

OVER THE TOP

MEMORIES OF YPRES AND THE SOMME



by

WALDO BEALES

1896 – 1985

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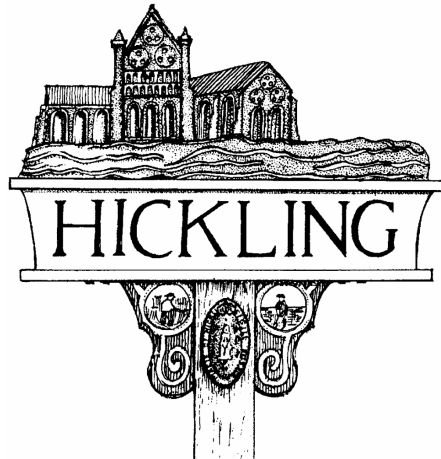
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INTRODUCTION

The Hickling Local History Group is pleased to present its third publication since its formation in 2000. “Over the Top” by Waldo Beales is the story of a Hickling lad’s experiences in the First World War, and in particular at the Battle of the Somme.

The First World War of 1914 – 1918 involved devastating human loss, the battle of the Somme in 1916 being the most costly and horrific. Many who joined up were very young men, some only sixteen, living at home with very little experience outside their own area. The media at that time could not portray the realities of war, and with much propaganda most did not want to be seen unpatriotic. These young men were thrown into horrific experiences, seeing death and dreadful injuries to their pals, whose companionship had probably been their only comfort far from home. To those who survived, these events will have had a lasting effect, making it difficult to express their feelings for a long time, possibly until retirement.

The aim of the Battle of the Somme had been for the British and French to attack the German army simultaneously. It had been hoped to break the German defences on July 1st, but started with 60,000 casualties on the first day. The battle continued until mid-November 1916, during which time the British sustained more than 400,000 casualties, and advanced only eight miles.

From 1914 onwards, recruitment meetings were held in the villages, and many men responded, Waldo Beales amongst them. This story was written in his retirement, when he had the time to look back, and to set down some of his memories. Waldo states that he had “just a village school education” but it will become evident to the reader that it served him well. Waldo’s daughter, Pat Deane, is a Hickling Local History Group member, and has made Waldo’s story available to the Group for publication.

The picture on the front cover is of a periscope in use in a W.W.I. trench – this apparatus is referred to in the story. A map has been included to enable the reader to follow the movements of Waldo and his platoon around the battlefields on which they fought.

FOREWORD

by Waldo's daughter, Pat Deane.

This year, 2006, commemorates the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. This story relates the personal experiences in this terrible battle of one young nineteen-year-old from Hickling. In his late seventies, he found the need to write down his story in his own words. His name is Waldo Wellington Athelstan Beales, the tenth child of George and Annie Beales, born in 1896 at the Pleasure Boat Inn, Hickling which was kept by his parents from 1880 until 1911.

Waldo attended the village school and joined up at a recruitment meeting held in the village in 1914 at the age of 17. In his story he refers to two friends who were in the same form with him at school, Ned and Bob. Research shows that they were Edward Crosse (Ned), son of the vicar of St. Mary's Church, Hickling, and Robert Brooks (Bob).

Waldo describes his time in France (via Hickling, Felixstowe, London and Southampton) in the trenches around Poperinge and Ypres. After an unfortunate incident and a period of isolation in a field hospital in Étaples, he was moved south to join the 1st Battalion of the Norfolk regiment at the Somme near Guillemont. It was here during the Battle of the Somme that he was seriously injured in both legs. After three weeks, he was repatriated to a hospital in the north of England. His injuries were so severe that he was unable to return to the front and after a period of convalescence he was discharged and returned home.



Waldo, back in Hickling and living with his family in The Guest House on Staithe Road (to which they had moved on leaving the Pleasure Boat), wanted his own business. He started a boatyard, building three wet-berth boathouses with quay headings, and slipways; he eventually owned eleven boats. Some of this remains today. He also built and ran a small garage at this time, and in 1929 married Katy Markin, from The Green (now Black Horse Cottage). They had a small bungalow built next to the garage at The Staithe and lived there until their deaths – Waldo's in 1985, aged 88, and Katy's in 2001 aged 98. They are buried together in St. Mary's churchyard at Hickling.

I am their daughter, and grew up in Hickling, moved to live and work in Derbyshire for some years, but have returned in retirement, with my husband Mike, to live again in my parents' home on the Staithe.

This story (written in Waldo's hand in a foolscap notebook) has been kept with the family photographs and documents. The postcards reproduced with this story have been added to show pictures of some of the places Waldo passed through on his way to and at the front. They were not sent by my father, but were in the family collection, having been sent to my grandmother, Mrs, Markin, by her nephew, Billy Newman.

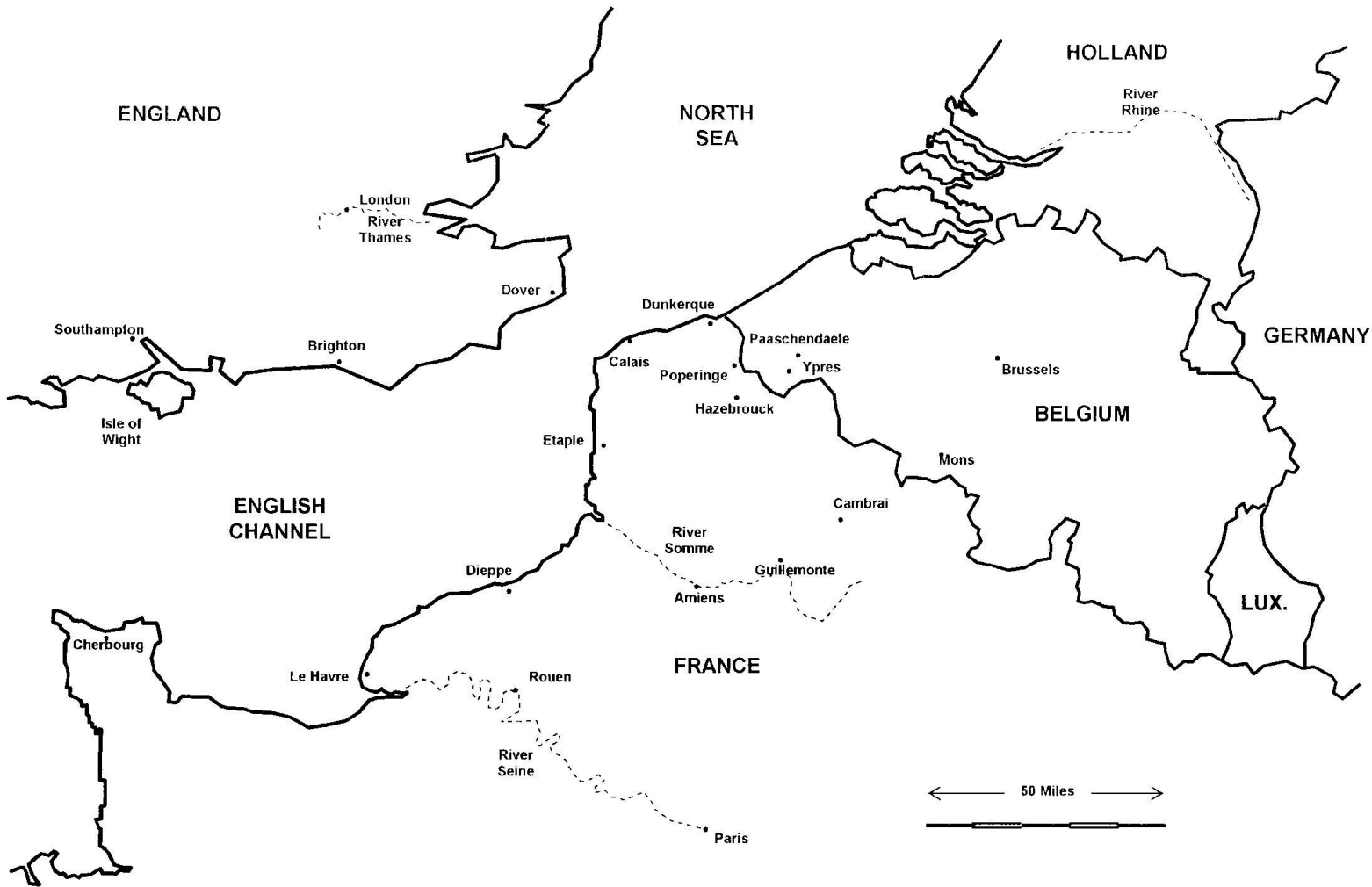
The Hickling Local History Group has encouraged me to publish this story and I have had assistance with transcription, information, map, and photographs from Group members, Ivor Kemp and Helen and Tony Cornwell. My thanks go to all concerned.

Pat Deane.

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BATTLEFIELDS OF W.W.1

And some of the places Waldo served:



“OVER THE TOP”

MEMORIES OF YPRES AND THE SOMME

First of all let me say that I am no story-writer, having had just a Village School education — not that I grumble at that, as I had no inclination to ‘shine’ as a scholar. Why am I writing this? The fact is that two years after World War I was over I had more or less forgotten it. I now felt recovered from my disability and able to work again, so decided to build up a small business. This meant a seven-day week for the next fifty years, mostly till dark and often after dark. Holidays were out of the question; besides money did not allow for them. However, I was quite resigned to all this. Then through no fault of my own I was compelled to retire, but kept a small part of the business to keep my mind and body occupied, and to keep contact with the many friends and customers I had made during these many years in the business. I now found that I was more relaxed, having a lot less worry and work. At times I found my mind going back to those days in the trenches at Ypres and on the Somme. These memories insisted on coming back every time I was slack. No, I won’t say they ‘haunted’ me or prayed on my mind — that would be a too cold-blooded way of putting it, so let’s say they insisted on coming back to me. Then, the idea came to me that perhaps if I wrote them all down I should feel easier in mind. Although I have a good recollection of the incidents mentioned I have only a hazy recollection of what happened in between, of some, none at all. Remember I am writing of what happened almost a lifetime ago.

I think I could say that the beginning, or rather the beginning of the beginning, of it started in our village school. Imagine three lads in school all about the same age sitting in the same form: Bob, Ned and myself. Three years later Britain was at war. Bob and I joined up at a Recruiting Meeting in the school in the Autumn of 1914, both under age. However by

the time we were called up we were both eighteen. Many others did the same thing. Ned, however, joined later as he was the youngest. His father I heard was trying to get him a commission and would not allow him to go before he was eighteen. I heard later that he had got his commission, but I did not see him till about two years later when we three were destined to meet on the Somme in the late summer of 1916. We had to make an attack near Guillemont. It was Ned who led our platoon 'Over the Top'. Half an hour later Bob, who was now a stretcher-bearer, was lifting me out of a shell-hole with the aid of his mate. (All about that incident later).

One unusual thing about our village I would like to mention — a tragic one at that. When we were in the trenches we used to reckon rightly or wrongly that for every five wounded one would be killed. Our village at that time had about 600 population. Out of about thirty five casualties thirty never came back, but only about five were wounded, which meant our 'reckoning' was in reverse. How other villages fared I do not know - not so tragic as that, I hope.

To go back to the beginning of my story, Bob and I found ourselves at Felixstowe, on the sea-front. We were billeted in a boarding house called 'Carlton House' which was run by two ladies, mother and daughter I believe. A nice couple who never worried us, and we in turn behaved ourselves and treated them with respect. I found myself in No.1 Platoon, those with surnames beginning with A, B, C and D. I remember several of Bs: Bird, Bunn, Baxter, Bunting, Briggs, Brooks (my school mate), Beales (a cousin); others I have forgotten. They were all a friendly lot of chaps - Norfolkers and country-bred. I often wonder what happened to them; as expected, we all got separated later. In France, I only had contact with three of them and I know what happened to them! Two were left behind, the other lost an eye. If any one of them is still alive I would dearly like to meet him. Not much hope I fear. They would be about 85 years old, older than I, as I was the youngest in my platoon. I was made a lance-corporal owing, I

suppose, to my abilities on the firing range and getting top marks for musketry. It was in May 1915 that I heard my name called out for a draft, and it was during the hours of darkness that I and several others were put on the train and headed south, to where we did not know and were never told. My next recollection was getting out at a North London station and marching through the city, though owing to the Londoners wishing us "Good luck" and nearly rubbing shoulders with us it was more of a straggle than a march! We were put on a train again at South London station and headed south again. I have little recollection of the journey, but I expect we had our heads out of the window admiring scenery we had never seen before! Our final destination proved to be Southampton.

We were lined up in front of a large transport ship. Had I been a Churchill I suppose I could have said "Well, that's the end of the beginning". As I got on the ship I could have said "Now for the Beginning of the End." It certainly was for several of my pals, and nearly the end for me on a number of occasions except for the amazing luck that seemed to follow me throughout my time in France; and apart from a few extraordinary coincidences as well! It was getting dusk as we got on board. Transport ships usually went across in the night. I don't suppose any of us had been on a ship before as events soon proved. We seemed to be able to roam about as we pleased. We realised we were now on Active Service and at risk of being sunk in the Channel. The Transport headed out to sea and it was now dark. The wind was getting up and before we got far she began to heave, as did many of my mates. The lea side of the ship was well lined with them. A few had to use the windward side with disastrous results! The deck on that side was no place for a quiet stroll! My next thought was to find a place to 'kip' for the night. A pal and I decided to try the top deck, where we found a place at the foot of the funnel. We didn't expect to sleep but lay down through force of habit under our overcoats, with our packs as pillows. So far I had avoided being sick (luck again I suppose). After about an hour I began to feel cold and decided to leave my pals and try the ship's

hold. I made my way to the top of the steps and looked down to see all my mates lying on the floor fast asleep; some were snoring. I got down three steps and stopped! What was that smell? The fact that it was warm seemed to make it worse. It seemed to be worse in all the confined spaces! My stomach gave me a gentle warning. I turned back and struggled back to my funnel and lay down again. After about an hour I felt colder than ever and once again made my way to the top of the hold. I managed to get down nearly to the bottom and stopped dead. The smell seemed worse than ever. My stomach warned me again. If I had to be sick it was not going to be down there! Back to my funnel again and then a faint ray of hope. Far out to the east I saw the faintest ray of light! I lay down again and made the best of it. Half an hour later it was light enough to see about the ship.

I suppose we had got beyond mid Channel by now. The wind was easing and shortly after we saw the outline of the French coast and some buildings. It turned out to be Le Havre but we did not stop there, but carried on down the River Seine. The sun was shining and it was quite warm as we made our way down this winding and tree-lined river. We were lying and sitting on the deck. Under any other circumstances it could have been a day's outing, but for our one thought. Were we coming back? If so how? These thoughts however faded out as we moored up on the right hand side of the harbour at Rouen. We were lined up and marched through the town to a large base-camp on the north side of the town. It was 'some' camp. There seemed to be every British nationality under the sun encamped there. Everyone seemed to be coming from somewhere and going somewhere. I think I saw a Gurkha on his knees offering up a prayer. We were not there many days however and my next recollection was of being lined up alongside some railway trucks near the camp. We climbed on board and sat round the sides of the truck side by side. I have little recollection of the journey north; according to my map about a hundred miles. It was 'slow — slow — stop!' The slower the better we thought and as for the stops they suited us too! We could hop off when necessary. If we hadn't finished

before the train moved off again we could easily run alongside and jump on again.

I cannot remember our destination. It could have been Poperinge. After that it was march, march, march. I remember sleeping one night at a deserted farm where we squeezed into the empty horse stables to sleep for the night. I also remember crossing the Ypres Canal and going through the ruins of Ypres and seeing what was left of the Cloth Hall. I think the Canal acted as a second line of defence then. I remember coming back to it once or twice for what was called a “rest”. Speaking of Ypres, some of us called it “Eeeps”, some “Yeeps”, but my old schoolmaster thought it should be “I pray” — the most appropriate name of the lot! We certainly prayed the whole time we were there. We were now getting near our destination as we could hear an occasional crack of a rifle. Just before we got there I heard what I thought was a horse being hit by a stray bullet. It turned out to be a mule, giving vent to its feelings! I may have seen a mule in my boyhood days, but I had never heard one make such a scream! We next found ourselves in a communication trench leading up to a large pine wood. It was now dark or as dark as it seems to get during the summer nights. We filed into the wood - the order now was “no lights and no noise”. Inside the wood was a large sand-bagged shelter. We were now getting tired but after a few minutes we were ordered out again into the trench which led to the other side of the wood into the front line. We were there at last! We were told to line the trench about two yards apart, but when it got daylight we found we were intermixed with regulars and reservists who had been there some time before us (which was a comforting thought for us beginners)! We were not allowed to move from our “stand” only when necessary and never once got the “stand to” order. I found myself facing a row of sand bags 6 or 7 feet high. At the foot was another row about a foot high which was called the firing-step on which we could stand to fire over the top of the trench (the parapet). Not in daylight though; that would have been suicidal! It was still dark but in between the fire-step and the parapet

someone had scooped out a cubby hole, long enough to lie down in. I was getting tired and thought I would try it out. I got in it and believe it or not was soon fast asleep and that within a stone's throw of the German trenches! It was still dark when I felt someone shaking my arm saying "come on Corporal, it's time to "stand to". It turned out to be another corporal whose name was Claude (Symonds I believe). A little later as he passed down the trench I heard him telling someone he hated waking the poor little 'B' up! As he came back he was now giving the order to stand on the fire-step and fire ten rounds rapid over the enemy lines - just to let them know we were fully manned! The quickest ten rounds I ever fired in my life! I got down with a sigh of relief.

Shortly after, it started to get daylight and I was able to take stock of my surroundings and see who my new pals were. They were friendly chaps — typical Norfolk lads, mostly from mid and west Norfolk. It seemed that one only got to really know the two on each side of one, being tied to the same spot as we were week after week. Gradually we found we were "palling" off in pairs as "mess mates" or as we called it "mucking-in" mates. It meant we ate together, cooked on the brazier, made tea and helped each other in every way, in fact became bosom pals! There was one in particular I shall never forget. His name was Fred Barker. What happened to him after we got separated I don't know; perhaps I never will now! He was a reservist and two or three years older than I was. I can see him now with that half-smile on his face, as though it was yesterday. Always ready for a joke, but always there when wanted. As is well known we were just breeding grounds for body lice; why and where they came from no-one seemed to know. We all got our share but Fred seemed to get more than his! They infested the seams of our trouser-legs! Once a week Fred would have what might be called a de-lousing operation. He would unroll his puttees, take off his boots and trousers and turn them inside out. I would hold one end of the trouser legs and Fred the top end. The two seams were lined from top to bottom with little white lice! A match was lit and passed

down the seams. “That should do the trick for another week” says Fred. On one occasion he had performed this operation and dressed himself when he said something that I shall never forget. It was this: “If ever I get out of this ‘B’ lot alive I’ll never grumble again.” It was something we all could have said! Knowing Fred, I am sure he meant it and lived up to it! I have forgotten where he came from. It could have been Swaffham. I know there are some Barker families still living there. If any one of them could help me I would be pleased to make contact with them. At the same time I realise that he may have passed away by now.

What I am writing now was a sample of everyday life in the trenches. I think we could say we had one grumble while there. We were always hungry due mainly to always living in the open air, I suppose. The rations we got for two days were often eaten the first day! Then we had to fall back on ‘bully’ and army biscuits. After we got tired of eating “bully” out of the tin we stewed it in our own billy-cans for a change. In the end I used to try and swallow mine, hoping not to taste it. Believe it or not, in that wood there was a small shelter built of bully-beef tins, big enough for two to sleep in. Full ones at that! The biscuits had to be broken up before we could eat them. We had to let them soak in our mouths for a bit before getting them down. Our greatest joy was when a food parcel arrived from home. Needless to say these were always shared out between our ‘little group’ and eaten the first day. I’m afraid we did not realise at the time that our parents who sent them were going hungry themselves!

Just one more word about the “company” that infested our trousers. Later on we were sent down to a Village behind our Lines (in small groups of course). Here there was a building that had been turned into a number of steam baths. I found myself in a cubicle and the door was shut behind me. The steam was turned on and I found myself having the first steam bath of my life — indeed the first bath of any kind for two months. I could not see myself in the steam. It was not the type where one could stick one’s head

out, so I was steamed inside as well as out. Besides this, our clothes were taken from us and fumigated. We certainly felt the fresher from all this after we got back to our trenches! One other little incident I recollect. It had been a very hot day and we had drunk our water bottles dry when a chap shouted that there was some water behind our trench. It turned out to be a trickle two inches wide; where it came from and where it went to no-one knew or cared! It looked quite clean and we filled up our billy-cans and had a good drink — and that was that. But not quite! That evening, or was it the next, about a dozen of us were dragging our feet to the Dressing Station with acute diarrhoea! We spent the night in an empty school but felt just well enough to stagger back to our trench in the morning. I suppose we had to learn what *not* to do as well as *what* to do. What I have written is just a sample of the “lighter” side of life in the trenches. Now for the grimmer side!

It happened a week after I had been at Ypres. We had fired our “ten rounds rapid” before daylight over the Jerry’s trenches. A pal in my section was about two yards away. As I jumped down I heard a crash as my pal fell down, dead. He was one second too late! A bullet had hit him in the centre of the fore-head. It was the first fatal casualty I saw, in fact the first person I had ever seen dead! What can one do but feel sorry for a chap when he is killed, but thank Heaven it wasn’t you? I was thinking over the tragedy next day and asking myself, was it just a stray shot, remembering it was dark at the time, or a crack sniper who had got the top of our trench “taped” to an inch? A week later I think I had the answer. Every certain distance in our trench we had what was called a periscopic rifle, a contraption that could be fired by one without putting one’s head over the top of the trench. Any one of us was free to use it when inclined. It was a ‘Z’ shaped affair with a small mirror at the top and another at the bottom of the periscope enabling one to take aim at the necessary object. Safe as houses? But wait! A pal in my section was fond of trying it out; indeed I was going to try it out myself as soon as he had finished with it. He was carefully getting a

sight on the Jerry's top sand-bags, standing on the same spot as my dead pal had been standing, when there was a bang as he staggered back into the trench. He was groaning and jumping about half crazy! Believe it or not, a bullet had hit the top mirror and smashed it to bits and a splinter had buried itself in his eye. He lost his eye and the last I saw of him was in England on home duty. Once again, I thought, it could have been me. One thing we had overlooked was the fact that the sun was shining on the top mirror at the time, making it a good target for the sniper. But who would think of that until it was too late?

Near me was a 2 ft square steel plate built into the sand-bags. It had a large key-hole in the centre big enough for one to put one's rifle through and take pot-shots and see if one could rip the tops off Jerry's sand-bags. I always used it sparingly knowing full well that if I fired too many shots at a time there would be a machine gun 'playing' on it. After all, bullets can get through a 2 inch hole at times. Most of the time I was at Ypres it was trench warfare, bullet versus bullet! There was not much shelling either. It seemed to me that the trenches had to be further apart for that, for fear of the shells dropping into their own trenches. One other deadly missile we feared was the trench mortar, though I think they had to be used at a suitable distance, say 200 yards. I only had occasion to remember one in particular. I heard the familiar "thump" as it was fired and looked up and saw it rising in the air to about two hundred feet and going to the right and heading for our trench as it started to fall. Heavens, I thought, it's going right in! It did. There was a flash and a bang as sand-bags flew up. A dead silence and then the familiar cry of "Stretcher Bearers" was passed down the trench. I saw the stretcher coming down the trench. As it approached we each in turn had to crawl out on to the back of the trench and lay flat to enable it to pass. As it passed by me, I saw it was another pal who had trained with me at Felixstowe. He was only just breathing and I heard he was dead before he got to the First Aid Post!

Towards the end of the summer, I had to leave for a minor operation. Glad of a change but sorry to leave my mates. A few weeks, I was back in the trenches again but with the 9th Battalion, Norfolks, making new friends again. The trenches here were further south as the British were slowly taking over from the French, who had been having a rough time of it lately. The first thing I noticed, where I had to stand, was that a safer type of trench had been built called a “Butt & Bay” type. The Bays were about 10 feet wide and the Butts about 4 feet in between each Bay. Much safer than the plain straight type, as I was soon to find out!

While with the 9th I have a clear recollection of three or four “incidents.” The first one in particular: The line had been quiet most of the first week. On this particular day I was standing in my bay quite at ease, as not a shot had been fired up till about 2 o’clock. Three of my pals were chatting and joking in the next bay on my right. Suddenly there was a terrific flash in my pals’ bay, and a blast of air that nearly took my cap off. As soon as I could get my breath, I ran round, knowing, yet dreading to see what had happened. One was dead and the other two lay wounded. The one that was dead I will call Young N, as I don’t want to open up any old wounds in case any of his relations might read this. He was one of the nicest lads I ever met in France. As I stood waiting for the Stretcher-Bearers to come along, I suddenly got an idea! I bent down and took a letter from his top pocket – we all kept our “home” letters there – I noted the address and the signature at the bottom. It was signed “Your Loving Sister” So & So. Why did I do this? I thought the only notification his family would get was just “Killed in Action”, no more. I felt they would like to know more. What killed him; did he suffer; did anyone see him at the time! A week later I wrote to his Sister and told her all I knew and how sorry we all were as to what happened to him. I got a very nice letter back saying how grateful she was to know that he had not suffered. If ever I was in London, where she was employed, would I please call on her. Long after, I did call, and we had a quiet chat over a cup of tea. She was a very nice girl,

but I could tell her little more than I had told her in my letter. I never saw her again and often wonder if she is still alive.

Now, a word about the shell that killed Young N. It was what we called a “Whiz-Bang” - one of the most deadly missiles used in World War I. It was about 3 inches in diameter and travelled as fast as a bullet. In fact you were alive one minute and dead the next! It may be a surprising statement to make when I say that you never heard the shell that was going to hit you. I should know, to my cost, later on! The noise of the shell never came out in front of it, but flowed out each side, which meant that if you were a few yards away on either side of its “target” you would hear the “whiz” and duck down and stand a fifty-fifty chance. In the case of the tragedy I have just mentioned, neither I nor Young N heard a sound of the shell coming. In fact N. was laughing when the shell hit him!! Anyway, we had a similar field gun which fired a similar shell and no doubt had a similar effect on the Jerrys.

I think it was the same afternoon as the above tragedy that we had a lively time of it. For some unknown reason I found myself in a different part of the trench, but not the Butt and Bay type, just the straight line type. We were more on the alert after what had happened earlier. Suddenly a shell burst in front of our trench, then another behind it. For the next half-hour it went on and on, while we were all bent double in the bottom of our trench. Then it suddenly stopped! Not one shell had fallen in the trench! While we were all bent double, two yards from me stood a young officer (his name was Self and he had been lent to our regiment for a short while). He stood bolt upright through it all! I can still see him – tall, slim and pale-faced and only about twenty years old; now and again turning his head and saying something like “Cheer up, it won’t last long.”

I had another occasion to respect that officer shortly after that. He was standing nearby me when a sergeant was detailing me to go on a risky

errand that night. The officer heard him and said “No, no, Sergeant, Corporal Beales has been on that job twice this week already, you must get someone else.” I don’t know who was the more surprised, the sergeant or I! The Sergeant saluted and said “Yes, Sir.” About the errand mentioned – this consisted of fetching our two days ration from behind our lines. There was a straight road leading from the back of our trenches along which I had to take a party of four for about half a mile, where the rations were dumped. This road, like most roads in France, never had hedges on each side like we have in Norfolk. It was slightly raised higher than the surrounding fields, and had a ditch on each side of it. We had to start as soon as it got dark. The Germans knew that we moved up and down this road and would shell it with Shrapnel, which was timed to explode in mid-air. My first trip was rather a nightmare, but we managed to dodge the shells, luckily. I had learnt one thing – so the next time I was a bit wiser. The shells came over at about 5 minute intervals, so we would stand and wait before moving off, and wait for the first shell to explode, then run as fast as we could for 5 minutes, and then flop down in the ditch and wait for the next one to explode! We had to repeat this performance all the way there and back. Anyway, plus the usual luck, we got back without getting hit.

My next recollection was that we were all marching further south again to extend our line. We found ourselves filing through an area of chalk. The trenches had been cut out of nothing but chalk - not dusty stuff, but chunks of it. Even the sandbags were filled with it. I remember as I was going along, a young “Frenchie” stepped out of a large “burrow” on one side of the trench he and his mates had been digging out. As he passed I said something in English which he did not understand. He said something in French which I did not understand, gave a grin, and was gone! I think we went a few more miles till we came to a dead halt. Why? At the end of that trench was a sheet of water! Yes, and reeds! I could hardly believe my eyes. I thought I was back on Martham Broad. I looked over the top of our trench – more water and reeds. A moorhen was peacefully pecking away at

the surface weeds! No sign of war here. It was the quietest and most peaceful spot that I came across in France! Nearby was a shell-proof shelter to take about a dozen of us. There were some wood-framed bedsteads with wire-netting stretched across for us to sleep on! Also a brazier to cook on. Also nearby was a sluice-gate, with a small wooden hut over the top. The water was much higher on one side, and was trickling through the dam-boards, and forming a small current on our side of the dam. Then, to complete the picture, dozens of eels were wriggling against the flow of water. They were about a foot long, and were fascinating to watch. Then someone shouted "What about eels for tea." That did it. Between us we ripped the netting from one of the beds and made it into a scoop, tied a pole on the end, and in no time fished out enough eels for a dozen of us. I thought we from the Broads area were the only people who knew how to deal with eels, but I was wrong. Most of my mates came from mid and west Norfolk. They knew as much as I did, and had those eels skinned and chopped in no time. They were duly put into the dixie and stewed. Result? Eels and biscuits for tea. As far as I remember there was hardly a shot fired while we were there, as we could not even see the German trenches. They seemed to be behind a slight hill in front of us. I can't remember how long we stayed in this spot – not long enough.

My next recollection was – we were due to march back to a nearby village for four days rest and to be inoculated. It was a treat to be able to stretch our legs. We arrived there, a bit tired but otherwise fit and well. By the way, all the time I was in the trenches, I never saw any of my mates with a cold, nor a cough, or a sneeze, or a runny nose. It was now early spring by the time we arrived at our destination. We found ourselves in Bell tents adjoining a marquee which was used for First-Aid. After a good night's sleep we were duly lined up next morning in the marquee for "treatment."

It was that day that something happened that was to change my whole career while in the army. While waiting for the “needle”, the M.O. turned away to get a fresh bottle of vaccine, not that I paid any attention to that. We were told to go and lay down in our tents and take it easy for the next two days, as expected. We had only been resting about an hour when an orderly looked in and asked “Everybody all right?” This was the usual practice after being treated. For the rest of that day he came round every hour or so, with the same question, and again the second day, which was twice as often as usual. I began to wonder why! On the day before we were due to march back, I *didn't* feel alright! I felt hot and flushed and guessed I had a temperature. That same evening I noticed two stretcher-bearers with a stretcher coming into my tent. I was put on it and taken to the marquee, and placed on a bed, wondering why I felt so ill! By now all my pals had recovered! An M.O. came and gave me a good look, and went off and fetched another M.O. They both went away, and brought another M.O. when they came back. Doctors have a language of their own. They say nothing! One raised his eyebrows and the other two nodded their heads and were gone. The next two or three days I was delirious and my mind seemed blank. By the end of the week my temperature had gone down, and I asked the nurse what was wrong. She said “You have got Scarlet Fever, you are a mass of spots from head to foot!” To this day I feel sure I had been given the wrong vaccine by accident. I suppose it was fate playing its hand again. I don't know how much longer I was there before I was well enough to be moved. I can just remember being lifted on to a Field Ambulance and leaving for an unknown destination, but no knowledge whatever of the journey or how long it took. By the way Field Ambulances in those days were just pick-up trucks with an awning over the top. Solid tyres of course, but they did a great job in that war. My next recollection was of being carried across a large lawn and placed in an Isolation Hut with two beds in it. Another chap was in the other bed. He belonged to the R.A.M. Corps. At the top end of the lawn was a large country house where the nurses resided.

The hut was beautifully furnished and spotless. Sheets on the bed too – heaven compared to what we had been used to in the trenches. To complete it all, we had two “angels” in the form of two Australian nurses to attend to all our wants. One was tall and slender, slightly tanned, and typical Australian and full of energy. The other was the exactly opposite! Short, plump, and rosy-cheeked. The former and I got on well together. The latter one took to the chap in the other bed. I don’t think either of us were in a desperate hurry to get better.

There were three little incidents which I remember well while I was there, two of which had a bearing on what was to happen later on. By the way, I forgot to mention that the name of the place we were at was Étapes, on the coast. After about a week there, I was able to get out of bed and stand on my feet. My first steps were to the beach to look at the sea. On the beach was a small wired-off compartment, complete with a deck-chair to sit in. It was here one fine day that I thought I saw the White Cliffs of Dover, or some part of the English Coast. A few days later I was wandering about the grounds when I found myself on the edge of a canal. As I was watching, for no particular reason, a large steam tug came round the bend. It was towing what I soon recognised as a fifty-ton iron Lighter such as were used on the River Yare for carrying heavy ballast to various parts of the Broads. There was a figure standing on the fore-deck that attracted my attention. Where had I seen him before? The penny dropped! He turned out to be a pre-war pal of mine who crewed a Trading Wherry not far away, and who had joined what was called the Inland Water Transport which operated up and down the canals carrying supplies to the bases. We used to meet down at Yarmouth, when I occasionally took a trip on my grandfather’s wherry during school holidays. By the time I had recognised him, he was gone, heading towards the channel. I hear he died about two years ago.

About the other chap that was in the hut with me. Occasionally his nurse would come in after dark and have a friendly chat with him. In under-

tones of course, so as not to wake me up! On one occasion I heard him say that he intended to transfer to an Infantry Regiment as he was getting rather bored with being in the R.A.M.C. (brave man). I had occasion to remember that some time later.

The other incident, or rather the beginning of it, happened one morning shortly before I left there. “My” nurse came in one morning with an excited look on her face and kissed me as I lay in bed. “Beale,” she said “I am going to leave you. I am going on the hospital ship ‘Brighton’,” and then said half-serious and half-smiling, “If ever you come across on it, ask for me, won’t you.” As the chances of me doing that were a million to one, I laughed it off, and soon forgot about it. In any case, if I ever did see her again, I shouldn’t be in one piece, on *that* boat.

After a short spell of leave, I was found fit for duty again. I remember being encamped at the notorious “Bullring” camp at Étaples, where there was supposed to have been a minor riot during the war, but which was kept a close secret until recently, though it seemed normal while I was there. A number of my pals were with me whom I had known earlier. We were told we were going to join the 1st Battalion which was now in the Somme area. The morning we departed I was coming out of what we called the wash-house – a marquee lined with wash basins on one side. I was a bit late and in a hurry not to miss breakfast. Another chap was coming in, and as is usual, we gave each other a half glance. Heavens! It was the chap who had been in the Isolation Hut with me! He had on an Infantry uniform, so his wish had come true. It’s a small world, it seemed, even in a country the size of France.

I have no recollection of our journey to the Somme or whether we went by train or truck, though I certainly had cause to remember what happened for a few weeks after that! It started to come back as we filed through the ruins of Guillemont. We had got to the end of the village. There

was a small pick-up truck pulled up on our right. One dead officer was slumped over the steering wheel. Another was lying half out of the doorway. Their faces were just beginning to turn grey, and we gathered that there had been action there, three or four days before we got there. A little further on, in the open field, two more lay dead. One was lying on his back and the other one was lying across him as though he had been talking to him till the last moment. I tried to imagine how they came to be lying in that position. As officers, they would probably have been moving forward about fifty yards apart when they fell. They would also have been good friends, and the one lying on the top had just enough strength to crawl to the other and try to comfort him till he died.

We moved on across an open field. On our left, a tank, the first I had seen, was lying on its side, deserted. Tanks, if I remember rightly, had only been used a few weeks before we got there. We knew we were getting near our destination, which turned out to be a ridge which we had to man. On the right, the trenches were on the top of the ridge, but to the left they were just over the other side, and had evidently been occupied by the Germans recently. It was on the left side that I found myself having a look at the German trenches about 200 yards away. There was not much shelling or rifle-firing for several days before we took action.

One little exciting incident happened the second day. Away to our left there was a small clump of trees in the middle of the field, such as we occasionally see in Norfolk, which surrounds a dew-pond. One afternoon we heard men shouting at the top of their voices. In fact they were men from another regiment adjoining ours on our left. Two Germans had emerged from out of that clump of tree, and were being marched in our direction by the chaps from this regiment, pointing their rifles behind the Germans' backs. How long they had been in that wood, I don't know – a week or ten days at a guess. They looked all in to me – hungry and thirsty, just strength enough to walk. It was the first time I had felt sorry for a

German. After being interrogated by our officers, they were escorted away to the nearest P.O.W. camp. For them, anyway, it meant they would be out of the fighting area.

By now, I had contacted my friend, Bob and we had swapped all the news of what had happened since we last saw each other. I had also caught sight of Ned, too, but he being an officer, our conversation could only consist of just a nod and a smile to each other! There was hardly any shelling or rifle-firing for the first week we were there. I suppose you could call it “the calm before the storm.” We guessed that something was afoot. It was.

The order came, that we were to make a raid in two days time at one o'clock. Result! The atmosphere in our trench underwent a complete change. Most of the chaps began writing letters home. The conversation was reduced to just a yes or no – a nod of the head, or shake of the head. You may wonder what our feelings were for the next few days. For my part, I hadn't any. Just one thought, would I get across; if not, I hoped it would be in the arm or leg. The cynics used to say about the Somme “Oh yes, the place where you prayed to get hit.” The fatal day arrived, warm and sunny. The morning dragged on. About 12 o'clock a chap near me pulled out his watch. “Only another hour,” he said with a grim face. Just before time he pulled it out again. “Another two minutes.” Hardly had he finished speaking when we heard a whistle from the right, and a shout, and over we went. To this day, I shall never know whether his watch was slow, or whether we went over two minutes early. If we did go over early, it would upset the timing of the “creeping barrage” of our own shells, which was supposed to be at least 200 yards ahead of us. But I do know this. After the war, I met Ned (who led us over) and he told me that we had about 50 casualties that were hit by our own shells! It could, of course, have been due to our shells accidentally falling short, as had occasionally happened before. Creeping barrages had to be timed to seconds, not minutes. As we

leaped out of our trench, we knew we were just walking targets, going to shoot at someone we had never seen, did not know, and did not hate, and who, no doubt, felt the same about us. The Germans had started to shell back at us by now. We were walking about two yards apart and carrying light packs in which were two Mills bombs.

I don't know how far I got – 50 or 100 yards, when I found myself flat on my face, as though I had tripped over a wire. What was I doing there? I had heard no shell, seen no smoke, nor smelled any, and believe it or not, was feeling no pain. I looked around, no sign of my mates, not a soul in sight anywhere. I sometimes wonder if I had a temporary blackout. I came to the conclusion that I had been hit, but where? I could see and hear and my brain seemed quite normal. I looked at my arms and down at my body, as best I could. OK so far. Perhaps it was my legs. I turned my head and looked. Instead of pointing downwards, one was twisted and pointing skywards. The other one was lifeless. In fact they both looked as if they did not belong to me. What to do next? The nearest shell-hole if I could make it. I saw the outline of one about 20 yards on my right. I raised myself on my arms, and by using them as levers simultaneously, found I could move forward about six inches at a time. My rifle? Yes, better take it with me “in case.” By pushing it forward as far as I could with my left hand and then levering myself along side of it, I found I was making headway slowly. I managed to keep it up until I got to the edge of the hole, which was as round as an egg-cup and about 4 ft. deep. On the left side lay one of my mates, stretched out, eyes closed and silent. I believe I called to him and, as I expected, got no answer. My next problem was to get in that hole and reverse my position without making my wounds worse. To this day, I do not know how I got in the position that I wanted to lie in. I have no recollection of ever making the attempt. Anyway, there I was, feeling a bit safer than lying in the open. The shelling had stopped and I was left alone with my thoughts, for what they were worth – wondering what the future held for me – would I be able to walk again, play on the village football

field, skate on our Broad again, or, terrible thought, would I lose my left leg? Anything but that! As I lay there I felt a slight pain in my back between the shoulder blades. I found out later that a small piece of shell had passed through my pack, missed the two Mills bombs, and buried itself under my skin. By the way, it never bothered me much. In fact it was there for years after the war. I can't feel it now, so I suppose it rusted away.

I had a feeling that someone would come and find me before long. I had been so lucky on three previous occasions before I left school that I now took it for granted that if ever I fell into a hole, someone would come along and pull me out. Suddenly, what was that? Footsteps, running hell for leather in my direction from the German trenches. A figure appeared on the edge of the hole. It was a young German, hands pushed forward in a diving position. No doubt it was easier to run in that position, besides making himself a smaller target. He seemed a bunch of nerves after the shelling he had had to endure. He sprang into the shell-hole and came opposite me, turned on his right side and buried his head and knees together so that I could not see his face and remained still and silent. That meant three of us out of the fighting. After a few minutes, I had occasion to move my left arm. Jerry sprang out of the hole like a "Jack-in-the-Box." Why? Of course, he thought I was going to shoot him. He had been watching me all the time out of the corner of his eye. He made straight for our lines – he got there, as I saw him later. Anyway, he was in one piece, which was more than I was. Once more I was left alone again with my thoughts, waiting for someone to come and find me. About 20 minutes later I heard voices. They were in English and getting nearer. Two figures appeared, carrying a stretcher. One was my school-mate Bob and the other was his mate (I sometimes wonder if his name was Bush). No words can describe my feeling of relief when I saw them. Bob gave me a long hard look. I knew what that look meant. Having decided that I had a good chance of survival, he and his mate put my "silent" mate onto their stretcher and went off, turning to me as he went and said "Shan't be long." Bob was always a man of action and never

wasted time on talking. About 20 minutes later they were back again and got me onto the stretcher and headed for our lines, over the ridge from where we had started from.

My first surprise was seeing a bunch of Jerrys who had given themselves up. Six or seven of them were standing near our M.O. who was attending to a casualty lying on a stretcher. Having done all he could for him, four of the Germans were detailed to take him behind our lines to the Field Ambulance, which was about a quarter of a mile away. Next he came to me, cut off my trousers, dressed and bound up my wounds, which so far I had not dared to look down at, gave me an injection, and detailed four more Jerrys to carry me back also. The Germans always carried shoulder high. That was why they needed four, whereas we had only two to a stretcher. After living like a rabbit for weeks, I felt a fine target, 6 feet in the air. The ground was a bit bumpy, but they were as careful as they could be. By the way they did not seem to be a bit sorry to have given themselves up. On the way we had to file past some of our reinforcements coming up. Behind my stretcher, following behind was the little Jerry who had been in my shell-hole with me. One of the reinforcement chaps couldn't resist the temptation to take off his tin helmet and plonk it on top of young Jerry's head.

I have only a hazy recollection of what happened during the next few hours. I remember being put on the ambulance and having a bumpy ride, after which I found myself on a train. It looked like a Guard's van that had been converted to carry stretcher-cases like myself down to the Base Hospital. There were two nurses on board, who seemed to be continually moving up and down the train, attending to the worst cases. I suppose we never realised the job these nurses had until we found ourselves helpless. No V.C.s could ever compensate them for the tasks they had to face during War I. Those that are alive today would be 85 to 90 years old by now, I suppose.

I next remember being taken on my stretcher and being placed on a bed in a marquee at the Base Hospital. I had good cause to remember what happened after I had been there a few hours. The M.O.s and nurses were busy dealing with the latest batch of casualties before my time came. The M.O.s and a nurse were at the foot of my bed, looking at my chart label. My blanket was thrown back, and the M.O. asked me if I was in the Bantam Regiment, as well he might. My broken leg was now 2 or 3 inches shorter than the other, and the thigh-bones had overlapped that much during my journey from the shell-hole. He looked at the other leg and seemed satisfied after I had told him I was in a front line regiment. He hesitated a moment, looked at the nurse. The nurse raised her eyebrows; the M.O. nodded his head. In a flash the nurse was behind me, and had locked her arms under my armpits. The M.O. grabbed my ankle and a tug-of-war ensued. As for me, the next two minutes I was yelling blue murder – the longest two minutes I shall ever remember. The M.O. went off and left the nurse to tidy me up, and wipe the perspiration from my face (or were they tears?). All I could say was “Sorry, nurse”, meaning for the yelling I had made. She did not say anything, but just gave me a pat on the head, and was gone. She was used to this sort of thing, and understood. I don’t know how long I was there – two weeks perhaps – lying on my back and being just able to raise my head and shoulders, but not enough to sit upright. I had no appetite – my tongue felt like sandpaper, and I had a vile taste in the mouth. When I looked round at some of the other cases, I considered myself lucky; at least I had hopes of getting about again.

I now had time to sum up the damage to my legs and am still wondering if a miracle happened or whether it was just plain luck. I was walking at the time and I think the shell came from my left. One lump passed through my left thigh, smashing the bone, but missed the right leg. The other lump missed my left calf and went through my right calf, but missed the two bones (tibia and fibula). The smaller piece, as stated before,

missed the two bombs, and lodged in my back. Just plain luck, or was it a miracle?

Eventually, I was considered strong enough to be moved, and sent home to England. I can just remember being put on an ambulance, but have no recalling of the journey whatever, not even being put on the Hospital Ship, until I found myself lying in the dimly-lit hold of the ship, lying alongside another stretcher case. Once again, wondering what the future held for me. An orderly came by. "What's the name of this ship, Orderly?" I asked. "The Brighton", he said. "Have you a nurse So & So on board?" (I forget her name). "Yes, why?" "Please tell her I would like to see her." He went away and I waited. About 20 minutes later, I saw the figure of a nurse bending down and reading the label tied at the foot of my stretcher. I shall never forget the look on her face as she stood up and said "Beale!" I think she could hardly believe her eyes. We chatted for about 5 or 10 minutes about the coincidence of meeting again, after what she had said a few months earlier at the Isolation Hospital. Before she went she had a good look at my legs to make sure they weren't bleeding or needed dressing. Then with a wave of the hand she said "Goodbye and good luck" and was gone.

My next recollection was being carried down the plank-way after the ship was moored up at Southampton, and being placed on the platform alongside a waiting train, with people all around helping in every way they could. My nurse came along and said a final goodbye. That was the last I ever saw of her. Sad to say, as I was lying in hospital about two months later, a newspaper was passed around in the ward. I opened it and the headlines read "Hospital Ship Brighton sunk in the channel!" What happened to my Australian nurse I shall never know. Whether she survived and finally returned to Australia, as I hope she did, is just guess-work. I have no recollection at all of the journey to London until I was lifted off the train, and placed on a waiting ambulance, and taken to a North London

station. I had good cause to remember that journey, the bumpiest ride of the lot. I wondered if the streets had been bombed. It was bump, bump, bump, groan, groan, groan, all the way. It was a relief to be placed onto the waiting Red Cross train, which seemed heavenly compared to that ambulance. Smooth-running, and nurses everywhere. The driver of that train knew what he had got on board.

It was a bright sunny day, and the train journey went on till long after dark, finally stopping at Stockport. Once again I was put onto an ambulance, and after a short ride, found myself being carried into a large hospital called "Stepping Hill" which had been taken over by the military during the war. It was to be my last journey for a long time. Broken legs and large wounds do not heal in weeks, but take months. Plus the occasional sleepless nights and an aching pain as the bone tends to unite. On one occasion my right leg had a haemorrhage. A shout, and a nurse was soon there, and had my leg up in the air, and a tourniquet round my thigh. On another occasion I had a spell of palpitation when my heart was thumping like a machine gun, and two nurses had to truss me up in hot blankets till I felt normal again.

About life in general at the hospital. The nurses were a friendly lot, capable, and always helpful in every way, which meant a lot to us who had to lie helpless for weeks on end. Also there were the local visitors, who often brought us home-made cakes and fruit. It is against the rules for nurses to have favourites in hospital, but not against the rules for patients to have favourite nurses. I had two whom I well remember – Nurse Hodson and Nurse Swallow. They were much older than I, so treated me like a younger brother, though not openly. It was their ward that I was first placed into. It was their main concern to see that my broken leg was kept fully extended to prevent the bones from overlapping. I did not realise how important this was until I got transferred to another ward, where most of the

cases here finished up by having to wear club-boots, whereas my leg was only half an inch shorter than normal.

Talking about fractured legs, there is one mystery that I have never been able to solve. Some people might say it was just a coincidence or imagination, but in the ward last mentioned, there were eleven fractured legs – all left legs. I have only one likely (or unlikely) suggestion for this. When we were in the danger area we always carried our rifle in our right hand, and in an emergency threw ourselves to the ground to the right on top of our rifle, leaving the left side of our bodies, arm and leg, exposed to anything likely to hit it.

There is little more of interest that I can say about my stay in hospital, except that I was slowly getting better. I remember the first occasion when I was lifted out of bed, and placed on a settee for an hour – the first time I, and my bed, had had daylight and an airing around us for a long time. The next step was to be lifted into a wheel-chair – my splint sticking out in front – so that I was able to wheel myself up and down the ward, and talk to my mates, and also go out in the grounds outside the hospital. After that I had to get used to two crutches; later two sticks. By now I was able to walk to the nearest tram-stop, and get to the nearest picture-house. Trams and cinemas were all free to us in hospital uniform. After I got home, discharged from the army, I had a special splint made to prevent my knee from going backwards, but after a few months discarded this, as I found that, with care, I could manage without it.

Concluding the story of my experiences during my spell in World War I, I hope I haven't given the impression that I was any kind of a hero – far from it – I was not that type. It is a story that thousands of other chaps who got back to England alive could have written.

W. W. Beales

SEPTEMBER 1982

This is just another one of my experiences during World War I.

I and a few of my pals were involved in a bad “accident” on the Somme in the autumn of 1916. It was about three weeks later that I was able to be moved to England and found myself in a large hospital called “Stepping Hill”, which had been taken over by the military during the war. It was on the outskirts of Stockport. I was quite happy there – if it is happy to be in hospital. The nurses were kind and efficient and the local residents visited us about twice a week, and brought us cakes and fruit. Indeed I made many friends while I was there – nearly a year in fact.

But to come to the main point of my story. It was during the latter end of my stay there that I made the acquaintance of one particular visitor whom I shall always remember. She was a “lady of means”, well-to-do, and lived in Bramhall Lane, where the more “better-off” residents lived. Let’s call her Mrs. H. It was about two months before I came out of hospital that I first made contact with her. I was sitting on my bed, having discarded my wheelchair and crutches, and was getting about on two sticks at the time. She was inviting a party of five patients to her home the next Sunday to have tea. Would I make one of the party? You bet I would! The other four chaps I only knew slightly, but they were a friendly lot. Not one of us were born in the same county, though.

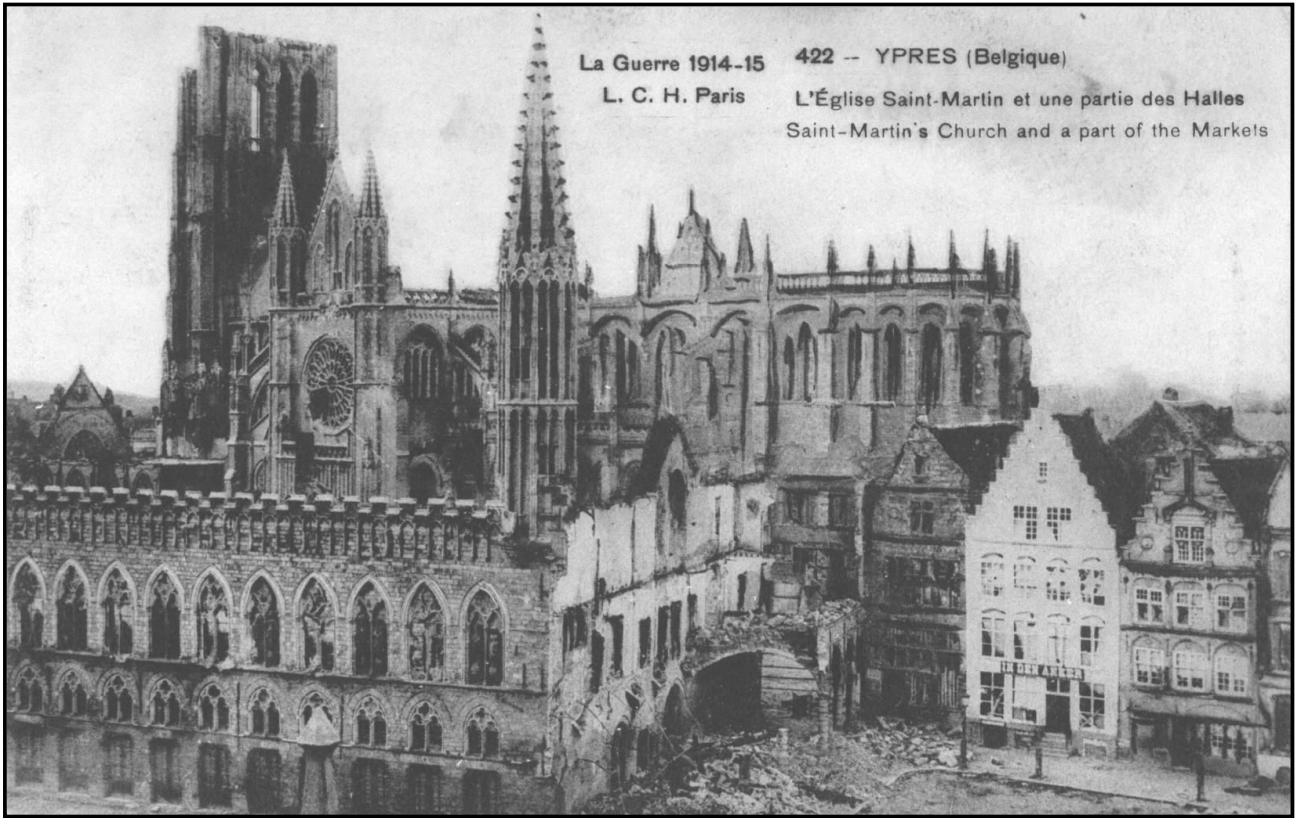
The taxi arrived after lunch the next Sunday and we arrived at her very nice home in Bramhall Lane, where she met us. We were introduced to her husband who had business ties in Manchester, and to her daughter – her name was Molly – well-educated of course – about fifteen years old. She played the piano and also recited to us after the tea-hour. Of course we all had to do a lot of talking, you bet – not having hardly met before. The next Sunday we came again and met her son who was home on leave,

before going to France. He shook hands with us all. He was what you might call a “fine type of officer.”

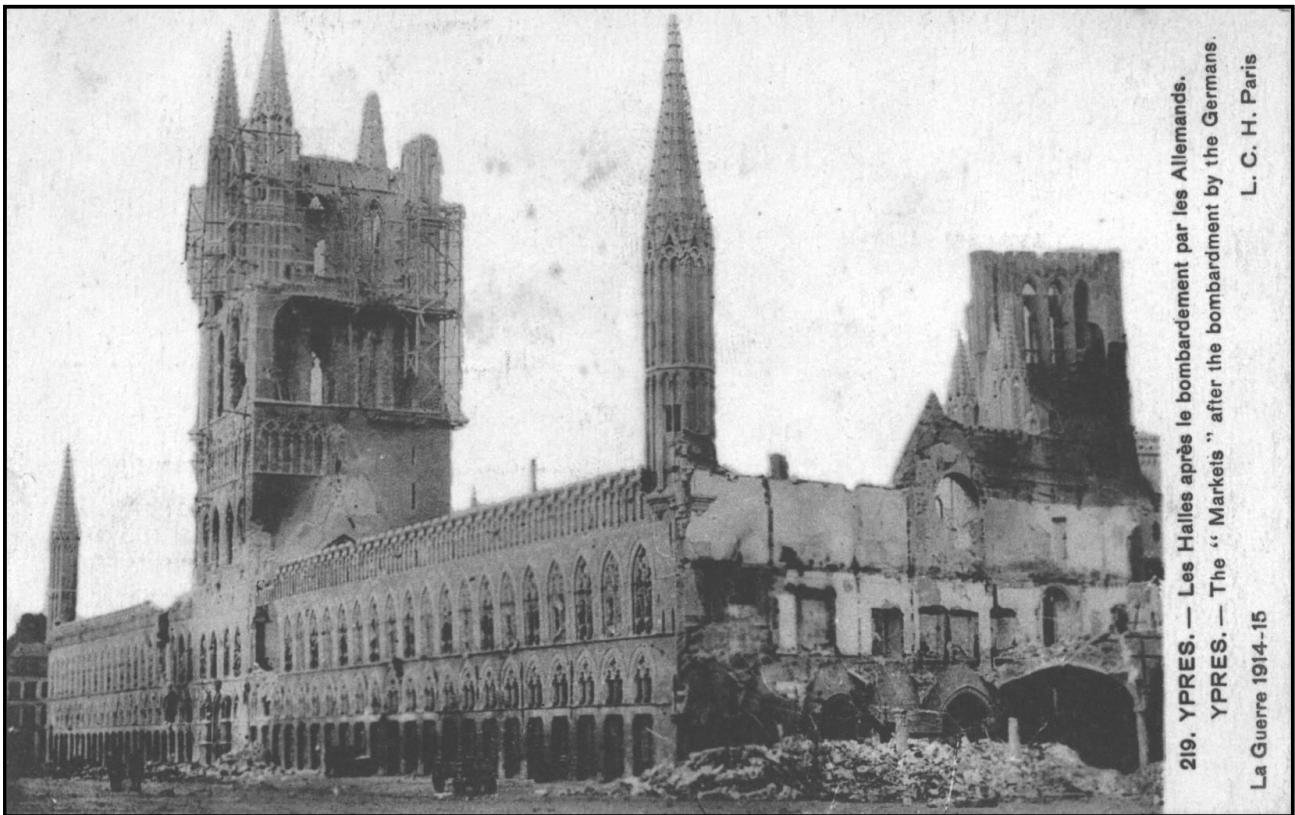
I think it would be about two weeks before we were all due to leave hospital that we all arrived there as usual, but no Mrs. H. to meet us at the gate. We just wondered why, I suppose, and stepped towards the door. The door opened and Mr. H. came out with a very serious look on his face. Then the shock came. He had had a letter the day before to say his son had been Killed in Action. We stood there and all of us felt a bit guilty about going in, but Mr. H. insisted that we did. There was no Mrs. H. in the room, of course. She was in another room, no doubt nursing her grief. The afternoon passed very quietly – we spoke in undertones – no playing on the piano by Molly. She brought in the tea, and shortly after that we were due to leave. There is one thing we knew we had to do before leaving, and that was to say goodbye and thank her for all she had done for us. We each went in, in turn. I being the youngest went in last. She was sitting in her armchair holding her head in her hands trying to hide the tears that were running down her face. I stood there for a moment, not knowing quite what to do. I knew if I overdid the “sympathy act”, the tears would only flow faster. I went forward and took her hand, told her how sorry we all were, and thanked her for all she had done for us. She had been as much a mother as a friend to us while we were in hospital. I turned away to leave her alone. As I did so, she dropped her hands, raised her head and shook it slowly from side to side and then said something I shall never forget. “I knew it, I knew it, I knew he would never come back!” I had no answer to that, and slowly moved towards the door. I had to! A lump had started to come in my throat. I closed the door, thinking I might never see her again, as we were all due to leave hospital in a few days, and go our different ways.

But I was wrong! Thirteen years later I was sitting indoors, the war forgotten, planning the next job. There was a knock on the door. It was my nephew. “There are two ladies at the top of the path who would like to see

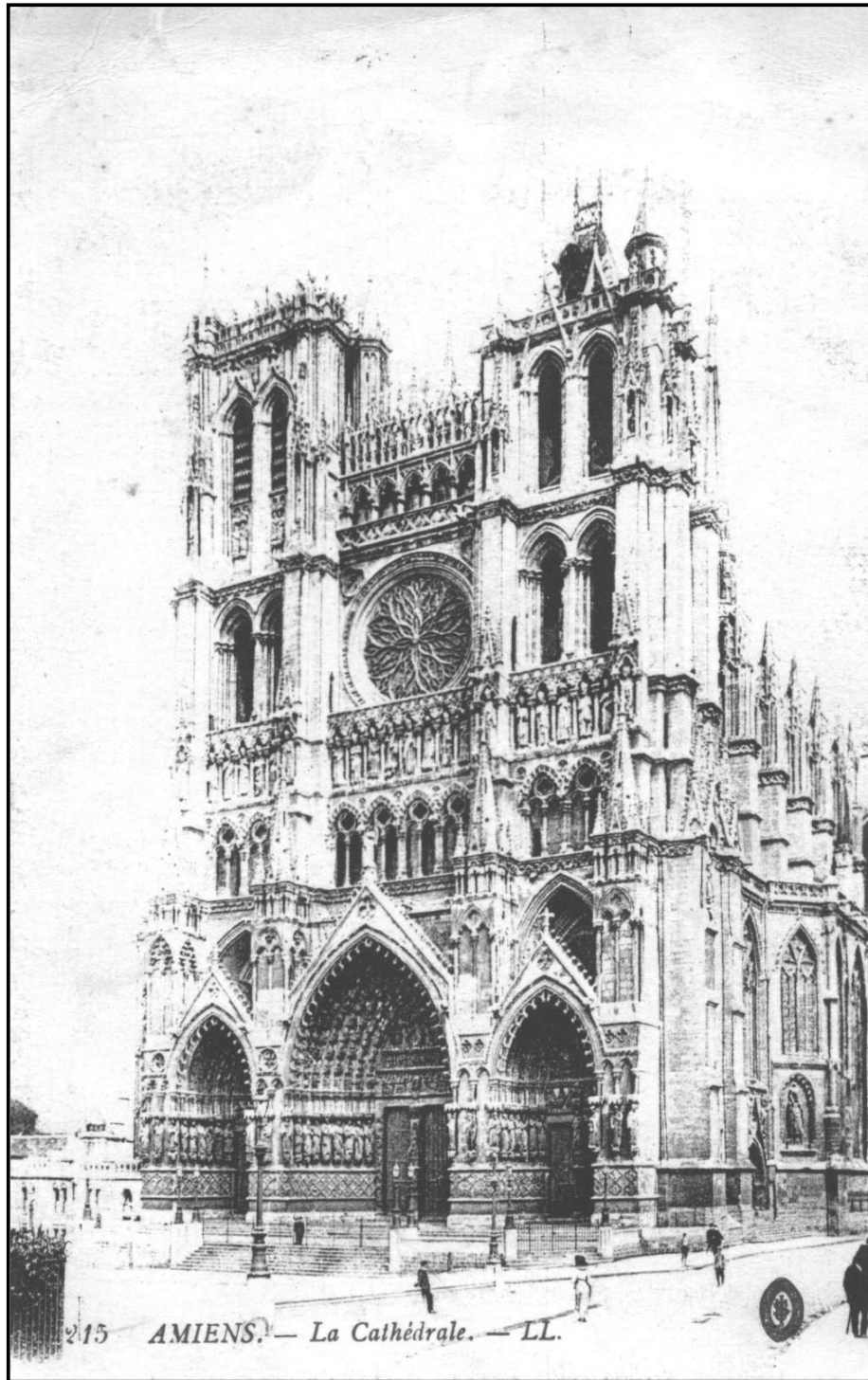
you.” I went out wondering who they could be. I was just staggered to find it was Mrs. H. and her daughter Molly. They had come miles out of their way, just to see how I was getting on. As soon as I recovered from the shock, we talked non-stop about the times we had at Stockport, etc. etc. They were going on to Yarmouth, I think, so could not stop too long. It made my day, anyway, just to see them. They both looked much the same as I last saw them at Stockport. I have no doubt that Mrs. H. and her husband have passed away by now. Her daughter would be in her seventies by now, and I hope still alive, married, and settled down under another name. All I have now is a snapshot left of Mrs. H. with myself standing beside her, while I was still at Stockport.



“This Photo gives a fair idea of what place looks like, it a bit more knocked about now”

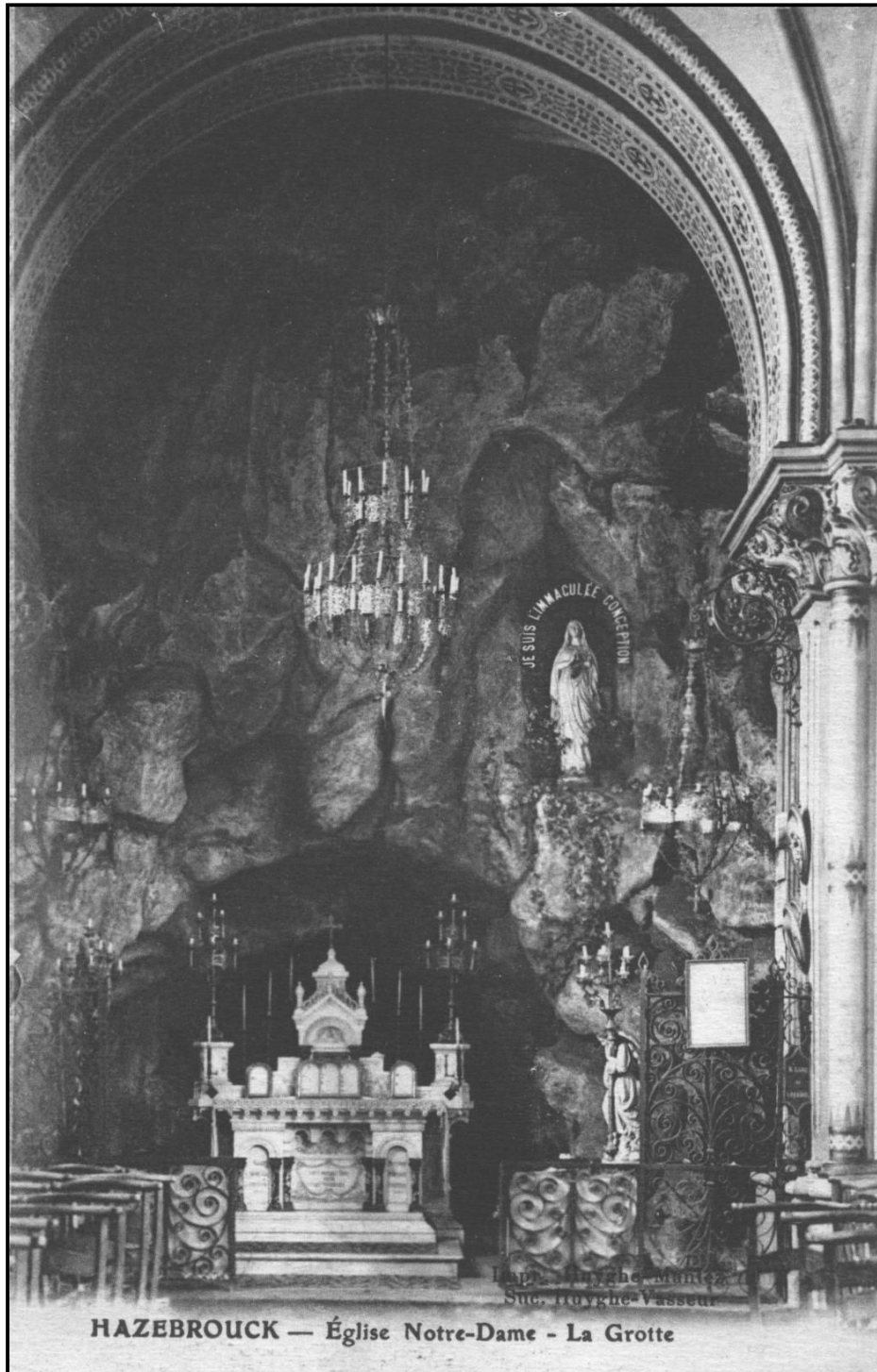


“Through this square we used to toddle to get to the trenches & one night it was a bit hot with shells & was all on fire”

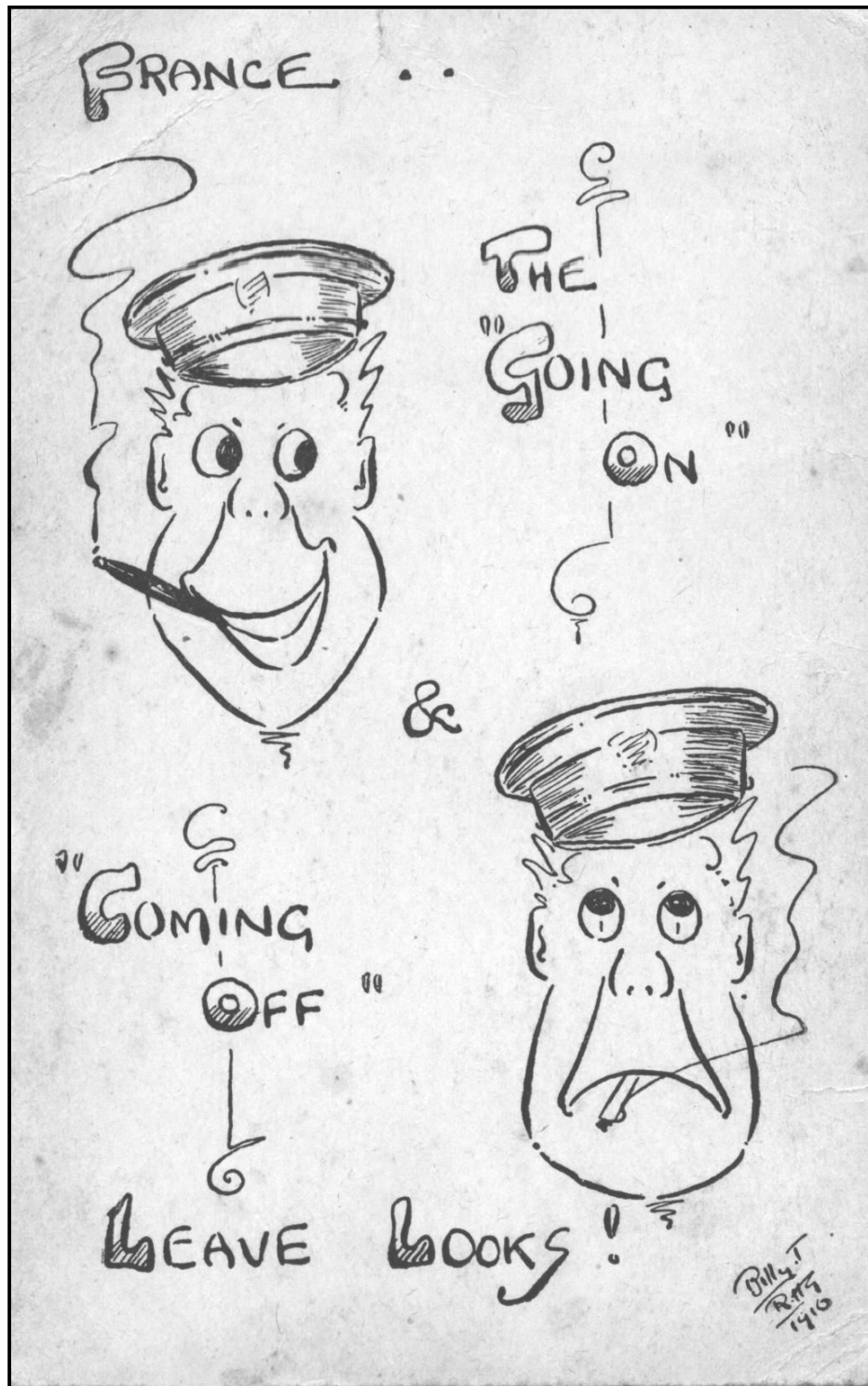


*Postcard addressed to:
Mrs Markin, The Green, Hickling, Norwich, Norfolk.
Franked in red "Passed Sensor" - Unable to decipher Postmark*

"Dear All, Received your letter this morn everything going on
A.1. Had a long ride yesterday so bit tired today. Love to all
Yours Bill"



“This is town near where we were trench digging last week
& was the place we detrained after our journey from Rouen.
They are all Catholic churches. & very religious”



“Dear A. K. Sorry I forgot to wish you Many Happy Returns in letter. Hope this won't be late. Having rotten weather now. Bill”