaps it is the nose cap, but anyway, the shell, if you know where it is coming from, can be seen from quite a long way off, but of course, there is not really time enough to move away.

Talking about ‘moving’, one sometimes hears people say they nearly jumped out of their boots with fright, the other day it actually happened! A party of men were taking a short cut across country in daylight and one got sniped; the others immediately dashed for the trench, and one man, in his fright, jumped clean out of his socks and boots and ran in bare-footed! His boots were not recovered either, so deep was the mud. Yesterday, one of our NCOs. got a nice ‘Blighty’ in the leg and was taken to the [advanced dressing station](#),



**Advanced dressing station**

where we went to see him on our way home; this station is an old inn at some cross roads and is frequently shelled, so the windows are filled solid with sand bags, etc. The scene inside was a typical war-picture; the only illumination came from a few candles, stuck in bottles; the air was thick with the smell of drugs, on shelves were all kinds of dressings and medicine. One room was occupied by stretcher bearers waiting to be called out to cases; the other room, full of strange shadows and dark corners was occupied by the men, wounded or dead, who had just been brought in; the wounded, with their injuries dressed, waiting till the ambulance could take them on to that Paradise, the Hospital, where one has baths and clean sheets and good meals. In one corner a man with his arm strapped tightly up, in another a man with his head bound, white faced and obviously in great pain; in another one poor fellow who had just died, with his gum boots already taken off him, for they are scarce and some one else will want them! Our own man was lying there, cheerfully smoking a cigarette – that solace for all wounds – his face covered in smiles at the idea of going back to dear old England, being envied by all who had not got a good “Blighty”. That is one’s usual feeling; if one could make sure of being hit in arm or leg, one would face bullets cheerfully; but an imaginative person can see himself rolling in agony on the ground, hit in the head or body, and that is the picture that makes him cringe when a bullet goes whistling by.

Tonight the work has gone on satisfactorily, except for the usual small difficulties with the Infantry parties, who always seem to think they are working for the special benefit of the R.E. They seem quite unable to realize that the trenches and so on that we build, are to protect them, not ourselves!

#### Thursday, December 2nd

Another very lazy morning; at 9.30 breakfast in bed, then an hour's read and at 10.45, previous to dressing leisurely for dinner at 1.00. "Bath" is merely its courtesy title, for the process consists of standing, on one foot or two as required, over a large bowlful of hot water and having an extra large wash! However, it suffices and is considerably better than nothing.

About 4.0. we started off again, whilst a dark heavy fog gradually began to swallow everything up, making it fairly certain we were in for a bad night. And so it happened, for out of 200 only 50 men arrived to time, and 100 did not arrive at all, consequently we got very little work done and I myself did not leave the Canal Bank. One of Captain Neill's party was killed, exactly on the spot where the Corporal was wounded two nights before; in his case he was standing and received the bullet in his leg; this lad – he was only a lad, poor fellow – was stooping down and the bullet went in at his shoulder and apparently stopped in his heart; there is evidently a fixed rifle position on that spot. Altogether, with the fog and rain and no infantry party, added to the cruelty of this poor lad's death, I felt somewhat despondent and was glad to get to bed. The only cheery thing was that I am gradually breaking 'Baby' of his lazy habits – with heel and whip – and we came 'home' at a fine pace. He is a queer horse, full of strange moods; he delights in rubbing his head against you, or with other horses, in licking them; going through villages, he insists on looking into every door on both sides of the road. He is obstinate at times and once it took 4 men to push him out of the stable into the road; he always knows when his nose is towards his stable and shows his delight by dancing, never being on more than 2 feet at once, making him very awkward to mount. He hates being passed by other horses and will try to nibble them if they come close enough; however, he is a jolly little horse and we are getting to be very good pals.

#### Friday, December 3rd

A perfectly wretched day; continuous rain, gusty winds and heavy clouds keeping out the daylight; the sort of day which makes one look forward to night work with anything but pleasure. And it certainly was a wretched night, pitch dark, still "blowey", and the rain had made the usual dry places pools of water and the usual pools into lakes, so our infantry parties, carrying up frames, pickets, and barbed wire and so on had a really horrible journey, taking 2 hours instead of the usual forty five minutes. Even carrying nothing it was almost impossible in parts to keep one's feet and I myself sat in the mud more than once! Consequently, half way through the evening I was absolutely weighed down and had eventually to take off my Mac' and simply hold it in a stream till the clinging mud had washed off it. However, we got a certain amount of work done and finished about 10. p.m.

Then for some reason, the Boches woke up and started shelling everything within reach; walking along the road by the canal, I was somewhat dismayed to hear several shells coming, and stepped to the side of the road, preparatory to lying down in the mud, if necessary! However, the shells went over, in twos and threes, and once at least half a dozen, tearing their way over to the village of Brielen, a mile away, through which we have to ride home! When things quietened down a bit, we started off, and one would have thought the Boches could see us for as soon as we got to the village the shells came again, smashing in roofs, tearing holes in the roads, knocking out brick walls as though made of paper; one dropped behind a house we were passing, and another, a "dud", thanks be to Providence, tore through the air 5 yards behind us and buried itself in the bank on the other side of the road. A "dud" is a shell which does not explode on landing, and about 20% of the Boche shells are of that kind, and so are comparatively harmless.

We trotted on, and beyond the village, saw shrapnel bursting high up, about a half a mile on our right, however, we hurried along, until out of reach and finally got home to supper and bed about 11.30 p.m. Shelling in daylight is fairly bad, but at night very much worse; one feels so absolutely helpless hearing the shells – and sometimes seeing them – coming, and not knowing where or when the burst will come. And yet shells, terrible though they are, are strangely harmless sometimes; I have seen a shell hit the ground and burst within 5 yards of a man and yet he was quite unharmed; the burst, when the shell is on the ground goes upwards at an angle, and a man lying down a yard or two away is safer than one standing at 20 yards. The usual thing to do is to lie down at once and then, unless the shell actually drops on you, you are practically safe.



Saturday, December 4<sup>th</sup>

Another really horrible day, wet and windy and dark; bed being most attractive. I had breakfast there and only got up in time for lunch. About 4.0.o'clock we started off again, met our working parties and started up to our jobs after loading up the carrying parties; a visit to the Machine Gun Officer delayed Neill and myself so that we started some minutes after the men and were just in time to stop some running away! The Boches were shelling all round and about our work, and had sent one or two near our carrying party; these had simply thrown shovels and sandbags and so on to one side and run, a thing no soldier should do, but in this case only another proof that this Division is badly in need of a rest. After 8 months in the front line – a shame that they should have been kept so long – the men are worn out and their nerves also; the night was also enough to upset anyone; pitch dark, so that one could not help but fall into pools and shell holes, the wind blowing furiously, driving the rain through mackintoshes and coats and in addition bullets and shells, – what could be more nerve shaking? Yet, when, in trying to cross a stream, I slipped and fell full length in the mud, tripping up Neill who fell on top of me, we laid there and laughed for a minute or two, quite unable to move! Human nature is a strange thing!

Finally, we gathered the poor lads together and after wading and slipping a long way round, managed to get to our work, and carry on as usual, Mr Boche ceased fire

. About 9.30 p.m. we knocked off and started for home, and by now the wind, from the S.W. had risen to such a gale as I have never met before, it was almost impossible to walk against it, and even the horses had hard work to get along and we had to walk most of the way. One of our carrying parties had bad luck, for a shed blew down as they were passing and severely injured five of them. If it isn't bullets, its shells, if not shells, the weather, it seems impossible to keep safe anywhere in this wretched country!!

Our big cycle shed was blown over, and I expected my hut roof to go, but luckily the wind was satisfied with stripping off the felt.

Sunday, December 5<sup>th</sup>

The wind had dropped entirely when I woke, and instead we had a fine sunny morning, a refreshing change. My lazy habits are growing, for I did not get up till 10.0.o'clock, after breakfast in bed again; because it is Sunday I suppose Mr Boche decided to wake things up a bit, so he has been sending shells over our heads into the quiet still inhabited village (Woesten) half a mile away, in addition to battering poor old Elverdinghe again. There is a railway line being brought past the farm and rumour has it that it is for a very big moveable gun, and if so, we can look for a lively time soon when the Boche retaliates; we shall probably have to move, which will be annoying. After lunch came news that there would be no working parties for us, so we decided, without much hesitation, to have the evening off ourselves; also for a change, to ride into Poperinghe and have as lively a time as possible. So the Major, Captain Neill and myself mounted about 3.o'clock and with John, the Belgian interpreter and two orderlies, set out. First to a jolly little house where some charming little Belgian girls provide meals for officers; alas! no cakes, so off we went to a patisserie and returned loaded with fancy pastries of all kinds, chocolate, etc; then tea, joined after much persuading by two of the young ladies, with whom conversation was somewhat limited, our only Flemish being the words for "more butter, please", and I defy anyone to keep up an interesting talk with those. However, we enjoyed ourselves and after tea invaded the next room, which contained a piano, here we were joined by some doctors and other officers and started a musical (?) evening and impromptu dance, remarkable for its energy rather than its gracefulness! However, after trenches and farm life, a piano and one or two of the other sex, have an exceedingly cheering effect, so we all more or less enjoyed ourselves, till about 7.30., when we bade affectionate "Goodbyes", with promises to return again, and returned to the farm for dinner. Needless to say it was pitch dark and raining fast. Our interpreter had been anxious to pay another visit to a house where there is also a piano and charming ladies, but that is put off for another day; on exceptional nights such as this, we always make it a rule to go to bed early, that being an especial treat to us.

Monday, December 6<sup>th</sup>

A quiet day after our previous evening dissipation; about 8.0.o'clock we started again for the trenches, and there being no infantry working party tonight, we took things easily and dropped in on our way to Brigade Headquarters at Chateau du Trois Tours [X on map]. Being guest night we arrived in time for a good drink and cigars, to fortify us for our work! On the line, the evening passed quietly and we got home to bed in good time. The world is small, for at Headquarters I met a man from Petrograd who knows my brother well.

Tuesday, December 7<sup>th</sup>

Another quiet day, but a decidedly lively night, in fact the liveliest I've had in my life! The Infantry were very late and so it was late when we arrived at our dump [\*] on the [Canal Road](#),



**Canal Road**

where we always load up; however, we got them away and then retired as usual to a little sandbag [X see map] kitchen on the canal side, for our usual cigarette, before going forward. Just as I was remarking that the corrugated iron roof would not keep out a shell if it came, the Boches started, shell after shell came, singly and in twos and threes, sweeping the road from end to end, and so quickly there was no chance to move into better shelter, so we had to stay crushing ourselves low down against the sandbags. With only four feet of space between ourselves and the road side stream, there was no room to run about and to make matters worse, an Infantry party, on its way to the trenches, was passing along, laden with packs and rifles and bags. So just at our spot was a horrible crush and there the shells came thickest; everyone who could dashed for the small entrance – 5ft x 3ft - to a sap, with the result that at once there was a struggling mass of men there, so jammed that no one could get into the place of safety or even move; I stood on the outside pulling men on one side and shouting – I'm afraid with some strong words. Added – to those inside to move up and make room for others, as did two R.E. Officers who had managed to get inside. But men in a panic are strangely like sheep, and you cannot control them by reasoning, so in the end it was a case of brute force, pulling them from the entrance and then simply pushing them in to the sap, one by one; another shell in that



spot would have killed many, but – thank Heaven! – no more came just then. It was certainly the fullest 5 minutes I have ever had; the struggling mass of men outside the entrance; just inside two wounded men, one groaning horribly, another, with bits of shell through heart and lungs, dying – not quietly but amongst a terrible uproar; at my feet, a man with the top of his head blown off and blood pouring from him as from a tap, lying just where he had fallen, tripping up the men who came rushing along; he was lying with head over the water and it was the greatest wonder he had not gone into the stream, to be drowned as well as wounded. We could do little for him but place him in a more comfortable place; when the stretcher came I helped to put him on it – a gruesome job – to go to the dressing station, but he was dead before getting there. Altogether, just about us, in two or three minutes, three men were killed and seven, including two Infantry officers, wounded; my gratitude for my own escape can be guessed, for the man whose head was hurt was not 10 feet away, yet I had nothing worse than a bump against the wall from the concussion. The details I have given were perhaps unnecessary, but I purposely gave them to show to a slight extent what war is; pictures in the paper, showing guns and horses and men charging the enemy may look very fine and exhilarating, but for real war take a pitch dark night and a crowded spot, with shells bursting over it, – that is much more like the real thing. Even amongst the awfulness of it, was a shade of humour, in the shape of one man, groaning most piteously, yet walking about, and only, we found, bruised on the hip by piece of stone; he thought, I think, that he was quite done for and certainly made more noise than anyone else!

Not feeling inclined to face a mile of bullets, I spent the remaining time in the sap – with a dead man on the same bed – after clearing the frightened men away to other and safer dug-outs. When I finally met my sappers I found that they too had been heavily shelled, but without any casualties, thanks to our new trench. Getting to bed about 2.0 a.m., I was glad to keep the lamp on and read a book, not about war, for some little time before going to sleep.

Wednesday, December 8<sup>th</sup>

Getting up in time for lunch, I found a delightfully sunny day to greet me, always a most welcome change. About 6.0 p.m. we started again, and the Infantry party being punctual, got to the dump, and with a wary eye on the sky for gun-flashes, loaded them up and sent them away. Then, not waiting for the casual cigarette, for shells spoil the flavour somewhat, I went straight on and got to the new trench in good time; work went on steadily for some time, but at 11.0'clock, when we decided the Boche had gone to bed, he showed we were mistaken by dropping a lot of shells all the way along the new line; big black shrapnel, high explosive and whiz-bangs; for 10 minutes we had the liveliest time, but with 10 feet of earth and sandbags in front of us, we were comparatively safe, being touched by nothing worse than showers of mud, whilst the ground shook as though an earthquake had arrived! Following the previous night's shelling, it certainly made me, and I think all of us shaky, and so we packed up and cleared away down to the Canal Road, even here, we had to run, for again the Boche sent shell after shell on the road, not, luckily, close to us, we did not linger, but hurriedly walked up to Brielen and the busses; being early, we deceived Mr Boche, for after we were safely past he shelled Brielen itself! Bullets are fairly rotten, but to be sniped, so to speak, with 6" shells, and to be followed by them everywhere, is most uncomfortable. However, "a miss is as good as a mile" they say, though in war times, I should much prefer the mile, and so we got safely back and to bed about 1.30 a.m.

#### Thursday, December 9th

At 5.0'clock I was awakened by noises and feeling the hut shake and found that our guns, all along the line, were doing a bit of "strafing", - the commonest word in use out here, equalled perhaps only by 'Blighty' - such pandemonium; whole batteries fired at once, then numbers of guns singly, and together, and now and again, the terrific bang of a big Naval 12", brought up on rails to shell a town 17 miles away! For half an hour solid, there was no break in the noise, whilst the hut and everything in it, myself included, rattled about; then it gradually slowed up and finally stopped about 6.0, when we managed another 3 hours sleep. In the dark, the gun flashes, seen through the glass in my door, were a fine sight, but - the Boches are certain to retaliate and we don't know when; probably they will have a few minutes "Hate" on our job again, before proceeding to shell the surrounding country. If they hit my hut and upset my bed clothes. I shall be in a fix when I return. At present it is pouring with rain, which may damp their ardour a little, and personally, I hope it will rain so fast the other side of the line, as to drown every man there.

By the way, dressing for the trenches on a cold, wet night is quite a business; a leather waistcoat under the tunic, then two pairs of socks, and great big rubber thigh boots; over the tunic a big leather jerkin, a wool muffler, and mackintosh; finally a waterproof cap cover and thick gloves. A decided change from the mail-armour and battleaxe of olden times! I should like to take a few warriors of the Middle Ages and put them where the shells are dropping and where bullets come from all sides. I warrant they would run a good deal quicker than we should; incidentally they would have great fun going along the trenches in their 'get-up' even without their horses.

After all, instead of being particularly noisy, Mr Boche has been particularly quiet, and we managed to get a little work done, though not much because of the weather. Quite the darkest night we've had, windy and pouring with rain; the air was unpleasantly damp and warm, making everyone feel weary. Having sent the Infantry up, I also sent a message to the Sappers, who were already on the spot, to come down early, and then I retired to a cosy dug-out for a smoke; it is nearly hopeless trying to work on such a night, and it is certainly unfair to the Infantry parties, who have been hard at work all day and then are sent out to work at night.

#### Friday, December 10th

As if to make up for last night's quiet, the Boche has been busy shelling tonight; on the right he was sending shells, one after another, shrapnel and H.E. on to nearly every square yard; on my job I saw him drop a few as I was walking up the road, and an hour later he sent some more, luckily no damage to either man or work; at the same time he bombarded the Canal road, and buried two of my carrying party in mud; they were pulled out unhurt, but neither they nor the rest of the party were seen again till 'bussing time'. We worked on steadily till 11.30 and then returned and once again the shells came, shrapnel fast and furious on the road, and some H.E. into Brielen, where we were standing by the busses. No one was hit luckily and all got safely away; I don't know what it costs in shells to put one man out of action, but it must be considerable; our party for instance, probably had 50 or more shells hurled at them, but not one man was touched.

#### Saturday, December 11th

A particularly ordinary day, spent in the usual routine of getting up late, after breakfast, writing letters, etc, and going on to the trenches at night.. It was a particularly quiet night and work went on quite steadily for some time; the only shells we had were in Brielen, waiting for the busses; just as we left Mr Boche dropped one or two into the battered little village, but our guns replied immediately so that probably Mr Boche wished he hadn't.

#### Sunday, December 12th

We were greeted this morning with the cheering news that there would be no working party this evening; where upon, with visions of early bed, we settled down to have a jolly day. A "Daily Sketch" gift parcel, containing boxing gloves, etc, came at midday, so we tried our hands at the "noble art" with little damage to anything but the furniture. Then, we spent a considerable time, and a large amount of energy, laughing over games of various kinds, and generally behaving like schoolboys let loose. We remembered occasionally that it was Sunday, but the Padre could not come to take a service today; also the guns fired just the same and the war still goes on, so that the Sabbath has - unfortunately - fallen more or less into line with the other six days of the week. The relief of not going to the trenches is such that our spirits rise to overflowing and we simply have to give vent to them!

About 9.0.o'clock most of us retired to spend an hour or so reading in bed, preparatory to a real long night.

Monday, December 13<sup>th</sup>

This morning came sad news, to the effect that Captain Edwardes of my own Company had been killed yesterday; it is a very great loss, for he was a fine soldier and a real gentleman. It was devotion to duty that lost him his life, for in order to examine certain works more carefully he got out of the trench in daylight and was immediately shot by a sniper. Today also came instructions to me to return to my own Company on Wednesday, which means a wooden hut for mess and a tent-bedroom again, not at all attractive after a farmhouse and cosy little hut. About 5.0. p.m. we went off again to our new line, picked up the Infantry party and worked steadily all night, shelled as usual but without casualties.

Tuesday, December 14<sup>th</sup>

A very ordinary day in every way; the same old weather, the same old meals, the same old trenches and the same old shells and bullets; nothing at all out of the common occurred worth recording.

Wednesday, December 15<sup>th</sup>

I spent the morning packing up and returned, not too cheerfully, to my own Company directly after lunch. I shall now be working on the left of my last position, nearer the Boche, and shall again have that mile walk every evening, over country full of bullets. Tonight we started on an attempt to reclaim an important [communication trench](#),



**Trench by the canal**

which is in a dreadful state. The trench runs parallel with the Canal, and if when shelling our bridges, the Boche does not get his range correct, his shells drop into our trench and there you are! Another unpleasant thing about the trench is that, as it is an old one and has seen a lot of fighting, there are all kinds of unpleasant relics, French and English, which we turn up as we dig down and about. On one occasion for instance, part of the side of the trench fell in and left a hand and arm sticking out; no more need be said to show that the job is an unpleasant one. We cannot get away from such things even outside the trenches, for in our walk backwards and forwards, we pass through a small soldier's cemetery, and here an occasional shell will burrow down and scatter the contents of three or four graves all round. It is truly surprising what human nature can get used to.

Thursday, December 16<sup>th</sup> – Saturday December 18<sup>th</sup>

I have put these three days together, because they were practically identical in every way; out of bed late, a quiet afternoon and then the night working away at the trench [Fargate]. The trench is in a truly awful condition; there has been little rain for a day or two, so what was merely liquid mud, knee deep and possible to wade through, has now dried a little and become semi-liquid glue, which holds your legs like – well, like glue! It is a very slow and

exceedingly difficult job to get along, it even one night pulled one of my thigh boots off, strapped in three places though it was! So naturally, we prefer the top of the trench, with its bullets, to struggling slowly through the glue; the men take up a spadeful and cannot throw it, but have to scrape it off each time. Flanders mud will be remembered for many years to come.

Sunday, December 19<sup>th</sup>

A really exciting day, perhaps the most exciting I have yet had; about 4.30 a.m. (I had hardly been in bed a couple of hours) I was awakened by hearing what was apparently a tremendous thunderstorm, and excited voices outside the tent. Soon, I discovered that the thunderstorm was the roaring of all our heavy guns firing like machine guns, added to the tremendous crash of heavy Boche shells bursting a little way off. The nearest shells, though they sounded unpleasantly close, were apparently about a quarter of a mile away, so I turned over and tried to sleep, but only dozed till about 9.0'clock. After breakfast news came filtering through on this bright Sunday morning; "Heavy firing by the Artillery", "Gas shells", "Gas attack". Later came news by one of our men from Brielen, a mile behind the line, that they had nearly been suffocated by gas shells that had been poured into the village, that the Germans had made a tremendous gas attack, but had failed because our artillery had simply smashed them up and stopped them getting out of their trenches and so on. The truth of this was apparent later when the ambulances began to come past, full of poor fellows, sick and gasping and green in the face; many scores too, smashed up by shells and wounded by bullets. Our big guns were still firing rapidly and there was a continuous roar all day, so what the Boches have suffered Heaven alone knows. We had arranged to have the evening in, but now began to wonder about our bridges; have they been smashed in? No telegrams arrived, so we felt hopeful, until changing for dinner, and then of course news came that most of our bridges had been broken, and were still being shelled by an armoured train behind the Boche lines. Such is life! Quickly changing again into trench clothes, and giving directions for my section, which is the bridging section, to follow, off I trotted, my heart in my boots, towards the inferno of shells and bullets that were still being rained on our trenches and guns. Behind the lines, the country was being drenched with gas shells, so that even the gunners had to work with helmets on; gas shells are not poisonous, but are lachrymatory, they make the tears pour out of one's eyes, so that one is almost blinded; on the way I passed streams of men, for whom there was no room in the ambulances staggering back, sick and wounded and weary to death. At the usual farm, my section met me and we started our walk straight into the shells; it was useless trying to find cover, for shells were everywhere, so we simply clenched our teeth and walked straight on; every few yards we were on the ground, trying to dodge the High Explosive and shrapnel, and in our spare time we wiped the tears from our eyes! By a miracle, we arrived at the trenches without mishap and found the bridging party, which always lives near the trenches, hard at work repairing. With our help, two bridges were quickly repaired and smashed in again by the Boches, and repaired again, and so we kept on for some time. Some men were hit, but the work can't stop; shells fly all round, but if they don't hit you, you are all right, so keep on! The smell of gas was everywhere, strong and sickly; being heavy it sinks to the ground and stays there, and many men, asleep in dug-outs, lost their lives in this way. The gas helmets, if you have time to put them on, are most effective, but they must fit tightly round the neck, else the gas gets underneath. Several officers, bending into the dug-outs to wake their men, loosened their helmets – and lost their lives. About midnight the firing slackened somewhat, our artillery had got the upper hand, but the walk back was quite sufficiently nerve-shaking; however, we got back without casualties, leaving some men still near the bridges in case of further damage.

So ended a really exciting day, and it is fairly certain that, despite the gas, the Boche casualties were considerably heavier than ours – a slight compensation for what we had gone through!

Monday, December 20<sup>th</sup>

A day of quiet after the storm, and whilst some of the men in the evening carried on with strengthening the bridges, I went on again to the communication trench and continued our work there. Our work was more difficult now, for some of the torrent of shells aimed at the bridge had fallen into the trench and upset things; in two cases big trees standing on the parapet, had been hit at the roots and pushed bodily into the trench, and were now standing upright as if growing there, blocking the way and giving us a lot of extra work. The Boche had not quite finished with the bridges even then, for after passing over one, I returned an hour later and found (when I got to the middle!) that there was a gap of 10 feet wide with the narrow edge of a 9" x 3" timber to walk across! In the middle of this tight-rope feat a shell flew whiz! Over my head and I nearly fell into the water; however, all's well that ends well and we got safely back to camp about midnight. Whilst standing in the trench, I had noticed ominous signs that my heart was not standing up to its work very well, so I decided to ask the Doctor's advice the following morning.



Tuesday, December 21<sup>st</sup>

The Doctor examined me today and quickly decided that I must have a long rest, and meanwhile, until he could get me moved away, I was not to go up to the trenches again, so I had two quiet, restful days until...

Thursday, December 24<sup>th</sup>

When I began to understand something more about the Army Medical system and the lengthy process it is getting away from the trenches! A wounded man is "first aided" at a dug-out surgery and then at night carried down to the ambulances, which take him to a Field Ambulance some two or three miles back. The one to which I went was in some barns belonging to a farmhouse; a Field Ambulance moves forward with the troops and so of course, men cannot stay there long, but are, as soon as possible, moved further back to a permanent Casualty Clearing Station and thence by Hospital Train, (for the Casualty Clearing Station is at railhead), to a Base Hospital or home to England. I myself, after two hours at the Field Ambulance, [x see map] was moved on by motor ambulance to No 10 Casualty Clearing Station at Poperinghe, arriving there about 12.0.a.m; about 3.30 the Hospital train arrived and then commenced the work of loading it with wounded and sick men, trench feet, shell wounds, bullets, eye troubles, heart troubles, every conceivable illness, truly a sorry train full and at first a very quiet one, but as the train moved on and we got away, out of range of shells and all the terrible things that War brings with it, the strain seemed to relax and soon the whole 1100 of us were laughing and talking cheerily, as though there were no such things as pain and illness. After eight weary hours we arrived at Boulogne (about 70 miles away!) and were greeted by English girls with smiles and kindly words; what a change after seeing nothing but "furriners" for weeks past and how delightful it seemed to be in civilization again! With a friend I went to No 7 Stationary Hospital, arriving there at 1.0.a.m. on Xmas morning and soon we were asleep, conscious of a greater feeling of safety than we had had for some time. Even here, our nerves would not altogether leave us alone, for in the middle of the night, the wind howling at the window woke Martin, who, forgetting where he was and hearing only a tearing shrieking sort of noise, took the first cover he could find, dived right down into the bed under the clothes and waited for he shell to burst!!

After four jolly days here I was moved on per H.M.H.S. "Cambrian" to Dover and then London again, that had seemed so far away. At Charing Cross more English girls – bless 'em! To help us into ambulances and motor cars, and, (most pathetic it was too) outside the station a crowd of girls and women, though it was midnight, waiting, with handkerchiefs in their hands, to greet the men who had been through so much for them and theirs.

My luck held good and I arrived at a most delightful private Hospital in Mayfair, where I spent 17 jolly days, before returning home on two months sick leave.

So ended my first experience of Active Service