

THE WESTERN FRONT

FROM THE MENIN GATE TO SAN QUENTIN 1915 - 1918.

The revised memoirs of 18369 Private John Moffatt
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The following view of the First World War is that of a front-line occupant. It is not the view of a Home Front pundit, nor that of a military strategist who saw the war from behind the lines, but of one who actually had to do the job. Neither is it the view of one who shared the glamour of the Engineers or the Artillery, nor who enjoyed the relative safety of the Medical Corps or Transport, but simply the first-hand view of an ordinary soldier who toured the killing fields of Ypres and the Somme over a period of 3 years living in Trenches, standing on fire-steps, going 'over the top', getting Blighty wounds, sniping and night-raiding in No Mans Land and, somehow, managing to survive; - a view one might say, from the mud.

"We don't want to fight but By Jingo if we do,

We've got the generals and the men, and we've got the money too."

When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, there was certainly not much doubt in people's minds about the men or the money mentioned in this current 'top of the pops' hit. Perhaps there was little doubt about the Generals either. Had they not just taken only a few years to wallop the Boer farmers? The war was bound to be over by Christmas asserted the old retired chaps, especially those who, by now, only had room for any more ribbons and medals down the backs of their tunics. Some were openly lamenting the fact that they were not twenty years younger but inwardly, I suspect, relieved to be the age they were.

'Kitchener's Army at the Front' proclaimed the newspaper headlines in the Autumn.

This may have been inserted merely to acquaint the general public of the fact, but possibly also in the hope that such news would spread terror in the German ranks. However, the British involvement at the very outset in a good-going Retreat, was not the kind of publicity which would be likely to cause much consternation in the enemy ranks. The charitable comment would be to say that it was not fair to send a General out armed with a Sandhurst Rule Book which catered for the destruction of Zulus, Dervishes and Farmers, against the most powerful and highly efficient army in the world. The Germans were equipped with real guns and were directed by real Generals. Even captured German prisoners were known to make derisory remarks about the tactics of our Top Brass. 'Your King and Country need you' declaimed Kitchener's famous recruiting poster with the pointing, challenging finger. It was the phrase 'your country' which intrigued quite a few of those who could read - especially those of us from the country areas who, hitherto, had always been bombarded with notices all round our respective neighbourhoods warning us to 'Keep out! You are disturbing the game. Trespassers will

be prosecuted and dogs will be shot!' Could this reference to 'your Country' perhaps be a misprint?

No army is complete without its Brass Hats – affectionately referred to in the line as 'Brass Hats with heads to match' who, like Gilbert's Duke of Plaza Toro, 'led their regiments from behind, they found it less exciting.'

On the rare occasions when the top Brass were obliged to inspect the line, usually the third line back, they were invariably accompanied by assistant staff, known to front-liners as 'Creepers'. In all my 3 years rambling over the Western Front the only Brass Hat I ever saw was at Lephook Camp in the south of England. Some apparently did proceed overseas; it seems there was not enough room for them all at home H.Q. After all they were needed to sign Court Martial death warrants for those unfortunate soldiers who had just snapped.

When war began some of our Brass Hats seemed quite happy to approach it with the same old swashbuckling, 'Tally Ho!' mind set, envisaging Cavalry galloping around the battlefield cutting and thrusting to their hearts' desire. It was not altogether surprising that the British Expeditionary Force very soon got themselves involved in as good going a retreat as one could imagine..

I myself however was not at Mons, I was in the process of enlisting.

Lord Carson was recruiting a Battalion to complete the 36th. Ulster Division. Recruiting offices were open to recruits in Glasgow and Newcastle. I was enrolled there but not sworn in. I was instructed to return to my home at Melkington, near Flodden, and await further orders until a sufficient number of recruits came forward to ship over to Belfast. I spent Christmas 1914 at home. The war, contrary to predictions, was definitely not over. My next Christmas would be spent on the 'firing step' head and shoulders above the parapet, with shifts of 2 hours on and, sometimes, 4 hours off. The following two Christmases would be more congenial; they would be spent during my 8 days out of the front line..

On 26th December 1914 I received orders to report back to Newcastle on the following day. There were about fifty recruits altogether. To say we 'sailed' over to Belfast would be a 'loose' description. I was to cross and re-cross that sea 14 times over the course of the war, but the other 13 crossings put together were not as bad as that first one.

We were in a tub called the Princess Maud – a first class cattle boat. As a matter of fact there were as many cattle as there were recruits: as one of the volunteers put it with some degree of accuracy, it was a sort of 'family gathering'. Initial fears that the boat might sink had changed by halfway across to fears that it might not.

We must have presented a sorry sight as we staggered through the streets of Belfast on our way to the recruiting barracks. There we were duly kitted out in our military uniforms to become part of 'D' Company, 11th. Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, which, in turn, formed part of the 36th. Ulster Division. Our civilian clothes were bundled up and addressed home. Very few of us were to have need of them again. On the first day of the Battle of the Somme in 1916 this Company was officially reported to have been wiped out almost to a man.

As our intended barracks were not quite ready for occupation, we were quartered in the Inniskilling Dragoon barracks. By early January 1915 we took over our now completed huts at Randalstown. This is an attractive location and the inhabitants were very kind to us. My clearest memories are those of donkey carts loaded with peat, rattling along the street.

We were now about to be introduced to the barrack square. Our first Instructor was referred to simply as 'Essex'. He was a nice fatherly figure, ever free with kindly advice. One of the more encouraging remarks he made about us as we moved around the square was that we reminded him of a heap of s..t. As commands like 'at the halt, on the left. form Platoon' produced something more in keeping with a trip round the Mulberry Bush, with recruits cursing each other while he swore at the lot of us, each individual was required to take yet another slow and careful count of the number of right hands and left feet he actually possessed.

The transition from the 'awkward squad' to the ranks was a good morale booster for the ordinary soldier. It was now that I began to learn some of the more unofficial tricks of the trade. Although we had joined up together, my instructor was surprisingly knowledgeable for a raw recruit. It turned out that he was not a 'rookie' at all. He was, in fact, a regular soldier of 7 years experience who had deserted from his Regiment and joined up again with us. He knew King's Regulations inside out. He instructed me in such matters as the exact amount of punishment which a Lieutenant could impose as distinct from a Captain, how to report sick and get away with it, how to develop a badly swollen leg prior to a route march, and how to get a day or two off duty by making the heart beat slowly.

I wondered about the feasibility of this practice of deserting and re-enlisting. According to him it was not uncommon, and in time of war, mere child's play. One simply deserted, donned civilian clothes, changed one's name and enlisted in another Regiment. When the Battalion was due to proceed overseas the process was simply repeated. I knew one soldier in our Battalion, a Bugler, who had already done this twice. As we prepared to leave for France he did it again - only this time, not before he borrowed my best boots and walking-out cane to use on leave.

As the weeks passed we were becoming more and more like soldiers. One is not a soldier of course until he has served a certain amount of C.B.(confinement to barracks). C.B. was within the reach of every Private and all too easily accessible at that. He could qualify for it by not having a regulation hair cut, being late on parade, refusing to eat his rations, having dirty boots or buttons, not having shaved, not standing properly to attention in front of an officer, failing to salute properly, having his bedding incorrectly folded, climbing over the camp wall after 'lights out' and of course, for getting drunk outside of camp. Getting blind drunk at the 'wet canteen' inside the camp however, did not incur any punishment at all. C.B. could be more than just irksome. It meant that after the day's parades were over, while others were free to go where they wished, those on C.B. had to wait in their huts until the Bugler blew 'Defaulters'. These then ran 'at the double' to the Guardroom for inspection, where more C.B. was liable to be handed out for not getting there quickly enough. Offenders might stand there for about half an hour before being dismissed to their huts, which they might barely reach before hearing 'Defaulters' blow again. This time they might get an hour's rifle drill. Attempts to write a letter in between times were usually futile. The final dismissal from the Guardroom would be timed for

9.50p.m. Each man was then required to be back in his own hut to answer his name at the final roll call before 'Lights out' at 10p.m.

By this time we were formed into Platoons. Each hut formed a Platoon. 4 Platoons constituted 1 Company and 4 Companies made up a Battalion. Young officers were arriving from Cadet school and were attached to the various Platoons. The Commanding Officer, Colonel Hessey, had returned from retirement. As the Battalions were newly formed, Sergeants, Corporals and Lance Corporals were selected from the ranks, all under the watchful eye of Mr. Blake, our Regimental Sergeant Major. Every Sunday we were marched down to Randalstown Church. Dodging Church Parade incurred C.B. as also did playing cards in the back row. The Reverend gentleman must have despaired of many of us but he had the good sense never to take a collection from us. I would like to think that this was out of compassion for us, rather than from a concern about his plate.

As we advanced in training we were each given an opportunity to volunteer for various types of jobs. Bombardiers were needed, also Signallers, Machine Gunners and Snipers. After the normal morning parade, rifle and bayonet practice, specialised training was given in these different arts. As I had returned fairly good cards on the miniature rifle range, I plumped for sniping. What I learned about sniping there, however, was nothing to what I would learn later at the sniping school in France.

About the end of June we got our first 7 days leave. Most of the men in our hut were from Newcastle and we were issued with a free pass for the Boat and train, plus 23 shillings ration money. The 'pitch and toss' addicts very soon gambled this away. One of them, who had also gambled his Pass away, was last seen being pursued out of Newcastle station by several Redcaps. He knew that if he could escape long enough to have his leave, there would be no problem about getting back to camp. The 5 days spent at home seemed to go like 5 afternoons.

All the Sections which made up the 36th Division now assembled at Liphook Camp to commence divisional training. It was here that we passed through the full musketry course. This involved firing shots at targets ranging from 100 – 600 yards. It was not without its humorous incidents. The soldier next to me was having some difficulty. Every shot he fired was getting the same red flag signal from the butts. This meant that he was not just failing to get an 'outer', but was missing the target altogether. The instructor behind him was jumping up and down in considerable agitation by this time and kept bawling at him "Take a fine sight, I tell you, take a fine sight" As this led to no improvement the instructor finally screamed at him "You there, do you know what a fine sight is"? The soldier in question quite calmly laid down his rifle and turning to the instructor, replied "Yes! Two dinners on one plate". The course was a satisfying one for me. By gaining maximum points I was entitled to wear the 'Cross Guns' on my sleeve. In peace time I believe this would have entitled me to an extra half-shilling a day. Ordinary army pay was one shilling per day. If one made any home allowance, his pay for a full fighting week worked out at three and a half shillings. How could any soldier, we wondered, possibly work his way through that amount? I understand our Canadian and Australian counterparts received six shillings per day but presumably they must have been better fighters.

THE FRONT

In the late evening of 5th.October our Division embarked at Dover, landing at Le Havre the following morning. The month of October was to prove something of a coincidence for me. My second landing in Europe was on October 16th.1916, and my third and final landing took place on October 26th.1917. It meant I was to spend three winters on the Western Front at seven shillings a week and no double time for Sundays. We marched through the narrow streets of Le Havre to a nearby transit camp. During our brief stay there, we were invaded by French locals, each carrying two big baskets of very tasty apples. We never knew if we were getting short-changed or not, but they certainly did a roaring trade. Soon we were off again by train. We were in closed trucks on what proved to be a very slow and uncomfortable 12.hours journey. When we were about half way the train pulled into a siding where the driver kindly allowed us to use hot water from his boiler to make tea. About midnight we arrived at some small place, the name of which I cannot recall, and finally detrained. After a few days here, where we had special rifle and bayonet drill, we were inspected by a General Nugent and then began to move up country, billeting in barns as we went. The sight of 5 graves containing one English Corporal, 3 French soldiers, and a French girl served to remind us, if that were needed, that the starting tape was getting close.

It was at the end of October, 1915, that I first entered the line at a place called Beaumont Hamel. At that time it was customary for 'greenhorns' to enter a section of the line which was already held by experienced troops. On this occasion the Lancasters were our instructors. It was there that I first climbed on to a fire-step and looked ahead into the 'soldiers playground' – No Man's Land. There too, where I heard for the first time the 'crump' of a bursting shell and the ping of a passing bullet. We learned, and very quickly, the rules and various bye-laws vital to a lengthy life. I fired my first shot near the village of Beaumont Hamel. Where, and when, would I fire the last?

After one week's instruction in front line tactics we moved further along the line to occupy a sector of our own.. With Autumn setting in we got quite a lot of rain which did not improve trench conditions. This particular front however, was quite moderate to what I was to experience later on.

Enemy bombardments brought their own special problems. In such an event, Standing Instructions required every man, regardless of what he was doing, to join the single sentry on the nearest firing step. This would result in about six men standing on a fire-step, head and shoulders above the parapet, ready to repel any attempted enemy advance. This, in turn, resulted in considerable loss of life. German tactics in a similar situation on the other hand, were to get every soldier, other than the sentry, to take cover in a safe dugout. It was the duty of the German Corporal to ensure that the single sentry remained alive to signal the enemy advance immediately on the conclusion of the bombardment, whereupon the Germans had ample time to line their fire-step and give 'Tommy' a suitable welcome on his arrival – if he arrived at all. The German method was more practical and much more successful.

About 2 weeks before Christmas, as a result of being too near an exploding shell, I received what seemed to be a belt over the left ear. It was not termed as a wound but it

did require the M.O.'s attention and I was despatched to the nearest First Aid centre. Complications set in and I went as bald as a billiard ball. By Christmas Day I had lost count of time altogether and was sent to the Base Hospital for repairs. Two weeks later I was passed as fit for duty.

We were not spared drilling at base camp. Many hours were spent being shown by instructors, some of whom seemed a bit young and inexperienced themselves, how to plunge a Bayonet into a German during close hand-to-hand fighting. One soldier was told off for not having his thumb and fingers in the proper position on his rifle as he lunged at a suspended bag of straw. The offending soldier turned out to be a 'regular' who thereupon lost his temper and proceeded to inform his young 'instructor' that he had been in more bayonet fights than the instructor was ever likely to see, that he was accustomed to sticking real Germans and that he did'nt get them hanging up either. The M.O.'s inspection was impersonal and swift. His usual answer to any protest or complaint was simply to set in motion a piece of string attached to a bit of lead on the end of it, remarking tersely as he did so, "This is what you are doing. Up the line!" – so up the line it was.

Shortly after rejoining my unit the Division was moved to the Ypres sector, one of the front's most notorious hell-holes. The area from Kemel Hill to the Menin Gate was an awesome location in which to serve an apprenticeship. The only obstacle to learning the arts of war quickly here was that of not living long enough. Poperinghe was the dispersal centre. Kemel Hill is a prominent landmark providing a good view over miles of the surrounding countryside, which is also very flat.. Names like 'Dicky Bush', Veerstaat, St. Eloi, Half Moon Salient and Hell Fire Corner had a familiar ring to all who fought in this area. At this stage the town of Ypres was not badly destroyed, although from the St.Eloi line German artillery could be seen shelling the Cloth Hall in the main square. The square was the passageway for all traffic and was continually swept with shell fire day and night. Troops never 'marched' through there. The prescribed method was 'at the double'. Many other towns suffered damage in the course of the war but nothing like that sustained by Ypres, which was always under fire more or less from the beginning of the war to the end, My recollections of Ypres stretch to the Third battle when we fought alongside the Canadians – the 57th. New Brunswicks to our right and the French Canadians on the left.

Certain rumours circulated later about some of the French Canadians refusing to top the parapet, but whatever the case, the New Brunswicks emerged as the heroes of Kemel Hill, as the monument erected there testifies.

Of the areas in the Menin Gate sector, the Half Moon Salient must stand out as the most notorious. It was a death trap. The capture of a shell hole was considered a gain. When standing on sentry duty at the furthestmost point of the salient, it seemed as if one was surrounded by star shells as they exploded not only in front, but on the left and right. No other town can match the experience of Ypres, affectionately known to us all as 'Wipers'. On my final view of it the whole place was ablaze.

One particular incident I recall while we were serving in the Ypres sector was when we found ourselves opposite the Bavarians. Quite a few of them could speak English. As the trenches were not much more than about 30 yards apart, greetings could easily be exchanged. One Bavarian shouted over "I have a wife in Hull". Another gave us an offer

"You no shoot, we no shoot. We get relieved Friday night; Prussians coming in" This last piece of information did not sound too good at all.

The disadvantages of having trenches in close proximity included having to cope with Rifle Grenades, Flying Pigs, bombs etc. It also encouraged more Raiding Parties. On the credit side however, we got relief from shell fire and also Gas.

The first gas masks issued to us were like cloth hoods. The cloth was chemically treated. There was a mouthpiece for breathing out and a thin piece of gauze for vision. When the Gas gong sounded we had to remove our steel helmets, put on the hood, tuck the ends under our tunics and replace the helmets. Should the Gas effects cause sickness, on no account was the hood to be removed. Although these masks were clumsy, they proved to be quite effective. Under a Gas attack, the sensation of a burning throat was a sign that your mask was working. Unfortunately some imagined they were being gassed and in a panic, tore off their helmets and masks. Once this happened they did'nt need them any more. If the wind was deemed favourable to the enemy for a Gas attack, the line was alerted and double sentries posted.

The effects of Gas were quite horrible. A bad dose gave a man about four hours to live, hours of agony as the lungs became solid and the flesh was torn from the throat. It was little wonder that many begged for someone to put a bullet through their heads. I saw this happen on more than one occasion.

Liquid Fire was another German invention. It came over like Gas, about boot high. It was not quite so bad, unless of course you were among the wounded lying in No Man's Land. As techniques improved, Gas shells were fired and the Box Respirator replaced the cloth hood. I recall one occasion, while home for repairs in a Canadian military hospital, where the doctor there, twice offered to buy my old mask, presumably as a collector's item.

Bombs also underwent considerable development throughout the war. The early ones were crude. The striker strip was tied to your chest. On a rainy night it got wet and the match would not light. If it did light it revealed your position in No Man's Land and German front line troops were adept enough at picking us out in this area without our striking matches to assist them. Whoever invented this contraption should have been decorated – not with a medal, but with a bullet in the head.

Our Mills bomb was probably the best bomb in the field. I remember being present at a demonstration of the capabilities of the German Bettel bomb. Our instructor on this occasion was one of our fire-step comrades who had picked it up on a raid on the German line. He explained that he would pull the fuse cord, about 6 inches long, throw the bomb outside our barbed wire and we could watch it go off. He pulled the cord alright, but unfortunately it got entangled around his forefinger. His audience immediately made a point of being elsewhere. I can picture him still with the bomb hanging from his right arm. It did not explode – but when we eventually ventured back and someone cut the cord and threw the bomb it outside of our lines, where it still did not explode, our man continued to sit ashen-faced and completely motionless on the fire step, staring, it seemed, at some point beyond our vision.

One of the worst jobs during trench duty was the running and repairing of the barbed wire. With two men to each coil the wire had to be carried from the support trenches into position in front of the line. As the journey was made in darkness along a slippery trench, the language was usually quite choice. Stakes had then to be driven in, forward of the trench. Mallets were supplied free of charge but no one really imagined that Fritz did not

hear the hammering. After all, we heard his. Once the stakes were in position the coils were unwound, twice round each stake. Gloves were not supplied. It cheered us up no end to see the enemy artillery blow all our efforts to hell the next day.

THE SOMME

In early Spring 1916 there was much talk of a 'Big Push'. Our Division went out of the line for a rest, re-building and a general overhaul. I was posted off to the Sniping School at Mont de Cats for another course. It was attended by representatives from the various Battalions. It was not a general musketry course. The emphasis was on snip-shooting, which meant you could not take your time. At the Butts, targets the size of a man's head were moved quickly backwards and forwards. Correct distances were not given but had to be judged quickly by the sniper. Sometimes targets were partly concealed and the Instructor would bark out such information as 'Your target, size of a postcard, direction 4 o'clock' while the sniper stood facing him, his rifle lying behind him on the ground. On the signal, we had to turn, throw ourselves down, pick up our rifles, load two clips, hunt the target, judge the distance and fire ten shots before the whistle blew again. Some shooting exercises were done while wearing a Gas mask. We were taught various ways of measuring distance without aids, like the width of a river, the height of a tree, how to locate the North Star and how to calculate direction from the cups on a telegraph pole. We also learned how to gauge the distance of a man as he appeared in the rifle's foresight, backsight and with the bolt out, viewed through the open barrel. My success in firing at a postcard target, while wearing a Gas mask, was confirmed by the Sniping Officer who took the trouble to send the card, duly punctured with ten shots, home to my Father as a keepsake. I also took part in shoot-out competitions at 200 yards where, to register only nine 'bulls' out of ten, was to lose. Considering that our favourite pastime was to practise cutting out the bull entirely, winning such competitions was not so surprising – it was in fact why we were there. As we left to return to our Battalions, none of us needed reminding that our rifle was indeed our best friend and a lot depended on the care we took of it.

Sniping from the trenches was a dangerous pastime. We did use periscopes from the fire-step but we eventually had to expose head and shoulders above the parapet for the quick aim and squeeze on the trigger. One must never 'pull' a trigger but 'squeeze' it. Another lesson learned at the sniping school was that the 'first' aim is always the best. If we were caught taking too long a time we were told to lay down the rifle, pick it up and take a fresh aim – in other words, the longer the aim the worse the shot. Stationary rifles on tripods were often set up by both sides and trained on a vulnerable spot in the enemy trenches – a low corner for example. It was surprising how often a random squeeze on the trigger, especially at night, could prove to be fatal.

The Battalion during my absence seemed to have had a good time resting in the area around Albert where the famous statue of the Madonna, literally hanging from the steeple over the town square, became one of the main attractions. Our Division, the 36th, was now moved up into the Somme area where signs of a forthcoming major attack were becoming more and more evident. Transports were busy night and day as additional Batteries appeared and shells were stockpiled. Channel shipping was so busy that for one week we received no white bread, although there was a plentiful supply of biscuits, bully-beef, cheese and jam. According to Press reports, bread was leaving the country at the rate of one loaf for every two men. By the time it passed through Base and the various other 'behind the line' organizations like the

Medical Corps, Artillery, Transport and Engineers, those of us in the front line were lucky if we got one loaf between four. Perhaps they reasoned that one loaf between two for those actually doing the fighting, whose life expectancy was brief anyway and about to get much briefer in the next few hours, was a waste of good bread.

The position allocated to the 36th. Ulster Division was directly in front of Thiepval. Fourteen Divisions were engaged on a 14 mile front. One Division to a mile indicated that it was going to be quite a battle.

Before any 'big do' a Church service was held in the rear for the troops. I have attended three of these occasions and know the gist of the Chaplain's message more or less by heart. "Well boys," he would say, "you all know as well as I do that some of you will not see to-morrow night. I wish every one of you the best of luck and may God bless you all." We would then sing the hymn 'Rock of Ages' or 'Abide with Me' and would then be dismissed. After tea, as we waited in the darkness before moving up into position, the boys had a Sing-song. It was the first time I had heard the song 'There's a long, long trail a-winding into the land of my dreams.' It was sung by one young lad who was standing on an ammunition box. I can still picture him clearly. It may have been my first hearing of the song but I know for a fact that it was the last time he ever sang it.

Under cover of darkness we began to take up our positions in the assembly trenches in Thiepval Wood – or Blighty Wood as it came to be known. The assembly trenches were very narrow making it very difficult for two soldiers in full kit to pass each other. They were merely a protection from shell fire.

In the very early morning of 1st. July, Field Postcards were passed down the line from hand to hand. Everyone was ordered to stroke out all the printed alternatives other than the one which said 'I am quite well'. We then signed the card and passed it back up again. This card, signed at around 4a.m. was about to be despatched to the various homes and Relatives of a 250 strong 'D' Company which was about to lose half that number in about 3-4 hours time and which, after 24 hours fighting, was to be – as the official report put it – 'wiped out almost to a man'. Actually 5 men were left standing up.

This procedure meant that that Army notifications beginning "Dear Sir, or Madam, we regret to inform you....." Would more than likely reach the homes before the arrival of the Field Postcard from a now dead Son or Father, stating that he was 'quite well' In this way the grief, mixed with the anguish of still hoping against hope, was prolonged, as many pathetically refused to accept the first notification and clung desperately to the familiar signature of their loved one on the Field Postcard. Sometimes the card and the Army notification arrived by the same post. I heard of one Belfast mother who was informed that she had lost three sons in one forenoon.

As we were taking up our positions in Blighty Wood we were met by our Commanding Officer. C.O. Hessey was a veteran, much respected and at his age, need not have been venturing into No Man's Land at all. He had obviously been reviewing our position and was clearly not happy at all. He seemed near to tears as he remarked to all of us as we passed "Boys, you have been given an impossible task". How right he was! Instead of making a night attack someone had hit on the brilliant idea of waiting till daylight and by 6-30 a.m. the sun was up. It was reckoned that we had exactly 95 yards to go to reach bayonet distance. To get there troops were going to have to survive tremendous enemy shell fire, a curtain fire stretching along No Man's Land, Shrapnel

shells above and concrete Machine Gun emplacements in Thiepval village, killing at 1000 yards. In this 'stroll in the sun' there would be nothing the sweating troops could do but stagger on. Apart from the failure of our week-long, preliminary bombardment, which only confirmed German Intelligence's information on the 'Big Push', which they had known about for some time anyway, the Germans had already placed hidden Batteries in the area. Not only were they well concealed, but not one of them fired a shot until the morning of July 1st. As we were passing through Blighty Wood one of our gunners at the Battery there shouted after us encouragingly "Don't be afraid Boys, he has'nt a gun to put on you".

The worst part was waiting to go over. All sorts of ideas and questions, slip through one's mind, the main ones being 'Will I be here tomorrow, or even in half an hour? Of course I will!' For the more pessimistic it would be 'Will it be a Blighty wound or a blanket. Is this the day I get 'Napooed?'. If conversation invaded thought, it was never on war, but usually ranged from Charlie Chaplin to cursing the rations or discussing plans for the next leave.

All things come to those who wait.

At 7-30 on the morning of the 1st. July 1916, two minutes after our final bombardment stopped, the first wave climbed over the top. As instructed they kept two yards apart. I was included in the second wave. Immediately the German gunners, including those in the hidden batteries, opened up – so much for our strategists and the detection powers of our Forward Observation experts. Whole waves of men just seemed to melt away as the following waves poured into the gaps. Men staggered on in full fighting kit, all loaded up with extra ammunition, extra bombs in sandbags and extra rations, up that hellish 95 yards, unable to run. Half way up between the two lines was a sunken road – our first halt. As we lay there panting with fear and lack of breath, the soldier immediately on my right jerked up suddenly and fell forward with blood spidering out of his forehead.

Our Platoon Officer was only a few yards in front of me. Verbal orders were useless in the din and when the time came to move on he indicated this by turning on his right side and waving us forward with the cane in his left hand. We got up and followed him. I never saw him again. Neither he nor our Company Captain ever reached the first German trench. Some weeks later, when I was in hospital in Kent, the Platoon Officer's mother, who had noticed my name on the wounded list, travelled over specially to see me. She asked if I knew Lieutenant Craig who was reported missing, believed killed. She was unable to get any news from the War Office. The poor woman kept repeating 'Surely, surely someone must have seen him on the field.' I could not bring myself to explain that if someone got in the direct line of a shell burst it was quite possible to disappear entirely from a battlefield like the Western Front as parts would be difficult to identify, or even find. Many of the names of the War dead which appear in war cemeteries or on Memorials like the Menin Gate at Ypres are simply designated as 'k. in a.' (killed in action) 'no known grave' because nothing much of them, or nothing at all was ever found.

As we went forward shell fire created sheer havoc with more and more gaps appearing in the rows of men to left and right. I had not gone much further when a bullet tore at my right arm high up and I became aware of blood running down my fingers. It was by no means a serious wound however and besides, my chief concern was to get somewhere

else as long as it was out of that open death trap of No Man's Land. I could not have been any more than 4 or 5 yards from the lip of the German trench when I got hit in the left groin. The bullet came out at the top of my left hip tearing a wide hole to the bone; the wound was later registered on my medical card as 'Bullet: Explosive' but I still maintain that the bullet was a 'dum-dum'. This is a bullet with the point cut off and it creates a much bigger exit hole than it does on entry. Dum-dums were strictly against the rules and you could be charged for having one in your possession.

The last I saw of my pal Bunny was him jumping into the German trench. He was reported 'missing' and later attempts of mine to trace him were fruitless. As Bunny was jumping in, someone was rolling me into a shell-hole on the lip of the German trench. It could not yet have been 7-40 a.m. I was bleeding quite freely and had to lie on my stomach. Cordite fumes from the shells and the battle smoke made breathing more difficult. Lying on the lip of the same shell hole were three soldiers. All of them were dead. One was lying partly across another. The clothes on one of them were smouldering. The third, whom I recognized as 'Big Louis', was more in the hole than out. He lay on his stomach, both arms stretched out and was without his helmet. The shell hole which we were in could have been caused by the shell which killed them.

There was a general belief that wounded men got immediate attention from R.A.M.C. orderlies but I knew this would not happen. As a non-combatant unit they would not be allowed on the battlefield. Every Platoon supplied two soldiers to act as stretcher bearers. Our two did not reach the sunken road. Furthermore we were all instructed that if the man next to us got wounded as we went forward, on no account were we to stop and attend to him – not even if he was our own brother.

Being in a shell hole offered some protection at least, but none at all from overhead shrapnel and there was plenty of that flying around. During the time I lay there I was hit in the neck – a quarter of an inch from the jugular as the M.O. informed me later. During the afternoon another piece of overhead shrapnel hit me between the shoulder blades. Having by now long since emptied my water bottle, I lay there musing on many things, among them the orders we had been given for that day. These were to force a way to the Crucifix which stood in Thiepval and to stop there. I began to think of all of those others, apart from myself, who, I now knew for a fact, were not going to reach any Crucifix that day. I learned later that in fact nobody did.

One thing I just could not keep my eyes off was Big Louis' face. It hung only a few feet from me. His eyes were open as if watching me, while the breeze kept tugging his black hair backwards and forwards across his forehead.

Being below ground level I did not have much of a view. No one passed. I assumed the last wave had gone forward. The shelling had lifted from No Man's Land, which meant the boys must be advancing. I decided to make my move before dark. Getting out of the shell hole was the worst bit. After that it was a straight 95 yards creep back to Blighty Wood which, by now, was no longer a wood but a mere mass of tree stumps. A soldier there picked me up and carried me piggy-back to the First Aid dugout. Friend or foe took their turn; two wounded German prisoners were in front of me. As I lay I looked around. The transformation in the area from where I had set out that morning was unbelievable. The fields were now a mass of upturned soil and bodies. I learned later that our own Division had been the most successful, having taken four lines of enemy trench that day only to find themselves in a salient and without support. They were

systematically driven back and by the following day the remnants were back in Blighty Wood. 'C' Company had no officers left and 'D' Company, my own, had been almost totally wiped out. Five V.C.s were won that day, but the city of Belfast was hard hit and held a full day's mourning. Thiepval became the graveyard of the Inniskillings and was not taken until the November of that year.

After receiving treatment we lay around waiting for an ambulance and watched the Chaplain going around the wounded filling in Field Postcards, striking out everything except 'I have been wounded'. We had all been 'quite well' at 7-30 that morning. Perhaps we should have just sent off the cards advising those at home to 'Take your pick'. Eventually we were shipped to Dover. It was touching to see the on-lookers there throwing flowers on to the stretchers – but then, we were in a different world. I finally landed up at the Canadian Military Hospital at Orpington, Kent. Of the various hospitals I found myself in, there was none to equal Orpington. The doctors, nurses and staff were a great bunch, although they also kept a trim ward. After about two and a half months there, I was marked as convalescent and posted to Chiselhurst, which was more of a converted private house. The people there were very considerate and we received many invitations to tea from the villagers.

Towards the end of September I was given a pass home and 7 days hospital leave. The pass also instructed me to report back to Finner Camp, Donegal – a journey which took almost two days off my leave. I decided to have most of my leave nevertheless and arrived back about two days late. When I handed my pass into the Guardroom I remained there. In fact, I was kept there. Aware that I would be up before the Captain in the morning, I had plenty of time to think up my story. Were I to try the 'missed the train' routine he would merely point out that I did not miss it when I was going home on leave. Eventually I explained that I had arrived home in Northumberland only to discover that my Mother was away visiting friends in Scotland and as I didn't want to leave without seeing her, I followed her there. The Captain pondered this for a moment and then in a kind, fatherly sort of way remarked "Rubbish! 7 days C.B. Dismiss!"

Life at camp became, once again, the usual round of parades, drills etc. Overseas drafts were becoming more frequent and rather than wait for one which I would have to go on anyway, I volunteered for the next one due and once more got the usual overseas leave. In no time I was back listening to the C.O.'s 'Departure pep-talk' about keeping up the good name of the Regiment. With the band playing and an immaculately groomed Billy Goat bedecked in regimental colours leading us, we, the other goats, marched behind on our way to Ballyshannon station. Ballyshannon village, not being in Ulster, provided us with an encouraging send-off. We were pelted with empty cans, bottles and loads of advice. The band, as was usual on these occasions, played 'Will ye no come back again?' Of course we would come back. After all, what could possibly prevent us? After a journey via Belfast, Dublin and Holyhead – a voyage which two days previously, had seen one boat torpedoed – we reached Folkestone where we embarked after dark. Early the next morning we landed at Le Havre. It was October 16th. 1916. I was back 'home' again – in a totally different world.

BACK TO THE GRIND

The Division was in Belgium in a section of the line in the Ypres sector. It was a rebuilt Division and most of the Officers and men were unknown to me. The area was known as the 'Glory Hole', low-lying terrain with black soil, which converted into mud all too easily. Enemy trenches were not far distant which made the area suitable for Raiding Parties and mortar shelling. In short it was a home where one would not be allowed to weary too much. Rats abounded, larger and healthier than I had ever seen. One soldier claimed, possibly with slight exaggeration, that when he entered the dug-out on one occasion he saw a rat trying on his overcoat.

After my second spell of 8 days in and 8 out of the trenches, I was warned that my name was down for a forthcoming Raiding Party. Married men were excluded from these romps in No Man's Land. Working from a photograph taken by one of our Reconnaissance boys, a plan of the German line was laid out in chalk behind our lines. Every raider was instructed on his point of entry. Our party was to include four sections, with seven men to each section. The enemy wire was to be blown up by the first group, using high-explosive tubes. When they set the fuses they were to crawl back and form the last section going in. Letters and other marks of identification were taken from us and our faces were blackened with burnt cork. Our orders were to break into the German trench, remain there for one hour and a 'Leave' for any man who brought back a prisoner. A red flare would signal 'recall' when it would then be every man for himself.

The first party set out at 11 p.m., fixed their tubes and crawled to the rear as arranged. Five minutes later they blew a beautiful gap. There was no more need for silence and with only about ten yards to travel, we moved in quickly with fixed bayonets. There was some resistance from the German sentries but they had little chance and we occupied four of their firing bays. Forcing a way along their communication trench involved more dirty work. The German officer in command withdrew his men into their second line and got his artillery to shell that part of his front line which was occupied. I cannot describe my feeling of relief when our red, recall rocket finally soared into the night sky. I may not have been the first home but I prided myself in managing to be in the 'first three'. There were no prisoners taken but each raider who returned was issued with a tot of rum.

German retaliation was swift and they returned the compliment by putting over a heavy Minnewerfer strafe. A minnewerfer is not a shell. It was designed for trench destruction and one of them could eliminate 3 lengths of a firing bay. Its flight, a caterpillar-like movement, could be seen in the sky at night with its red exhaust clearly visible. What was so frightening about a 'minnie' attack was that there was nothing one could do and, unlike the Germans, we had no really deep front line dug-outs in which to shelter. Immediately the attack was over we were ordered to use trenching tools to join the mine holes together as quickly as possible after sentries had been posted. A nearby Lewis-gun dugout had disappeared and one or two of us went over to help one of the survivors who was frantically digging in the dirt. He said nothing and no one else spoke because we knew he was searching for his brother. Eventually an arm was uncovered and on examining it, the frantic brother sat down, covered his face with his hands and cried. It was not until three nights later that a patrol party in No Man's Land picked up other identifiable remains of the dead gunner. These included his head and upper torso, left arm

and upper left part of his chest. The flap on his left breast pocket was unbuttoned. His Pay-book was half in and half out as if he had been in the act of taking it out or putting it back. There was not even a scratch on his face. Like the wind tugging at Big Louis' hair in the Somme shell hole, it was the little things which tended to stick in the mind.

The next move for our Division came early in November. We marched out with an 'Eyes Right' to the cemetery, heading for Cambrai. We had plenty of time on the way to speculate about the sort of place it would be. Trenches in the Cambrai area were much drier than those we had just left. There was also about 100 yards of No Man's Land. When there, apart from the normal trench routine, we helped to make a new line – to be called the 'Haig Line'. Although we were in full view of enemy observers we were in no way troubled. The weather was fairly good and we were not directly in front of Cambrai. It was not long however, until talk of a big offensive began to circulate.

We were moved into position. We were to take part in an attack on the Hindenburg Line. The method of attack this time was to be very different from the 'over the top' routine. There was to be no Artillery barrage prior to the assault. Our instructions were to break into the Hindenburg Line at one point only and carry the line Fire-bay by Fire-bay, with bomb and bayonet. The break-in party was by no means a large one. It was not a frontal attack. First, second and third bayonet-man were appointed. Should the first get into difficulties, the second man took over.

To say the German boys got a surprise would be putting it mildly. The first two to be taken prisoner were Orderlies. They walked round the traverse corner into the bay we had just entered. Each was carrying two 'dixies' to draw the morning breakfast. One of them, who seemed very young, dropped the Dixie and burst into tears. They had been informed that all German prisoners captured by the British were shot and they obviously believed this. They were not shot. In fact our Captain gave each of them a cigarette and passed them on to the rear. I shall never the look of sheer relief on that young soldier's face. He began to smile.

As this up-the-line fighting went on, the opposition became more sticky. It was a fight for each bay and it was here I witnessed a remarkable incident involving a very brave German soldier. He was the only one in the bay left standing up. He rounded the traverse corner, tore open his tunic baring his chest and, walking up to our first bayonet man said in perfect English "Go on then!" Someone clubbed him on the chin.

Whenever we rounded a traverse corner the Jerry machine-gunners were cutting splinters out the duckboards at our feet as if to indicate 'thus far and no further'. So it went on: bombs and more bombs, then a rush with the bayonet and on to the next bay. At one point one of our lads lobbed over a Mills bomb with a seven second fuse without allowing the fuse to burn down far enough. Jerry caught it and returned it. Neither our thrower nor the soldier behind him had a chance. In one of the bays which we rushed, we came across a German soldier who was still firing his machine gun with half of his guts spewed out in front of him. As he was still active he got a ball in the head. Further ahead the only two Germans left in one particular bay would not raise their hands when ordered to do so. They continued to refuse until they were shot. I seem to remember reading a British newspaper article written by some armchair idiot who had stated quite categorically that 'the Germans won't fight'. They were heard to have yelled out of their comrades behind us. In that fleeting moment they made no attempt to drop their guns to show their

After a day's straight fighting we halted when darkness fell and were informed that fourteen hundred yards of the Hindenburg line had been taken. It was only now that the ordinary British soldier discovered what a real trench could look like. It had 32 steps leading underground and was fitted with wire beds and hand rails. One dug-out had a mirror hanging up half-way down the steps. Everything was so neat, clean and tidy that we just gaped in wonder. Our problems however, were by no means over.

During the day's proceedings a number of Jerries had crawled out of their firing bays and escaped into the temporary safety of No Man's Land. As there was no artillery fire it was quite safe. As darkness approached some of them crawled back again to the tops of their firing bays and lay in an ideal position for sniping anyone passing up or down. It was here that I ran into a particularly awkward situation. I was despatched by the Captain to carry a message back to our starting point. Perhaps it was the instinctive action of a now trench-hardened soldier, but after having proceeded about 15 yards down the trench, I climbed on to a firing step and looked cautiously over. A bullet zipped into the soil just below my chin. I have never moved so quickly in my life. Up until that moment I had not even thought about snipers from the top. As I proceeded further I was again surprised, this time by a German soldier slightly ahead of me. Who was sliding down into the trench. By the time his feet touched the duckboards I had him covered. He raised both arms with his rifle held high in one hand. Holding it perpendicularly, he thrust it into my face saying as he did so 'Bon Camerad! Bon Camerad!' I had apparently got myself a prisoner. I took his rifle and ran one hand round his pockets, particularly his belt. I wanted to see if he was carrying a revolver. I knew two or three of my pals who had acquired one in this way. He did not have one. I merely confiscated some of his correspondence and escorted him back to the head of the column to explain matters to the Captain. The prisoner could speak some English and was searched and questioned. The Captain then instructed me to escort him back to our starting point and hand him over. We proceeded down the line with me leading. We had not gone any further than three firing bays when suddenly, on rounding a traverse corner, he grasped my left shoulder to draw me back. I whirled round anticipating trouble only to find him holding up three fingers in front of my nose. He pointed to the top of the parapet and whispered 'Pas bon camerades! Pas bon camerades!' I did not require any more convincing to grasp the situation and we immediately moved back a good part of the way we had come. It was then I decided quite definitely that I was not going any further down that line until daylight. Furthermore, I was not going back to the column head either. We sat down together on a fire-step and I shared with him what eatables I had – a tin of Bully Beef and a few army biscuits. He told me that his brother had already been killed on the Western Front, also that he was married and had a 5 year old son. He then asked if I would return some of his correspondence. From it he picked out a photograph to show me himself in evening dress and his wife standing beside him. In front of them stood the little boy. He asked me if I was a conscript. When I told him I was a volunteer he replied "You are worse than me. I at least am a conscript". Perhaps he was right.

We sat there until dawn – at least, that is, until we got company. On first hearing the voices coming up the trench, I assumed they were Tommies. As they got nearer I realized they were not. The leader had rounded the corner; the other was halfway round. Both held their rifles at the ready. They were bound to have noticed one of their comrades behind me. In that fleeting moment they made no attempt to drop their guns or raise their

hands, At the length of the firing bay I shot the first one. The other at the back turned and bolted back down the trench again. Later on, as the light improved I stepped over the body and took particular care to note that the ball had entered his head above the right eyebrow so at least there would be no lingering delay.

In the morning, as the prisoner stepped over the body, he halted and removed his cap, He remained for a minute or two with his hands clasped and his head bowed. Perhaps he thought I should have waited to see if I could not have taken more prisoners. On the way down he did not speak to me again. However, as I handed him, over we shook hands, which I would like to think meant that he had probably admitted to himself as a soldier that, in my place, he would have done exactly the same. I hope so anyway. He was on his way to the barbed wire cage, while I was on my way back to the column head. It was not until the following day that I learned that a full Platoon of our lads was prevented from reaching the column because of the German sniping in No Man's Land. The prisoner and I had been wandering around half the night in the middle of it all like a couple of 'head cases'.

We had now been two days over the allotted period in the line and with the Germans on the defensive, we looked forward to the usual 8 days spell out as we handed over. We reached a village further back and were allotted billets, some in sheds, barns or battered-down houses. The usual guards were posted. I had only completed about half of my 2 hours stint on guard when one of the runners came tearing in to announce that the Germans had counter-attacked, broken through and were advancing. I had'nt had my boots off for 10 days. The march back was made worse by the fact that the Germans had captured our own Battery. To get to our new designated positions we had to cross the Cambrai road. The trench there was broken by the road, which meant we had to cross the open road to get to the other side of the trench. As the road was now constantly being swept with artillery and machine gun fire, each man had to throw himself over under orders of 'one at a time'. Many did not make it.

The part of the trench we occupied was a shambles. It had been held by the Warwicks who had taken their wounded, but had been forced to leave their dead behind. No sooner were we in the trench than orders came through that we were to go over the top at daylight to re-take a trench that the Warwicks had been put out of on the previous day. I well remember our Captain on this occasion, taking the rum jar from the Corporal and emptying the entire contents into the trench, remarking as he did so that the men were in no fit state to be given rum. I was only about 3 feet away from him and I can still hear that unforgettable gurgling of rum being poured out into the earth. He was right of course. Rum and empty stomachs do not mix.

As it turned out our intended trip over the bogs at daylight was postponed until the following morning. Trench patrol continued as usual however and during it I saw some unforgettable sights because we could not patrol the trench without stepping on bodies. At one spot three soldiers were lying together, one on top of the other. The leg of one lay close by. The one lying crosswise over the other had a piece of shrapnel, about the size of a dinner plate, embedded in the back of his skull and protruding about half an inch out of his forehead. These details became so fixed in my memory because I had to cross and re-cross them at regular intervals on my trench patrol..

As the line was thinly held Lieutenant Johnstone was also on patrol and I remember him halving a bar of chocolate with me. Before my relief was due I recall passing one of the

Warwick soldiers who was half sitting, half lying on the firing step with his back against the traverse. He had his rifle cradled in his right hand. In his left hand, between forefinger and thumb, he was holding what seemed to be a postcard. He appeared so natural, as if just resting, that a newcomer passing by might well have asked him for the time. He certainly was resting – for ever. I prised a photograph from his still tight grasp. It was simply signed ‘From your loving wife, Bertha’. Later I managed to hand over the photo to the Chaplain who assured me he would return it to its owner.

Shortly afterwards the Lieutenant asked me to come along with him as he intended to explore a particular dugout. With drawn revolver he entered first. Imagine our surprise on finding that the only occupant was a completely naked Warwick soldier. On seeing us he lost control of himself for a few minutes as the tears streamed down his face. Eventually he told us his story. He had been brought to the dugout by three Jerries who did not harm him, but stripped him and left him there. When he heard our footsteps he thought it was them coming back.

Early next morning we duly climbed over the top to attack. My only regret was that the home-grown idiot who had written that ‘the Germans would’nt fight’ was not with us. The Jerry boys did’nt even wait until we reached their lines. They too climbed over. We met about halfway across No Man’s Land. It was tough going. Bayonet work usually is. It is a time when a man ceases to be one, as he is driven on to kill or be killed. The niceties of the boxing ring do not apply as screaming, cursing savages fight, not for any country any more, but for their own very existence. What matters here is a successful plunge which is accompanied by some kind of uncontrolled, fiendish delight. The raw technicalities which have been learned back at base, or acquired from previous personal experience, become all important: ‘after the plunge a quick half right, then a quick half left, followed by an even quicker withdraw before the bayonet, on entry, is gripped by the internal muscles’ At a quick withdraw the body fluid squirts out on to your tunic, into your face and you spit it out. It is then that you have become an animal. The lessons from the training camp still come crowding in: ‘when at close quarters a bullet for the head and the bayonet for the throat’. But there are no hard and fast rules in this game. My own personal experience taught me how vital it was, when going in, to ride a high bayonet. Allow your opponent to ride yours to the ground, and you will lose. Try if possible to lunge at the stomach; it offers a bigger target and is more deadly than plunging into the ribs, where bones can deflect your thrust, - gruesome rules for a gruesome situation in which survival is the name of the game.

As for this particular party in No Man’s Land, to deny that Jerry on this occasion, more or less wiped the field with us, would be a lie, although I am sure official reports would have us ‘withdrawing to a more strategic position’. The Germans chased us further back than our starting point. Their advance was in full swing. Admittedly they had lost a lot of prisoners at first but they had an ample reserve supply in the area. After our initial advance we stood still for 24 hours. No one knows why. Even the German prisoners were asking us the same question. “You made a good advance”, they said. “We got prepared to meet you at the other side of Cambrai. Suddenly you stop and allow us to move up a Division of Prussian Guards. Why did you stop at the beginning? Why?”

I suppose we could have made the excuse that our strategic planners behind the line were away of on leave just now to rest their brains, but we could not just admit to them that our

top Brass Hats, with heads to match, were simply bone-headed and that the famous comment of one German observer that "The soldiers of the British Army were Lions led by Donkeys" was all too true.

One of the more civilised episodes I recall from this whole 'do' concerned two German prisoners. One was fair-haired. They were both hatless. They were carrying in our wounded from No Man's Land. No one had ordered or asked them to do so. They were under their own gun fire but this did not deter them in the slightest, nor did they confine themselves to only one trip out. I was very impressed with their bravery and concern. Their only reward was the cigarette each, which one of our lads gave them. The ordinary Tommy may have cursed his opposite number time and time again, but he never lost his respect for him. Of course the War Propaganda on both sides made beasts of the enemy but speaking as one of the common fraternity of soldiers everywhere, after three years of fighting against him, I still maintain that there was 'nt a better soldier than the German to be found anywhere.

Our Division was now due out. One of my last memories of the area was looking back to see Burlong Wood ablaze. It should have been set alight long before. It was one hell of a place. It had changed hands several times and had been gassed three times. Moreover, the Wood was full of barbed trip wires. It certainly got a soldiers farewell.

Moving back we arrived at the area of Haveringe Court where we stayed for a few days rest. We were quite close to a village and, believe it or not, we got paid – 10 Francs per man. Now twelve shillings and sixpence is a fortune, especially to a soldier. Now off duty, the next move was to the village to say Hello to the locals and enjoy egg and chips. A busy night was anticipated and in more ways than one, that is exactly what it turned out to be. This war never allowed for a dull moment. Our Company was billeted in a fair sized barn. It was not particularly clean but there was straw on the floor. It was dry enough to lie on and by lying round the walls some space was left in the middle. On our arrival back from the village the usual 'Crown and Anchor' game got under way. Two of our Company, whom I shall just call 'Joe' and 'Tom', produced a fold-up board. A candle was fixed on top of a steel helmet and the game commenced. It had not been in progress for long when the Sgt./ Major entered. The time must have been well over 'Lights Out'. Walking over to Joe he said "Put that light out!". Joe, who was on his knees busy running the board, turned his head, looked up into the Sgt/Major's face and replied "We will do a bloody sight less," and continued with the game. The Sgt/Major made no further remark but moved forward and kicked the candle off the helmet into the straw which caught alight; then he walked out of the barn. The others, who had taken no part in the game, were already lying down but no one made any attempt to stamp the fire out. It was at that point Tom, although somewhat unsteady on his feet, decided to take a hand. Picking up his rifle and shoving a clip into the magazine, he staggered round the barn shouting "The first bastard that does 'nt get up and 'stand to' I'll blow his bloody brains out" He obviously meant business. Some reached for their packs for a quick get-away. Others climbed into the rafters. Of course the Sgt/Major had by now reported the incident and suddenly the Captain appeared to join the party. After a few well-delivered words of advice, he turned and walked out again towards the barn door. I don't think the ball which Tom fired was meant for the Captain – who, incidentally, was one of the best, - but it entered the lintel of the door about six inches above the Captain's head. Events now

moved quickly to a climax. Within minutes, a Sergeant wearing side arms, together with three of the Quarter Guard, also armed, entered to take their bow. Tom walked up to the Sergeant and enquired "Is it me you've come for?" Although I was standing quite close I did not hear the Sergeant give any reply. He simply drew from his scabbard and plunged his bayonet into Tom's stomach, sinking him into the straw. It was a very soldier-like thrust. The fluid poured out and coloured the straw. The body was removed, the smouldering straw stamped out and we retired to our repose. All this happened on our second night's 'Rest'. Other than disobeying an order while on active service, Joe was not in too bad a position. However, he decided to go missing and remained so for three days. He finally gave himself up, which was a point in his favour. We learned later that the Captain's evidence had saved him from a severe sentence. Apparently Joe had been awarded a stripe on two previous occasions. He had lost the first for intercepting a letter which he thought contained a Postal Order, and the second for causing a Sergeant to fall off a duckboard. The Sergeant required three stitches in his lower lip and there seems to have been general agreement that Joe should have been promoted to Sergeant for such an achievement. Joe was one of the 'raiders' in our recent excursion into No Man's Land and later got the Military Medal. He did not get what he could have got i.e. Field Punishment No.1, which involved being chained to a Battery gun wheel for one hour per day.

MESSINES

As winter set in by the December of 1916 we were headed for Plug Street and the Messines area. It was Christmas Eve when we entered the line to begin our 8 days' spell. Any hopes of a revival of December 1914, when British and German troops left their trenches for a few hours to share the occasion by exchanging cigarettes, showing photographs etc., were quickly dashed. It was strictly 'business as usual'. We were duly warned that if anyone tried to go over and wish Fritz. A Merry Christmas he would be severely dealt with. To make certain, a barrage was opened up on the German lines on Christmas morning. This enabled the Brass Hats and their entourage five miles further back, to get the corkscrews out and enjoy their Christmas dinner in peace, confident in the knowledge that the animals in the front line were doing their stuff.

Messines Ridge was held by the Germans and was an excellent observation post. Every move the British made in the surrounding flat countryside was easily noted. Fritz could almost look into our trenches. Their dugouts were, if anything, superior to those of the Hindenburg line. They were comfortable and well below the ground, immune from shells – not that our shells seemed to have bothered the Germans much during the war. It is common knowledge that in the earlier part of the war especially, our artillery was only allocated a limited number of shells per Battery. For every shell of ours sent over, the Germans could throw five back in return. After the Somme show I had occasion to speak to one of the gunners in our own battery just to the rear of Blighty Wood. He informed me that on that fatal day his Battery stood idle for five hours due to the lack of shells.

Among our losses during that Christmas week was one of our most popular officers – a time serving Sergeant who had been given a commission. While talking to one of the boys on the fire-step he was hit by a Whizz Bang. I saw parts of his body being carried out. The remaining two on the fire-step were on their way to Blighty to complete their Christmas there. One other incident which happened while we were there concerned a tin hut which stood a bit to the rear of our dugout. It was sometimes used by Concert Parties who came occasionally to entertain the front line troops. These visits were much appreciated. One night, about concert time, Fritz decided to remove the concert hall by landing two shells on it. Both were direct hits and the shed was blown off the map. The laugh, however, was on Fritz because the hut was empty; on the previous night it had been full.

The frost at this time was very severe – the hardest apparently for some years. Frost had both its advantages and disadvantages. It at least removed the mud problem and the ground was much drier and cleaner. On the other hand shells do not penetrate far into hard ground and the resulting increase in the amount of shrapnel made the shell's explosion that much more lethal.

Covering parties during that particular Christmas found it impossible to dig any graves at all. Bodies were conveyed to the cemetery and simply left lying there, wrapped in the blanket they had earned, until such time as a burial could take place. We had been in the line for another 8 days and out again before there was any sort of thaw and we were detailed to assist at the burial. Two men were assigned to a body with one holding the blanket at either end. As the blankets were reverently laid in, the rats were jumping out of

them. Two army Chaplains gave the burial service. Different thoughts pass through one's mind on occasions like this. Bodies go unheeded in the heat of battle but here I found myself reflecting that I could easily have been in one of those blankets. On the subject of graveyards, I always noticed how remarkably well the French churchyards were kept with vast numbers of flowers, including artificial flowers of all colours, trained neatly round the yard.

It was about this time that a small draft of new recruits was sent up. On such occasions a guide is sent down to escort the newcomers into the front line as the number of auxiliary lines branching off from the main communication line can be confusing, especially as such troop movements only took place at night. There had been some strafing in our area recently and in order to clear the way some casualties, about five in number, had been laid out temporarily on top of the trench. When passing them in the dark one recruit was heard to remark "What a funny place to sleep!" I did not enlighten him. He would learn soon enough.

A more amusing incident occurred later in the nearby cemetery. My mate and I encountered 3 recruits walking around looking at the graves and the flowers. There were a lot of 'Lancs' buried there as well as Frenchmen and the inscription R.I.P. appeared on most of the inscriptions. One recruit asked "What Regiment are the R.I.P.s?" "Oh" replied my mate, "that's the 'Rise if Possibles'"!

Fresh recruits were a natural target for leg-pulling. They also lost bits of their kit pretty rapidly but soon realised that pinching someone else's was much more practical than complaining to an officer, who would only tell them to do that anyway. One of the cutest moves I witnessed concerned the drawing of rations. The tea ration per soldier was one canteen lid-ful (about 2 ordinary cups) and it was common practice for one man to draw his pal's allowance of tea together with his own – provided the Orderly agreed. One enterprising soldier called Bowers, who came from a place called Byker in the Newcastle area, used to wait until the newcomers were on mess-orderly duty and ask for "Bowers, Byker's and my own". He got away with this several times until they caught on. Oddly enough, Bowers was known by no other name in the Company but Byker and was addressed as such even by his Platoon officer.

During the 8 days out of the line quite a few of us used to pass the time hunting for aluminium, which could be obtained from the bands sunk into the nose-caps of shells. Many ingeniously made souvenirs were produced by the troops out of this material. To the delight of both of us we came across a dud German shell lying out in the open. Although there were few trees left standing in this area, this shell had apparently struck one of them without exploding, slewed round and was facing in the direction from which it had come. This was a find indeed. My mate found a suitable stone and had only got a few belts in when who should appear on the scene but the Forward Observation officer. I won't even attempt to paraphrase his comments but he called us just about everything but 'gentlemen' He marched us, ranting and raving, to our Captain as if we had lost the war. A suitable reward was found for us. Just 2 miles away lay the town of Neuve Eglise in which there was a British cemetery. The German artillery may have imagined they were on target for our Battery there, but were in fact systematically shelling the cemetery. The overall effect of this I leave to your imagination. Both of us were assigned to a detail whose job it was to re-bury the dead, some of whom had been interred there 10 months previously. We were both convinced that that shell would never explode and that the

officer wanted the aluminium for himself. At any rate the shell was wired off and posts painted in red with the warning to 'Keep Out!'. When we left the area several months later that shell had neither exploded nor had been removed. As a postscript to the aluminium saga one of the gunners in a nearby battery who was quite skilled in making aluminium souvenirs, told us that, for a small remuneration, he would have one for us on our next spell out. We did duly call but neither he nor his Battery were there any more. It appeared that, a few days earlier, his gun had experienced a 'Premature' which meant that a shell had burst in the barrel leaving the gun crew no chance.

As the weather improved the rumours multiplied, including many of the usual ones. Someone had heard, officially of course, that we were all due to leave for the Dardanelles of all places. Others had official confirmation that the war was going to finish next week. Some days we were informed that the British Navy had been sunk, only to be told a few days later that it was the other Navy which had been sunk. The war could not go on much longer; the people in Germany were starving and in revolt. Such speculations were all very interesting but there was nothing speculative about the ordering of parades for 'Gas mask inspection' and the issue of the small bottle of Iodine to each front-line soldier – all of which bore that unmistakable sign that there really was another 'Bloody Push' in the offing. I believe some of the younger Medics tended to look down on humble Iodine, but it saved thousands of lives on the battlefield.

The German trenches, well below ground, as I have said, had been safe from shells but they were not immune to mines. Messines Ridge was the target for our coming 'Big Push'. It looked like being tough going as it was all uphill. The secrecy behind the construction of the Messines mine was one of the best kept secrets of the war – similar to the hush-hush surrounding the debut of the tank. We only learned of the mine's existence a few hours before going over. Our briefing was unusually explicit. There would be no customary over-the-top. At a given time we would move into No Man's Land. The vibration of the explosion would cause the trench to cave in. No one, not even the C.O., knew the exact time it was to be blown. If it did not go up before daylight we were to assume that it would not go up that day. When the ground began to move on the blowing of the mine we were to keep our mouths open as wide as possible to reduce the possibility of concussion.

It was around midnight when our artillery opened up. Both the 'heavies' in the rear and the frontal Batteries poured a wall of steel over our heads. I have been in many bombardments but this was one of the most intense. Even though we were lying next to each other we had to shout to be heard. I did not envy the poor fellows over there. Lying out in the open I found myself alongside one of our Corporals. He was in charge of the Company 'Rum Jar'. "We will try and keep together" he said. "Do you want any rum in your water bottle?" I said that it was already full with water. "Empty some out" he said "and I'll put some rum in it." I did so. I had just strapped my bottle back in position when 'God in heaven', the ground began to rise up, and up, and up. We were lying on our stomachs, clawing into the earth, wondering how much further it was going to go up when, on that unforgettable morning in early June 1917, 'she blew!' Two huge columns of flame shot into the sky. As soon as the flames went up the ground stopped rising. It appeared to hang for a moment then shuddered back to rest. Peering through the dim morning light it seemed as if Messines Ridge had simply disappeared. It had! Ridge,

sandbags, guns and men. The Messines mine was actually two mines simultaneously fused, which explained the two tongues of flame. I believe that the effects of the quake were felt in Eastbourne and London. Lying so close to it I'll never forget the sensation of my stomach heaving its way up into my mouth. The German line on the Ridge, which had been such a stumbling block for years, was fully manned. Neither they, nor their immediate reserves could ever have known what hit them. We were told not to expect any resistance until we reached the so-called Red Line i.e. the fourth enemy line. The explosion centre at the top could hardly be termed a crater – it was more like a valley. I remember vividly, while climbing up the opposite side of the valley, passing close to a German soldier. He did not appear to be wounded but he had no equipment and his steel helmet was off. What seemed like froth was coming from his mouth. He was kneeling and digging frantically with his bare hands into the soil, just like a rabbit, dig, dig, digging. He did not even glance at me. Further on, when I looked back, he was still digging. At the Red Line we eventually ran into opposition but I can't enlarge on it any further. Almost immediately I got a bullet between the fourth and little fingers of my left hand. On looking at it I saw the fourth finger was badly bent and the little finger was almost hanging off. This meant farewell to Messines. Anyone who wanted it was welcome to my share. Having been trapped for most of a day after being wounded on the Somme field had taught me a lesson. I could move on this occasion and I did. Gradually I made my way back to the First Aid field post where it was dressed before I was passed on to the nearest casualty clearing station.

At this time I did not think I had a Blighty wound but after the M.O. straightened the finger into position, that was what he termed it.

On arrival home I was posted to Chichester Hospital where there seemed to be a lot of Australians around. I recall my bullet wound being first examined by a 'civvie' doctor who asked me if I thought there was any 'shrapnel' left in the wound. After that I would'nt have been surprised if the next question had been "and when are you expecting?" Being a 'walk-about' case, I wandered round the grounds quite a lot. The weather was beautiful and 'summery'. The place seemed to be popular with visiting parties, especially kind, elderly ladies. They sometimes formed choirs and rendered a song or two but the inmates who were 'in the know' usually managed to clear off in time. After a week I was posted to Sunningdale Convalescent camp at Eastbourne from which I was soon discharged with the usual home leave. I reached home about mid-August and after a few days there, was instructed to report to Finner Camp, Ballyshannon.

This journey was becoming all too familiar now and an extra stop for 2 days in Belfast got me 7 days C.B. before I returned to normal camp routine.

In early September, when the Overseas draft was formed, I volunteered and returned home on the usual overseas leave. My Parents were surprised to see me back so soon. I did'nt have to say anything but I imagine they guessed that I was heading back to France. In October the draft marched out once more for Ballyshannon station, to which we were led by the same old Billy Goat and the same old Band playing the same old tune 'Will ye no come back again'? It sounded all so homely. Perhaps our fans in Ballyshannon felt more kindly towards us this time, or maybe they had just run out of ammunition, but the missile bombardment was not up to the usual standards.

We embarked at Folkestone and landed at Boulogne in the early morning of 26th. October 1917. The 10-day October pattern was holding up. As I have noted my first landing in

France was on October 6th, 1915, and my second on October 16th, 1916. I wondered whether this time would be 'Catching Time'.

THE FINAL VISIT

Once again it was back to the Bull Ring and the same old instructors who were still sticking manfully to their dangerous task of 'Right Turn! Left Turn! Halt!' They were no doubt doing their job but I felt a bit resentful of those Officers who seemed to be doing only this kind of job. For me the brave ones I had encountered and seen die in the front line, were the real Officers. Bullying N.C.O.'s I also resented. Occasionally such types did suddenly find themselves on a draft for France. When this happened the word was passed and they became marked men. Certainly a Front Line was a great leveller, where many such people were soon cut down to size and discovered that they were not the little tin gods they had imagined themselves to be.

Getting passed by the M.O. - 'Hindenburg' to all who knew and loved him - was not a difficult job. His reputation was legendary. To the thousands of complaints and excuses he must have listened to, his cure was swift and predictable - 'Up the line'! One of my acquaintances, who was called 'Sacko', complained about his poor eyesight. Hindenburg asked him "How far off can you see a man?" Sacko replied "Well sir, at about 50 yards distance my sight is pretty dim." "Your Regiment," Hindenburg replied, "is at present along the Ypres Bluff. The lines there are about 25-30 yards apart. "You'll do. Up the line!" Poor Sacko: although a good soldier, he had quite a reputation. One night, when we were out, he knocked the owner of the local Estaminet through a glass door and grabbed the money till. He came to a sad end. He had over-stayed his leave and an escort of a Sergeant and two men were sent to his home to bring him back. Sacko was waiting for them. He had been drinking and stood at the top of the staircase waving a loaded rifle and shouting "The first B..... that comes up this stair, I'll blow his brains out!" The Sergeant bravely kept on coming, fired a ball and Sacko died at his own stair head.

These Estaminets were very convenient for the troops. They served simple meals like Egg and Chips - to be paid for when ordered. During the spells of '8 days out' they were very well patronised. Some were situated dangerously close to the line and the owners were well warned about this. However, considering the business they did, they obviously thought it was well worth the risk. Besides, they provided a much greater service than simply that of satisfying our stomachs. There was something homely and comforting about sitting in the glow of those long French stoves on a winter's night with a plate of Eggs and Chips. It was not all harmony however. Certainly, on many occasions, our presence in France must have put a great strain on the locals, but we were under strain too. Poultry, pigs and various other items frequently disappeared from their farms. Sometimes our water-pump handles would be removed in retaliation, which was not likely to endear troops returning from the line or from a long forced march.

Orders came through that we were to take over a section of the line presently being held by the French at St. Quentin. This would put us the furthest south of any British troops. It would also mean a march of 2-3 days and billeting over night. Our last stopping place before St. Quentin was a small farming village where we occupied anything that had a roof on it. Our farm-house was of typical French construction with the back door opening onto a fair-sized square, with a midden in the middle and surrounded by pigsties,

cow byres, hen-houses etc. Trouble was brewing however. Some of us were detailed to get straw from a nearby stack. An agitated farmer appeared waving his arms. He appeared to be talking to himself. He was, because none of us spoke French. But he did succeed in making it plain that we were not to take any of his straw – not even to lie on. When we reported this to the Captain he detailed a Sergeant and two men to accompany him to the haystack. There was a heated discussion with the Captain doing most of the talking. The straw was duly taken. This was not the only example of French non-cooperation with the soldiers who were over in their country fighting for it. One could be forgiven for concluding at times that some of them had more sympathy for the Germans. The matter did not end there. Some of the lads had found out that the two goats which wandered round the farm during the day were housed at night in a shed with a door which was not locked, but only fixed with a staple and a wooden pin. Breaking in would be easy for men intent on a banquet and who had a qualified butcher among their number. Unfortunately, in the dark, the wrong goat was killed – the pregnant one – and the party was called off. We watched for the French Madame coming to open the door in the morning. She emerged screaming with both hands above her head and shouting “Nanny – Napoo, Nanny – Napoo!”. The Captain had all fifteen of us lined up for inspection. It was the first time I had been inspected in the ranks by a lady, but while she too could no doubt boast later that she was one of the few French women to inspect British troops, she could have had no idea whom she was looking for. She had not even seen any of us prior to the goat’s demise.

‘Nanny – Napoo’ became a catch-phrase with us from then on and other Companies would often greet us with the question “Baa Baa! Who killed the goat”? Even letters from Belfast eventually came to use the phrase ‘Nanny – Napoo’. The positions which we took over had long lines of communication leading to the front trench, which necessitated more sentries at night time. The password to these sentries was ‘Nanny – Napoo’. I know this because I was one of the sentries there, The sequel to the ‘goat’ affair came when we next presented our pay-books at the pay table. Stamped across them were the words ‘Deduction: 10 Francs’. I was unaware of the going rate for goats at that time but I still felt the deduction was a bit hard.

Next morning we set off on our last lap. The snow and ice on the roads did not make for an easy passage. As the French soldiers filed out on our arrival, I was struck by the length of the French army overcoat which, unlike ours, reached almost to their boots. Their reply to our natural enquiries as to what the sector was like sounded something like ‘Bokoo Gause’, which alerted even the most non-lingual of us to the fact that there was plenty of Gas around. The respective first lines were the furthest apart of any I had ever experienced. There must have been at least 200 yards of No Man’s Land and our position overlooked the German line.

We were under orders at that time not to ‘annoy’ the line too much as the French Batteries were pulling out and ours were in the process of moving into position. If anything were to happen we would have no artillery support. Apart from the usual routine greetings the sector remained generally quiet for some time. Trench orders only began to tighten up around February 1918. Troops moving any distance from the line were compelled to don full marching order – even on visits to the latrines. It was no secret that the Germans were preparing to launch a full scale offensive. The only question was

'when'? Behind us, where the British and French armies joined, we had 4 Divisions in support – which at that time was considered ample. Little did anyone imagine that in 3 months time the British and French armies would be on their knees, with the Germans almost back to their 1914 positions.

On the night of 20-21st. March 1918 their offensive opened up. The usual procedure for opening a battle was a barrage on the enemy front line, followed up with the bayonet. On this occasion the Germans reversed the tactics. They opened up on our heavy armour miles in our rear and gradually worked their way back up to the front line. Their artillery searched out the whole area. Not only did they cut all communication lines, but they blew some of our '18 pounders' out of existence. Finally our front line was dealt a dose of Gas, to be quickly followed up by the bayonet boys. It was a master stroke. The weather could not have suited them better. Visibility was practically nil and remained so for days. The German boys could not be seen crossing No Man's Land and were at our parapet before we sighted them. After their third bayonet assault the line belonged to them. Our reinforcements, which we were told we had in the rear, might as well have been in China as far as that front line was concerned. Our sector was not alone. All along the line our troops were in full retreat. What with the fog and the rapid German advance, it was one glorious mix-up. Some of our troops actually finished up firing at each other. I saw one of our '18 pounders. being dragged back by four mules, their bellies flat to the ground and snorting in terror. They had been hit, kicking and plunging with some of their insides hanging out. To see poor dumb animals in this state made me feel sick.

By the following day the Germans had opened up a three-mile gap between the British and the French, which they later increased to six miles. This was precisely the aim of the heavy blow they had directed towards our area. As the mist descended again at night we left the main road and took to a field. While there we heard a troop of Cavalry passing near us during the night. We heard later they were the dreaded Uhlans. Fortunately for us it was a foggy night. The following morning the light was reasonably clear and we moved on. I recall reaching a small river, which we assumed to be near Olesey. The bridge there, a wooden one, had already received a direct hit. The two middle parts were hanging into the river and three bodies lay on the wrecked bridge, one with his face practically in the water.

Whenever visibility was suitable there was no lack of enemy aircraft. We ate our rations on the move. It did not seem as if anyone was in charge, but I did see one officer – not one of our own – who had a bandage around his face where once his nose had been. He kept repeatedly spitting and spitting the blood from his mouth. By noon we were still keeping on the move – backwards – as we thought. In fact, such was the confusion, we were actually moving towards Jerry. Someone shouted "Enemy aircraft" and on looking up we saw about 10 planes forming up into a big wheel formation in the sky before coming down to spray the ground. Judging by the mess they left behind, their raid seemed to have been quite successful. After the war I read all about the exploits of the famous Red Baron von Richthofen and I wondered if it was his acquaintance I had made that day.

We were making for the town of Ham in order to link up again with our own troops. Unknown to us the Germans had already captured the town the previous day including, I believe, a split new Red Cross train which was standing in the station. After the strafing

from the air our Party was now much smaller and there did not appear to be any officer around, so it came under the command of a Sergeant Sinclair who was from our own 'C' Company. We set off for Ham on the morning of the 23rd. As we were on the main road, we moved along Indian style on the side of the road with Sgt. Sinclair leading. Behind me followed a Corporal. After a while the Sergeant called a halt. His party consisted of roughly 25-30 men. We were ordered to line the bank at the roadside and face in the direction from which he imagined the enemy attack would come. The attack came alright – but from entirely the opposite direction. Reflecting on our situation later, I calculated that had we continued moving ahead we would have walked straight through the gates of a 'Prisoner of War' camp. It appeared odd that their machine guns did not open up as long as we were moving forward. We must have been in full view for quite some time. Perhaps they were just curious, or making sure that they just could not miss. Lying along the bank, we were in the same order as before. There was a good slope on it and it was an ideal position for coping with a frontal attack from the direction we expected. At this point I decided to insert a fresh clip of ammunition into my magazine. For some reason, which I will never be able to explain, I slewed my body round to perform this operation so that my feet were exactly where my head had been a moment before. At that moment a machine gun rattled. I noticed the Sergeant's body jerk and a split second later I collected three machine gun bullets – two a few inches above the ankle on the inside of my right leg and one through the left foot. There was no particular reason why, on this occasion I should have slewed round to load. I had done it often enough before in the normal way. Why did I turn just then? Why? I kept asking myself – and still do. God, or my 'Guardian Angel' must have been 'mighty close'.

I was now immobile. Laying down my rifle, I slipped off my heavy pack and equipment and rolled myself into the nearby ditch. I glanced down at my leg. It was bleeding a lot; in fact I could see the blood seeping through the lace-holes of my right boot. I made some attempt to crawl along the ditch but the pain was excruciating, as though a hob-nailed boot or a hammer had crashed into my leg bone. It was knocking me so dizzy that I was scarcely aware of the damage to my other foot. I could not have gone far when I came across another soldier sitting propped up in the ditch. He too must have been wounded. I didn't know him; he was not one of our lot. "You're bleeding bad" he remarked, "better stop and let me have a look at it." He did not bother to unwind the puttee but slit it with his jack-knife. "Good God man" he exclaimed, "you'll bleed to death within an hour!" The bullet had severed an artery, which explained the blood bubbling through the lace-holes. He cut the string from his jack-knife and twisted it as tightly as he could around my leg above the knee. Then, after cutting part of the trouser leg off, he advised me "If you can move, move now! 'They' will be coming over this way shortly." I had not even spoken to him, not even to say 'thanks pal', yet even now I could pick him out from thousands. He saved my life. I attempted to crawl on but I knew I was not making much headway and felt that I was not going to last long. It was going to be too bad to finish up in a ditch. Everything went blurry, the sky spun and the ground heaved as I passed out. I do not know how long I lay there but I next became dimly aware of being in a small army van, lying alongside three other wounded cases. This van, I later found out, was engaged in evacuating Red Cross supplies from one of our First Aid posts and was on its final trip. Apparently two soldiers had carried me there with the aid of an oil sheet. I recall the driver opening the shutter behind his seat and shouting

"Hang on boys! I'm heading for Roye – and I'm going like hell." By now my right leg had swollen considerably; it was over-lapping the cord and I could not see my knee. I passed out again and my next memory was finding myself lying on a hard slab in the hospital with a tall man bending over me asking "Have you any false teeth?" I shook my head and he placed something over my face saying "Inhale this!"

It was daylight when I awoke with two nurses slapping my face good and hard. It seemed an age since I had eaten and I asked for something to eat and drink but all I got was half a cup of tea and a small piece of bread. However, I felt better and fell asleep again.

My stay in that hospital must have been one of the shortest on record. When I awoke I was on a Red Cross train, which was still stationary in Roye station. Apparently evacuation orders had previously been given to the hospital but had been cancelled. The town of Roye was now coming under fairly heavy shell fire and I still remember the bravery of the Nurses there as they coolly and calmly went about their duties. I was told that an enemy shell had narrowly missed the hospital and one had landed on the railway line a short distance ahead of the train. It must have taken hours to clear the torn and twisted lines, but I slept through most of this. Eventually it was 'full steam ahead' and I remember looking out of the window from my bottom bunk. I presumed that the black smoke, which I saw, meant that the two shell bursts which I had heard overhead had been shrapnel shells. There was nothing remarkable about that, but I did not know then that I had heard my last roar of artillery, and witnessed my final shell burst. This was my last 'Blighty'. The train gathered speed, heading for the base hospital at Etaples. As it approached Amiens it was reduced to a crawl. Complete pandemonium reigned in the station. Women in shawls were milling about, pushing their salvaged belongings in loaded prams and dragging little children behind them. A row of French Home Guard were lined up at the edge of the platform to prevent them from boarding the Red Cross train. With the British army in retreat and the Germans within striking distance, the panic was increasing.

On the bottom bunk next to me lay another wounded soldier. He was propped up, apparently in no pain and was quietly smoking a cigarette. I didn't think he realised it but both his legs were severed, one above the knee. They removed his body from the train not long after it had left Amiens.

We reached our destination around midnight and in the hospital there my wound was diagnosed as a compound fracture. I had visions of having to clump around with a high-soled boot for the rest of my life, but a subsequent X Ray convinced the doctor that it was a shattered Tibia. The nurse told me I would be shipped home sooner than expected. From where I lay I could see the tall mortuary trolley passing by from time to time and this gave me considerable cause to reflect. I had been lucky.

It was early on Easter Sunday morning that I was moved down to the quayside to embark for Southampton. It was not the usual Irish cattle boat this time but a beautiful boat called the 'Guildford Castle' which, I was informed, usually plied between Southampton and Cape Town, but had been requisitioned for its present purpose. There was an abundant supply of white bread aboard and we were urged by the Stewards to eat as much of it as possible because we would not get any in England. This was not entirely the case however, as it turned out. The wait in the Southampton sheds for the Red Cross

trains was long and tedious. I was the last to be stretchered on to one of the trains bound for Devon, but this was found to be full up and I was taken off again to await the next train. This one was headed for Sunderland and I remember wishing at the time that I had been going to Devon, although Sunderland was much nearer home..

It arrived at the usual time for hospital trains – around midnight – but this did not seem to have deterred quite a number of people from being there at that time. Perhaps they were looking for relatives, or maybe they just found it a bit more thrilling than going to the Pictures. “What a white face you’ve got!” was the jovial greeting I got from one Sister and I sensed at the outset that we were not likely to be strolling together round the town at any time. While in the ward my Mother visited me twice. Earlier in the war it seemed to be the practice that wounded who belonged to the North were sent to hospitals in the South and vice versa. This was not such a bad idea as the visiting were not quite so hectic in a place where silence and darkness were often so essential to the patient.

I soon graduated to a wheel chair, then from two sticks to one and was graded ‘Convalescent’. From there I was sent to Richmond in Yorkshire. This was a very pleasant place on the banks of the River Swale, where it was easy for us to hire a boat. It must have been around mid-July when I arrived home on hospital leave. I remember bringing a small black cat with me; it had been given to me at the convalescent centre. As usual orders arrived a couple of days before my leave was up. Imagine my surprise when I found I had to report to Randalstown Camp, County Antrim. The travel warrant was duly enclosed. Was I to begin all over again? The memories of 3 years ago came flooding back to the first time I had entered the camp gate. Various things came to mind like having to learn how to put on a pair of puttees, dodging parades, climbing over the camp wall after a late night in town and of course, the inevitable C.B. Now it was as if I was returning ‘home’, stamped in eight places with Fritz’s bullets and shrapnel. While there, I took the opportunity to visit old friends in the neighbourhood and was made very welcome. There was much to discuss – sometimes too much for comfort. The Regiment was well known in the area. My nostalgic visit to Shane’s Park carried specially poignant memories. The tree trunk still bore the initials B.A.; S.W.; J.M.. which we had carved out there when recruits. My last memories of Bunny A. jumping into that Jerry front line trench that day on the Somme were still vivid. Spuggie W. had not survived one of the many Minnewerfer strafes. On returning from what was to prove his last leave, Spuggie had informed us that he had decided to get married next time back. How we ribbed him by saying that the only reason a girl could possibly have for marrying him would be to get the widow’s pension. Well if the girl had’nt collected, Shuggie certainly had. Life was easy now at Randalstown and duties light, as many of us awaited discharge. I had not been there long when my leg began to trouble me again and I was sent to Ballymena hospital for treatment. From the Red Cross van I viewed the town through which we had so often marched in training and around which we used to enjoy cycling on Saturdays. The war news at this time was not encouraging. The usual Press reports kept informing the public that the British were retreating to a more favourable position. Considering that they did not occupy these positions for any more than 24 hours, there must have been a hell of a lot more favourable positions around. Of course, as we were repeatedly told, we had the most competent Commanders in the field. “Which particular

field would that be"? I asked myself. As these Commanders could not agree on tactics among themselves, it came as no surprise to hear that a Frenchman, General Foch, had been chosen to get them out of the mess. Whereas the ordinary private could be crimed for mislaying his toothbrush, our 'Commanders' were to get medals for mislaying their brains.

Ballymena proved to be the best hospital billet of them all. The food was good and there was plenty of it. The doctors were civilians which meant there was no wobbling about in an effort to stand to attention and no praise could be too high for the Sisters and Nurses. There was a serious Flu epidemic sweeping the country at that time. Some districts in the North of England had been very badly affected with whole families dying. In my ward there were only three wounded cases; the remainder were all flu victims. Some of them were conscripts who had previously been in sheltered employment. They had not been overseas but were still bemoaning their lot. What was worrying most of them was the loss of the £10 per week which they had been earning in Munitions. The 7/- army pay did not seem to match up to requirements. Of course munitions work is a dangerous calling; all that travelling to and from work during the winter must have been hell for them. One lad, who would have fitted nicely into a firing bay, asked me if they got paid while in hospital. I told him that I had'nt noticed and he seemed disappointed. There were two deaths in the ward while I was there; both were flu cases. The parents of one of them had travelled up from the South of England only to arrive 2 hours after he had died. He was entitled to a military funeral but I don't know if his parents bothered. Such occasions did not apply overseas of course but I recall being on such a detail on two occasions prior to my going on active service. Six of us, three on either side of the grave, fired six blanks into the air. The drill was carefully executed with no audible command but only a short 'ip' sound from the Sergeant as we went through the routine. On one occasion the parents came afterwards to thank us and gave each of us 1/-.

Soon I was up and about again and, along with another 'stick' case, was free to manoeuvre my way round the neighbourhood as long as I was back on time. Ballymena was the main attraction and one Saturday we decided to attend a local Sports meeting. We were chatting to a couple of girls at a shop door. The conversation was soon interrupted however by the arrival on the scene of a big Billy goat. I was about to pat it when it suddenly took two steps back, lowered its head and charged. It belted me in the stomach and knocked me through the open shop door into a pile of empty boxes. Amid the laughter of the others, the shopkeeper came over to help me up. As he picked up my cap and handed it to me he remarked "It's the Hospital Blues that Billy does not like." I seemed fated to be linked with goats. Recollections of the goat which had led our marches to the station on overseas drafts and the 'Nanny - Napoo' goat in that French farmyard which had cost me 10 Francs off my pay, made me resolve to avoid these creatures in future.

Matters on the Western Front had by now decidedly changed in our favour. Thanks to American help and a good French general in command, the tide had turned at last. On that unforgettable day, November 11th. 1918, the unforgettable war was finally over. To be standing on the firestep at 11 am. that morning as the Guns fell silent must have been a strange, even eerie, experience and one I would have given everything to have had. Just as I was not there at the beginning, neither was I there at the end.

The ecstatic scenes of joy in Ballymena on Armistice Day were typical of what was taking place all over the country as banquets were laid on and a relieved people danced and sang in the streets. Following a truly sumptuous dinner in the hospital, I was sent next day to consult a specialist in the Victoria Hospital, Belfast. The outcome was that I was given a chit to report to my Unit in Oswestry, Wales. The boat and train times were detailed on the chit but there were no signs of either provisions or money. I felt I had to do something about this. I was perfectly aware by now of the time of the boat from Belfast to Holyhead without any prompting from the Army and it did not require much ingenuity to arrive at the quay half an hour after the boat had gone. The statutory report to the R.T.O. got me what I was after, viz. an extra day plus ration money. Eventually I reached Oswestry Camp just before midnight.

It was a large camp and several other Units were there besides the Inniskillings. Camp routine followed the usual pattern. They were recruiting a Brigade of Volunteers for service in Chanak which, I was told, involved a trip across the Aegean sea. I would not have stood a chance of being accepted anyway. Many other troops were marching out – singing, naturally, - to Demob centres! I was despatched to Oswestry hospital for further examination and was kept there overnight. A Welsh soldier was with me as we entered the ward. The Sister indicated two vacant beds, the first of which – No.9 – I took. A few minutes later the Welsh lad returned and asked if I was superstitious. He told me he was born on the 9th., married on the 9th., and his first child had been born on the 9th. and asked if I would mind swapping beds and move to No.13. I was not bothered either way but as I was dumping my gear on No.13 I heard a voice say “Hello there!” I could’nt believe it. There in No.12 bed lay Sgt. Sinclair and the Corporal, who was from Londonderry, was in No.14. We were in the same formation as we had been on that lead-swept road leading to Ham. The co-incidence was almost too bizarre to be real, but there they were. The Sergeant had been hit in the chest and the Corporal had a stomach wound. I was called away and had left again by next day before getting the full story of how they got away from the scene, but I was glad they too had survived.

My time for Demob came in December and I was ordered to report to Newcastle-on-Tyne. Trains were very busy with heavy troop movements and I did not get a seat until York, but I managed to reach the dispersal centre by nightfall. The Demob officer did not take long over the formalities on the following morning. He showed his appreciation of my services by telling me that I did not qualify for a Disability Pension as the nature of my wounds would not hinder me from following my trade as a Carpenter. On receiving my Discharge papers I made my first mistake – I saluted him. I closed the door behind me and tried to convince myself that I was now a civilian. For the last 4 years and 49 days – as my Discharge papers have it – I had been instructed, not always in a kindly manner, where to go, when to come back, when to go to bed, when to eat and how to dress. Now I would have to make my own decisions. My first was to decide on a train home. It was only 70 miles away but I did not hurry. At least this time I would not be greeted with the usual question “When have you to go back?”

Thanks to the intervention of Sir Francis Blake, on whose estate my Father was employed, I was eventually granted a Pension for one year. The end of the war must have come as a severe jolt to the well-heeled, Munitions workers, not to mention the big industrial firms, some of whom were having to declare