

## Battle of Neuve Chapelle

In the Field

20.3.15.

Dear Mother & Father

I have just got out of our trenches & am quite fit though rather tired in consequence of the last seven days constant strain on one's nerves. However I am now in a position to tell you of all my experiences. As you can gather from my last letter we have been continually moving from billet to billet, gradually moving forward & marching by night. We arrived at the front on the night of the eleventh & slept out in the open in rear of some trenches that we had captured the previous day. We were told that we would attack at dawn on the 12<sup>th</sup>. The Bois de Biez just E. of Neuve Chapelle was our object & we were to make a frontal attack with two brigades. However at 5 o'clock on the early morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> the Germans opened a terrible artillery fire on us with Jack Johnson's & shrapnel & caused us several casualties including Capt. Campbell. They delivered a very severe counter attack on our line with two or even three brigades of Infantry. But we opened fire on them with machine guns & rifle fire backed up with our artillery which stopped them dead not nearer than forty yards from our trenches. Report came down that the line was broken & my company charged to support the line. Murray-Lyon was in command & we covered the ground under very heavy artillery fire, but lost pretty slightly considering. I got to the trench first with Murray-Lyon behind me & we occupied the front trench which the Gurkhas were occupying, but the attack was completely repulsed & there were some five or six hundred dead Germans in front & the rest turned about & some got away but not many. Two other attacks were made on our line but our Artillery stopped them from debouching from the Bois de Biez. About 10 a.m. we rushed the trench in front from the flank with bombers & drove them out taking a hundred & sixty prisoners, &

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calling the same number by enfilade fire from our trenches. The prisoners all came through our lines to the rear, a motley crew, two officers amongst them. Some were young & thin others quite clean & well developed men. They said they had been completely surprised & were glad to be taken. We saw one German put up the white flag & let a Gurka come up to him & then shot him. One of their officers was shooting his own men when they wouldn't make a stand, & finally seeing all was over, he took out his revolver & blew his own brains out. That is a good example of their officers. We were all longing to charge the Bois de Biez but were not allowed to of course, as no preparation had been made. About 11 a.m. however our Artillery concentrated a terrific fire on the Bois de Biez & shelled it through & through. The hostile Artillery had quietened down by then. Then came the time for our attack. I was in command of D. Company as Murray-Lyon was wounded while going to receive <sup>his</sup> orders. I was in local support of B. Coy. following 300' in rear in two lines of two platoons each. A & B. Coys. were the first two coys. to advance. I must mention that the Bois de Biez had been attacked previous to this by the Meerut Division, but they could not get through it owing to the left being held up. The Germans were now considerably reinforced both in Artillery & machine guns which were placed all along the front of the Bois de Biez. Also the German line bent inwards towards us so that they enfiladed our attack unless our left kept well up, which as it turned out they did not do. The Jullandar Brigade were on our left in touch with us, but their attack did not develop until late in the day, owing to their suffering very heavily from Artillery fire. However we attacked & A & B. Coys. passed over my trench towards the Bois de Biez. It was a great attack but never have I seen or experienced such a fire as they put into us. As our boys rushed on, one by one dropped until they eventually had to advance by

crawling. Our losses were very heavy & there were not many left of A & B Coys. when they reached the first line of trenches. C. Coy. came up level with me & they lost a hundred & fifty men in doing so as the fire was terrible. I then started to support B. Coy. & sent up a platoon telling them to crawl the whole way. Some of them got across the 300' open under that fire but the losses were terrible. A & B Coys. tried to advance again but the fire thinned them out & it was found to be hopeless. As our left had not come up at all, our Brigade stood fast for further orders. We held the ground we had won but the Yullunder Brigade had lost half their men before starting their attack, so could not get up. Thus we were told to hold on with our left flank exposed & the Germans in a continuation of the trench we had won. Our toll of officers was terrible, all my best chums gone. Killed — Cpts. Campbell, Walker, Lieuts. Everard, Close, Clague, ~~McClean~~, Cox & Payne. Wounded — Cpts. Knight, Inglis, Halswelle. Lieuts. Parr, Murray, Lyon & Gibbs. Our total casualties being 14 officers killed & wounded & 450 men killed & wounded. Well it was a great attack but was known to be rather hopeless as the Bris de Biez was very strongly held & could be only captured by two enveloping attacks & holding the front. Well, I then relieved A & B Coy in the trenches we had won & we worked day & night strengthening them & now they are the best trenches I have been in. We have got dug outs & all kinds of luxuries, all done by our men. We got praised by the Brigadier for our work & he was very pleased with us. The Germans have been shelling us continually with big guns & now there is little left of Neuve Chapelle except a mass of ruins. It was a great victory for the Allies as this village is a very important point & it was unfortunate being held up at the Bris de Biez as we could then have pushed through. I have not experienced anything like this show & I had some pretty near shaves but got through

in the end safe & sound. We gave the Germans a bad beating & although our casualties were heavy, theirs were far more, as can be seen by the corpses round here. We buried all our officers & most of the men. I hope we shall get some rest now as we have done our work. The men did magnificently & their bravery deserves reward.

Such a charge under that fire could never have been attempted by any except the British. The men are in great spirits & are glad to get some of their own back.

It is snowing to-day but we have been very lucky in the weather. I hope leave will be re-opened soon but I am afraid not.

With love to all etc etc.

John Robert Cowan

had been abandoned, and the guns were withdrawn during the night. At 9.40 p.m. to assist in pressing the attack more vigorously, a composite brigade was placed at the disposal of the Lahore Division, and was ordered to

J. R. Cowan

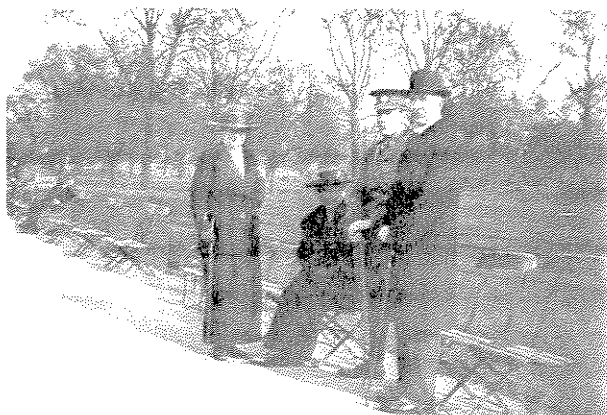


H. Cowan.



S<sup>r</sup> James' Park  
London  
April 10<sup>th</sup> 1915.

L.H.C. E.M.C.



H.C. R.W.C.

had been abandoned, and the guns were with-  
drawn during the night. At 2.40 p.m., to  
assist in pressing the attack more vigorously,  
a composite brigade was placed at the disposal