

The War Years

① I well remember the Declaration of War as we were staying with Uncle Dick and Auntie Mary at Dale Head (near Whiston, midway between Peak Forest and Tideswell) over the August Bank Holiday. On walking to Tideswell on Tuesday August 4th. we heard that Germany had been issued with an ultimatum to expire at 11 pm that evening.

You must imagine what life was like in those days with no television and no radio. Very few people were on the telephone even and we were completely cut off in the heart of the country so we had to walk over to Tideswell again on the morning of the 5th. to get the news. Dad went back to Manchester at once and we followed a few days later.

A Moratorium was declared and all the Banks were closed for four days. Fortunately we had some money to last us for a short time, but many people were in a real mess without ready cash. Nobody quite realised what we were in for but all the young men were in a ferment and were either joining the Territorials or Kitchener's first 100,000. The Territorials were soon full up and started 2nd line regiments, the 6th Manchester. Ardwick being very popular with the clerks and businessmen of Manchester and went to form the 42nd and 66th Divisions along with the 7th and 8th Battalions Lancashire Fusiliers from Cross Lane and Broughton. I remember one morning in September about 5.30am hearing martial music from afar and dressing to dash out to Pendlebury to see the Lancashire Fusiliers marching off to camp at Littleborough.

I was 16½ at the time and can best be described by some poetry written at about the time:

'And me with my head chock full of fighting,
and the blood of Vikings to thrill my veins'.

I was desperately anxious that the war would not finish before I could get into it.

① However, it was back to school for me. The Army was not allowed to accept anyone under the age of 19, though many slipped in. My pal Burke joined the Royal Irish Rifles and got as far as Dublin from where he was unceremoniously yanked back by his father. One boy of 15½ was at Gallipoli. The first thing we did when we got back to school was to join the O.T.C. and we drilled after school on the Blue Coats ground at the rear of the buildings. On Saturdays we had field days, often at the back of Irlam-on-the-Heights on the ground sloping to the Irwell.

② So passed the time until Matric exams in July, after I had worked harder than ever in my life. I did four hours studying every night and worked all Sunday as Dad had said that if I passed I could join the Army. Well, I passed, and was offered a commission in the Hampshire Regiment but Dad said I was too young and not experienced enough. He insisted that I join the Inns of Court O.T.C. in London first. It was a good job that I didn't join the Hampshires as a few weeks after they were sent out with the expedition to Basra and Mesopotamia and how on earth I would have stood the heat I don't know. It was very excessive and not my style at all. Nearly all went down with dysentery. One of my friends, Collisson, who fell ill and was taken down the Tigris lying on the open deck, said the place was an absolute shambles as they were defecating where they lay and the stench was unbelievable. However, when I went down to London with Dad for an interview at the Inns of Court (introduced by one of the leading barristers, Scott) they were very sorry but they had just been told not to enrol any more men as they were being turned into a 'Cadet School'. These were just being formed by the Army to train men for commissions and were the only way

you could get one, either entering from the Army or an O.T.C. But, the minimum age was eighteen and you had to show your birth certificate. There were many Cadet Schools formed and of Battalion strength, organised accordingly and the training lasting four months while they gradually weeded out the unsatisfactory ones, physically and mentally. Then the successful ones had to sit an examination, having to pass this and another in field work.

So, meantime, I went to work at James Boyd and Son. They wouldn't take you in the Army as a private unless you were nineteen but I did find out that, as soon as I was eighteen, I could join the R.F.C. ground staff. I wasn't particularly keen on this but when I told Dad that I was going to join he said the best thing that I could do was to join the Manchester University O.T.C. who ran a full-time training course from where you could go onto a Cadet School. So, in April of 1916 I joined up.

The bulk of the men were considerably older than I was, most of them being solicitors, accountants, businessmen, etc. There were three permanent officers, a sergeant-major and several sergeants together with about twelve lance-corporals from the ranks. With my previous training at the school O.T.C. I was soon promoted to lance-corporal and spent my time drilling the men and generally knocking them into shape. It was very good training for me and at last I was sent to Cadet School in November at Newmarket, about three miles out near Snailwell. We were housed in huts, about thirty men to a hut and in which there was one coke stove in the centre and beds along each side. Our Company Commander was ex-Indian Army. He had lost his arm earlier in the war and was really fiery and a very strict disciplinarian. Our own particular hut sergeant, Brassey, from the L.F.s, was a terror; I hated that man more than anybody else. We were treated as privates and had to do everything - fatigues, guard duty, etc., as well as drill and night and day operations and study.

Reveille was at 6am and you then had half an hour of either P.T. or running. You shaved and washed in cold water in the open, then cleaned your equipment, breakfasted at 7.30am and paraded from 8.15am to 12.15pm. After lunch it was parade again from 1.30pm to 4.30/5pm, then a main meal at 6pm and study later on. On Saturdays we finished at noon and we could then walk into Newmarket when I would take the opportunity of having a hot bath at one of the hotels. I think it was 1/- including clean towels, a lot of money on 6d per day but our only chance unless you had one in the open and in cold water, as there was no hot water laid on.

Up to this time I had been rather fussy about my food, not being at all partial to meat. In fact, when in Manchester I went to a vegetarian restaurant, both from school and work. However, you either ate the food, mostly stews, or you went hungry. So I ate it. But after a couple of weeks I broke out in boils, about three in various places. Soon after I was given typhoid and tetanus injections and either the same day or the next had the boils lanced and given M.D. The weather was very cold and on parade next morning I passed out, so they gave me that day in bed but had to be on parade again the following day.

I was the only Englishman in our hut, the rest being Scots. They were a very nice crowd; one or two from Aberdeen were so broad I had the greatest difficulty in making out what they said.

As usual in my Army career I was the baby of the group, but, as always, they were all very decent to me and I can honestly say that none of them took advantage of my inexperience or tried to lead me astray in any way. I was friendly with a young man from Glasgow and we generally went out together, picking up with the main bunch at about 10pm at the pub they frequented, as most of them were hardened drinkers. However, they never tried to get us drinking and we would all walk back to camp together.

It was a very cold winter and snow was on the ground for practically the whole of the four month training period. At Xmas we were given four days leave, the only leave we got until we passed out at the end of March. Those of us who had passed the course held a celebration dinner at a small hotel in Snailwell and, as was customary in those days, everybody had to contribute a turn to the entertainment. Some of the turns were really excellent. 'Opportunity Knocks' had nothing on them.

We were allowed to state our preference for any regiment we wanted, but the Army did not guarantee that you would get your choice. I opted for the Lancashire Fusiliers and was fortunate to get my choice. After a short leave I was posted to the 3rd Battalion at the Reserve Depot at Withernsea, near Hull, where 2nd Lieutenants were the lowest form of life and ten a penny. However, I was there for only a few weeks before being sent on embarkation leave, crossing to France on May 26th 1917 along with about forty others from the Depot. We had embarked at Folkestone but our departure was put off for several hours owing to enemy submarine activity in the Channel. We arrived at Calais in the early evening in the middle of an air raid. Although several bombs fell near us as we were disembarking nobody was hit. I was directed to stay at the Hotel Sauvage for the night only to find on my arrival that the whole place was deserted. A bomb had exploded in the street at the rear of the hotel, causing considerable damage. The entire staff of the hotel had retreated to the cellars and had no intention of coming out. So we foraged around for ourselves, had a very good meal, chose our own bedrooms and retired to rest.

27/5
When we awoke next morning everything was functioning as usual and we received orders to go down to the 'Bull Ring' at Etaples. This was the place to which all reinforcements were sent, afterwards being distributed to the various Battalions and Divisions. It had a very bad name with the O.R. for drill and discipline, but we only had a day or so there before being sent on. I visited Le Touquet one afternoon and it was there I made my first acquaintance with our 'Loyal and Ancient Ally' the Portuguese, in the form of the advance party of their contingent. I wasn't very impressed by them but more later.

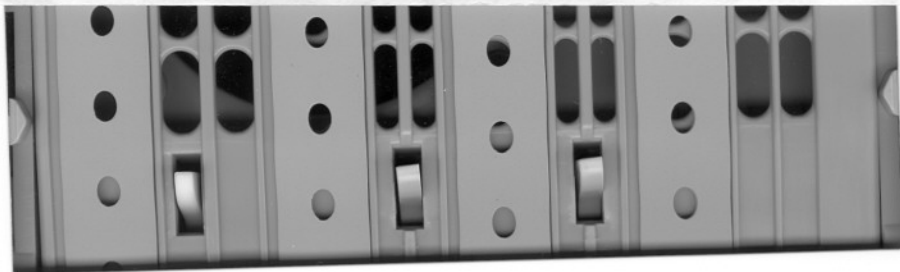
29/5
I travelled up to Bailleul on my own, arriving at about midnight on the 31st May. Fortunately, the 9th Battalion, which I was joining, had sent a wagon down to meet me and I arrived in camp near Westoutre at about two or three in the morning. I dosed down where I could for the night in my sleeping bag. They let me sleep-in in the morning and later, when I had reported to the Adjutant, I was allocated to 'W' Company.



The first time I met my brother officers was at lunch and they asked me what I would like to drink. Of course I said 'water please', at which they laughed and said I wouldn't last long on that. Well, I took one drink and that was enough. It was heavily chlorinated, by order and it was foul. So I asked what there was to drink, the answer being whiskey and soda or French beer, the latter being very weak. So I asked for beer and that was the first alcoholic drink I had ever had, there being no option. Later I had some lemonade powders sent out but they were very synthetic and hardly drowned the chlorine so I eventually drifted onto whiskey. Of course, you could have tea but I normally didn't drink it and the Army's Sergeant Major tea was hardly likely to make me change my mind. It was a hard school for a youth of just nineteen but no one ever encouraged me to drink, although you could have as much as you wanted at any time so long as you were totally fit to do your duty. That was adamant and no excuses were accepted - you held your drink as a gentleman or were for it. Fortunately we were very fit as we were out of doors in all weathers and alcohol certainly helped us to relax and stand the strains of the terrible conditions we often had to live in. It certainly taught me never to abuse alcohol and to control it's intake. Maybe you are better to be teetotal but alcohol has given me quite a lot of pleasure in life - the lesson is always to be in control of it, never let it be in control of you. I have seen too much unhappiness that way.

About the same time I started smoking, although up to that time, in contrast to many boys, I had never done so. My Uncle Dick gave me a pipe and tobacco and told me to start on these if I ever did take smoking up. And it was the best way to do so as I never started to inhale, so that when I started to smoke cigarettes after dinner I didn't inhale either. It is the inhaling which causes most of the trouble from smoking, and as I did not do so I was able to break off the habit of smoking at any time without much difficulty. There again I was determined that no habit was going to get control of me and I think I have stuck to that all my life.

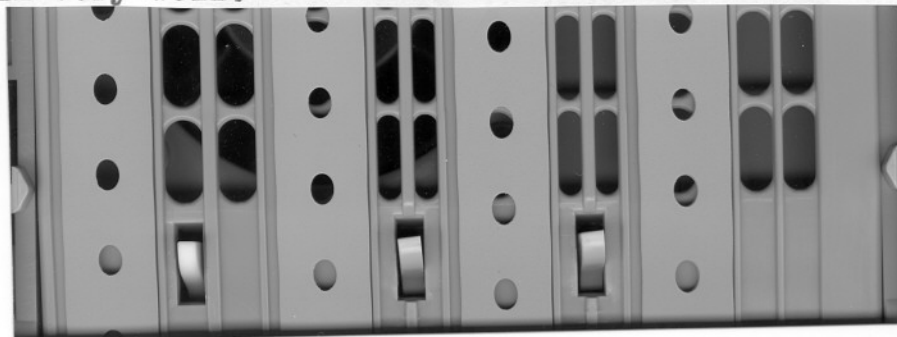
Now, to my brother officers. The Company Commander was Capt. J.F. T.P. Ward McInaid, a very flashy and vain man of whom you will hear much more later but who left about four weeks later for England to go on a Senior Officers' Course. The 2nd in command was Lieut. Jack Hayes MC who had been a regular Sergeant Major and promoted to 2nd Lieut. at Gallipoli. It was here that our 11th Division had taken part in the Suvla Bay landing. Jack received his MC for his part in the battle of the Somme at Mouquet Farm.



To digress I should tell you that the 9th Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, was one of the first Kitchener's Army Battalions to be formed and most of the officers as well as all the NCOs were regulars, which accounted for the strict discipline which was always maintained and the excellent running of the Battalion.

But to get back to Jack Hayes. He was a most colourful character, aged about forty and not one of the best from many points of view but he was a soldier and I learnt more from him about how to run a company than I could have done from anyone else. According to him he had first enlisted many years before in the Manchester Regiment, only to desert and enlist later in the Lancashire Fusiliers under the name of Jack Hayes, which name he had seen on the back of a fruiterer's cart as he entered the recruiting station. In the 1st Battalion he became an NCO being promoted to Company Sergeant Major when the 9th was formed. When Ward McInaid left for England Jack was promoted to Captain and took command of the company which he ruled with a rod of iron. He was a terrible man for drink and lust but he never did me any harm and I learnt a lot from him. He added a bar to his MC later at Ypres and, I believe, survived the war. According to one friend he opened up a grocer's shop in Colleyhurst after the war but I never saw or heard of him again.

Then there was A.M. Inglis, aged about 23/4, a really nice fellow; he earned his MC at Ypres in the same action as Jack Hayes won his bar. Also Charlie Melling, an actor, who had won an MC earlier with the 11th Battalion; he was just a few weeks older than I was. Tim Healey from Warrington was another; he later won an MC with the French Mortars. He and I were very pally and were referred to as 'the Babes'. He later captained Liverpool University at Rugby and became a doctor. So, you can see that there was plenty of talent in 'W' Company; I should say it was the best that I was ever to be in. There was also another chap whose name I forget but who later became the Registrar at Broughton, Salford, but he was knocked out in my first action at Messines so I never knew him very well.



27

5/6

We stayed a few days at Westoutre, during which time we had sports. I rather fancied my chances in the 100 yards race for Officers but was beaten by about three yards by A.E.R.Gilligan of 'Z' Company. He later became the England and Sussex cricket Captain when Maurice Tate was in his heyday. On the night of the 6/7th June we moved up to the front near the Chinese Wall, to be held in reserve for the attack on the Messines Ridge, a not more than 200 foot rise which commanded a view of all the plain around Ypres and which had to be in our hands before the big Ypres offensive could be mounted later in the summer. Otherwise the Germans would have been able to see our every move and it would have been impossible for us to mass our artillery and men for the attack. The Ridge and forward slopes were strongly fortified with trenches and dug-outs right up to our own trenches at the foot. A lot of mining and counter-mining had been going on. At 3.30am on the 7th all hell was let loose, about twenty mines exploding together, one crater was about forty feet across. The front divisions, the 25th (in which was our 11th Battalion) and Royal Irish and Royal Ulster, broke through and captured the Ridge and well down the slope on the other side, engulfing the whole of the German trench system there. So we were not required in the final assault, which was supposed to be our job if required. We advanced to the top of the Ridge where the Ypres-Messines road ran along through what had been the village of Wytchaete, but which was just a mass of ruins now. We came in for very heavy shelling here as the Germans put down a barrage to prevent us reinforcing the forward troops. This was the first time I had been under fire, but I was too busy getting my platoon under what cover there was to feel any fright. When the barrage slackened a bit we dashed over the road and forward to the edge of the Ouster-ven wood, where we were ordered to halt and dig-in to provide a trench line for our forward troops to retire to if the German counter-attack made any progress. I should say now that just short of the crest was a very deep and large dug-out which the Germans had used as a rest and first-aid post. It was from here that I took the packet of first-aid labels I have now.

As soon as the shelling had started Ward McInaid had dived down this particular dug-out and was not seen again during these operations, having the Company Headquarters about twenty feet below ground.

I got my length of trench marked out and started the men digging. When we had got about a foot down the Boche started shelling again but this time a shrapnel barrage, bursting right overhead, the bullets



spattering on the road about sixty to one hundred yards to our rear. The men took cover at once, thinking that I must have been mad, especially when I just stood there and told them to get on digging. I explained to them that we were in the safest place as, if the shrapnel was bursting overhead, it burst forward and the danger spot was the road. So, by the time the next big barrage was put down when the Germans started their big counter-attack, we were in quite reasonable cover about four feet down and with a good parapet. The parapet was made by putting soil at the front of the trench, and the parados by putting it at the back.

Every officer was provided with a servant and a runner. It was the runner's job to stay at Command HQ and bring any orders or messages, and to take mine back. I was much amazed when, at the height of the barrage, my runner came through with three messages,

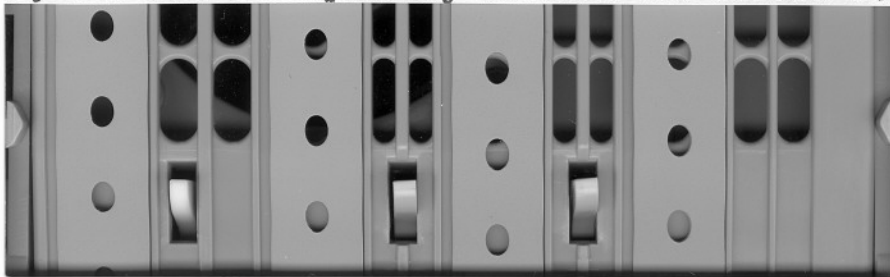
- 1) how many men under my command had married Belgian wives?
- 2) my weekly return of jam jars had not been sent in, and
- 3)

As soon as the barrage began I gave the order to 'stand to' and to take as much cover in the trench as possible. After about twenty minutes the barrage stopped as their counter-attack had failed. I gave the order to 'stand down' and then, about ten minutes later, came the order from Command HQ to 'stand to', which I ignored. I was learning fast.

We lay down to sleep where we were. At about 2am I was wakened by the officer on duty (the one whose name I have forgotten) to take over. Within about fifteen minutes heavy shelling started and, as I made my way down the trench, found that a direct hit had blown-up the little shelter erected by the late duty officer and that he was completely buried. However, we dug him out and, though he was hardly hurt, he was badly shell-shocked and never came out to the front again.

The next day was beautiful and hot. We finished putting the trench in order and, as some of the shell holes had joined together and filled with water, I had a very enjoyable bathe in one.

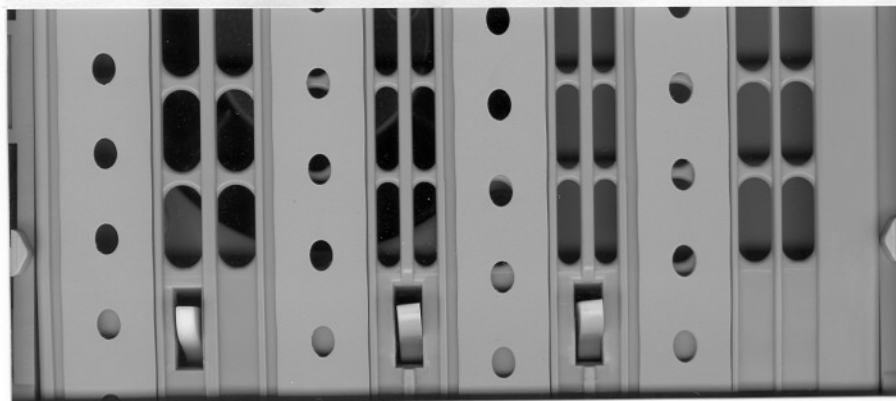
146 We were therefor a few days consolidating and acting as supports in case of German attempts to recapture our positions, but nothing much happened. I had been a bit anxious as to how I should conduct myself under fire but I seemed to have done alright as the men appeared to have every confidence in me. As one of our duties we were expected to censor all our mens letters and I was quite bucked when one man wrote to his wife 'thank goodness we now have an officer who knows what he is doing'. I believe they had had a completely useless one before me.



10/16
7/16
My servant was a chap called Bird, not the brightest. On my first morning in the Battalion he had wanted to know where my washstand was. I explained that I had not got one but that a bucket would do and that there were some horse lines about one hundred yards away. He got the idea and there was a bucket the next day. I had it all through the war and brought it back with me. The Government allowed you £30 to kit yourself out with but I had been well primed not to spend it on many things like washstands, etc. which they laid down as necessary, as the allowance wouldn't run to it and they were invariably lost or damaged on active service.

20/6
21/6
22/6
On the 19th we left Wytschaete and were on the march for several days until we settled at Hellebroncq on the 24th. The weather was very hot and we used to start marching about 6am, continuing until about noon when we would settle in some small village for the rest of the day and night, the men mostly in the barns while the officers generally slept in our flea-bags on the floor in the farmhouse. I know that when we arrived at Hellebroncq I was billeted in a cottage and had a bedroom with a feather bed - I thought I was in heaven.

8/7
We were at Hellebroncq until July 1st, refitting and training. Then we went to Meutque and La Ronville where we took up permanent quarters in the farms for the next three weeks. Here we had the whole of the Ypres front (which we were scheduled to attack on August 1st) laid out on the ground and we had to practice our attacks on the Langenarck - Tonnebec road and over the Steerbeek, not much more than a ditch, with the strong points at Rat House and White House. Each company was allotted it's front and we had to go over it time after time, being held up by German strong points as shown by the air photographs, and taking the correct tactics. Each platoon had four sections, one being a Lewis gun and another the rifle bombs. As soon as you came under enemy fire the whole platoon got down on their tummies and, while the outside section pushed out on each flank, they were given covering fire by the two middle sections. Then the middle sections, composed of the Lewis gun and bombers, rushed forward under covering fire from the flanks. This procedure was



repeated until the position was outflanked and the enemy were either overwhelmed or forced to retreat. It was beautiful weather and we quite enjoyed ourselves as we were well behind the lines and could sleep safely at night.

One day we held a Divisional Race Meeting to which we went by bus. As Healey was acting as Assistant Transport Officer we had the offer of two mules to ride the fifteen or so miles back to camp. We came back through Hellebroncq, visiting our late respective billets. Having got my mule in a narrow stable when I came to get it out I had a terrible time as a mule does not kick like a horse but does so sideways, backwards and anyways. This one thoroughly enjoyed himself. However, I eventually got it out and, having mounted, set off. When we were only halfway through the village both mules stopped and refused to budge. They were abreast of their old transport lines and were determined to go no further. So we had to pocket our dignity and get off and lead them. After about two hundred yards and a hectic struggle we mounted again. They still went very reluctantly until they smelt their new lines when they set off at a gallop and we finished in fine style. I thus learnt the saying 'as stubborn as a mule'.

15/7
27
A bit of a rumpus occurred at this time when a subaltern in 'Z' Company, who had been promoted from the ranks and though not a bad fellow was definitely out of his class, was ordered to come before a subaltern's court martial accused of frequenting the sergeants' canteen and drinking with the other ranks. All subalterns were ordered to be present by the senior subaltern. A.E.R. Gilligan, Healey and I refused to attend as we considered it rather snobbish and that the matter could have been dealt with more easily and quietly. This was considered to be leze-majesty and the Signalling Officer (Fletcher, a nasty piece of work) was sent with another officer to bring us before the court, both of them acting in a very threatening manner. However, A.W. Inglis, who was then Company 2nd i/c, told them to clear off and if anyone tried to interfere with 'the Babes' it would be over the dead bodies of the rest of the company. So, whatever the men thought of us, the other officers looked on us as youngsters yet. Actually, Goss (the promoted subaltern at the centre of the affair) behaved very well in the action at Ypres on August 16th. He was wounded on this occasion as also was Fletcher.



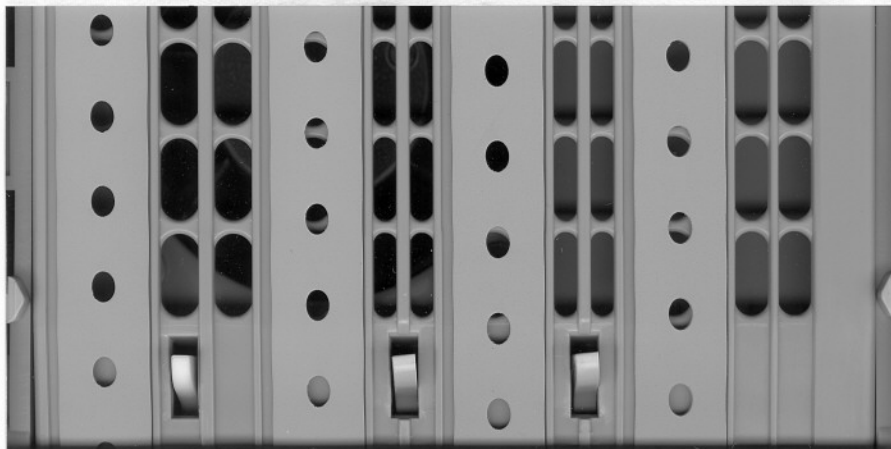
26/7
31/7
On the 24th we left La Ronville and spent the next four days at Wormhouth. We then moved up by St. Jans-tu-Biezen to Windmill Camp at Woesten on the 30th, preparatory to the attack on the 2nd day of the offensive, August 1st. As it turned out we were at Windmill Camp for nine days as it started raining, continuing very heavily for several days. The ground was so churned up by the barrage that the 2nd day attack had to be postponed until August 16th.

4/8
My first Minden Dinner was eaten in a large marquee at Windmill Camp. This is an annual dinner celebrating the Lancashire Fusiliers' glorious victory at Minden on August 1st 1759, in the Seven Years War, when we went into battle with roses in our hats. It is one of the chief Battle Honours of the L.F. Every new officer is bound to eat a rose, washed down with champagne, at his first Minden Dinner, which I duly did.

We had a most unpleasant stay at the camp as we were in bivouacs and tents in a hop garden. It rained and rained and everything was sopping wet.

5/8
On August 7th we moved to Siege Camp, Elverdinge, about four miles short of the Yser Canal which runs around Ypres. From here we had to supply carrying parties every night over No 4 bridge and up to the front line, food, wine, ammunition, duckboards, etc. All had to be carried over duckboard tracks, about eighteen inches wide, for about three miles and over ground which was just a quagmire. If anyone fell off the track it was very difficult to pull them out and many lost their lives in this way. I remember one night one leg going over but fortunately I managed to keep from falling in, getting free by leaving my Wellington in the mud and going in my stocking foot for the rest of the night. We loathed those journeys and almost preferred to be in the line.

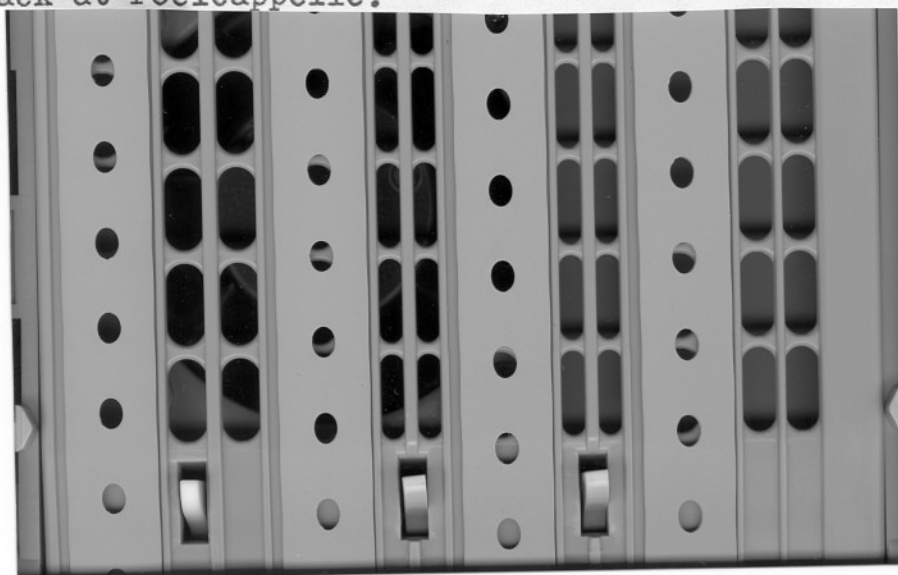
We moved up to the canal bank north of Ypres on the 15th, prior to the attack on the 16th. I didn't take part in the attack as I had been put in 'B' team, this being a skeleton battalion left out so that the survivors could be reformed on them. This was necessary as in every attack at that time we lost 30/50% of our effectives, killed or wounded. Normally an officer took part in two out of three attacks so they didn't last long as their casualty rate was very high. It was reckoned that the average 'life' of a 2nd Lieutenant was six weeks.



23/8
28/8
2/9
8/9

We went over the top at 4.45am on the 16th August and had captured all our objectives by the 17th. We were relieved on the same night and retired to Siege Camp to lick our wounds, having lost ten officers and two hundred and forty other ranks, wounded, dead or missing, so you can see why it was necessary to have a 'B' team. Jack Hayes and Inglis were awarded MCs for their gallant conduct. We stayed at Siege Camp until the 30th, acting as carrying parties and a reserve in case of counter-attacks. On the 30th we went further back to Dirty Bucket Camp where we were in tents under low scrub trees and heavily camouflaged. Here we reorganised and received a draft of one hundred new men. We were due to march out early on September 4th to Pear Tree Camp at Watou but all the night of the 3/4th we could hear aeroplanes circling overhead. As we were to be up at 3am we mostly stayed up playing cards, with all lights blacked out. Strict instructions had been issued about lights when breakfasting and getting ready in the morning as it was still dark, but some must have been careless and the planes must have spotted them. Just as I had finished breakfast and was going down to see the company four or five bombs were dropped right in the middle of the camp. There was frightful slaughter and we lost about one hundred men in those few minutes. I shall never forget lifting the flap of one tent which had been hit. There were sixteen bodies with legs and arms and blood all over the place. It was terrible and many of the casualties were among the new draft.

We gradually sorted out the wounded and got them away in ambulances. By 10am we had formed up and marched away to Watou, leaving a clearing-up party behind us. Watou was about sixteen miles behind the lines. We stayed there until the 11th September and then went to Herzelle for the next three weeks, reorganising, absorbing new recruits and training for the next attack at Poelcappelle.



At about this time I was appointed to a Divisional Court Martial, a rather harrowing experience. It consisted of a Lieutenant Colonel as President, a Major, a Captain and a 2nd Lieutenant (myself in this case) and was set up on this occasion to try a sergeant for 'Desertion in the face of the Enemy'. It had happened during the attack of August 16th. He was found wandering in the rear area some miles back after leaving his men. There was no doubt in the evidence but he was undoubtedly in a confused state of mind and I felt sorry for him in a way. But discipline is essential when in action and the penalty was to be shot at dawn. It was the rule when giving sentence that the junior officer should state his first, with reasons, and then the next junior in turn. I felt it a very unenviable position but, after consideration of all the facts, some example had to be made and I opted for the death penalty. So did the Captain and Major but, fortunately for my conscience in later life, the President used his prerogative and reduced the sentence to ten years, to be stripped of all his rank and to be discharged from the Army with Ignominy. I think most of those convicted were pardoned after the war, but not all of them were so lucky. As a boy of nineteen I was really too young to vote on such an issue and, after my later experiences, I would undoubtedly have been more sympathetic.

During this period I went on my first ten days leave. We entrained at the railhead at Hazebrauch in the late afternoon, arriving at Boulogne in the late evening and staying at the Officers' Club for the night. We crossed to Dover the next morning, caught the train to London and arrived in Manchester about midnight. There were one or two taxis at the station but none of them would take me on as they wanted the short lucrative runs. No other type of transport was available so I had to walk home to Pendleton. Fortunately my only luggage was in my haversack, but you can imagine my feelings. We were fighting and dying for these miserable devils who were exempt from service and they could see that I had come straight from the trenches.

However, I enjoyed my leave and arrived back at Hazelee towards the end of September. I was immediately sent for by the 2nd i/c of the Battalion, a Major Milne, and asked if I would like the job of Intelligence Officer, the previous one having been wounded in the last attack.

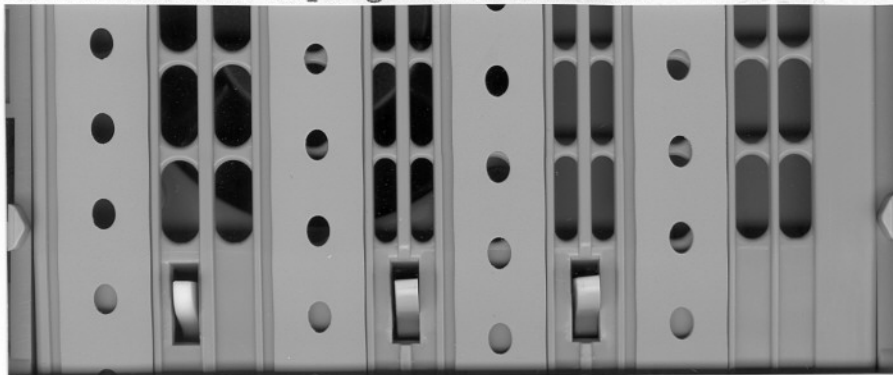
The I.O. had a sergeant and sixteen men under him and was responsible for all the Sniping and Scouting duties, collecting all Daily Information Reports from the companies and forwarding the Battalion Information Report to the Brigade HQ. This was when we were in the trenches; when attacking the I.O. was responsible for putting out the white tape on which the Battalion formed up in No Mans Land prior to an attack, and for conducting the various companies to their respective positions. Then, during the attack, he maintained liason between the attacking force and Battalion HQ. A rather unenviable job as you came in for all the shelling and sniping, often in the open without any cover.



However, I said 'yes' and was immediately told that I would have to go at once to the 5th Army Scouting and Sniping Course at Corbie, just south of Amiens, for two weeks, which cut me out of the Poelcappelle show. I left the Battalion on the 29/30th and it took us three days to cover about fifty miles by train. All the lines were blocked by troop trains and supplies. As we were travelling across the lines of communications we had to make many changes, being dumped at all sorts of stations and mostly spending the nights in stationary railway carriages. There were four of us from our division, one from the 11th Manchester in our brigade, one Irishman (a Protestant and an exceedingly nice chap) and another chap called George ----, who came from London but more about him later. We all got on very well together. One night we camped out luxuriously in first class compartments, but left all the doors of the other compartments open so that they would have to be shut before the train was started. It was fortunate that we did this as it was the only thing that wakened us. We had to hurriedly chuck all our goods out of the doors and jump for it, after the train had started.

We were in that place for the whole of the next day, the R.T.O. saying that there was no chance of us getting away until about 7pm. So we went off for a walk in the country. It was beautiful, quiet farming country. The war might not have been on. At midday we found an estaminet in a little village where they made us the best omellette that I have ever tasted. With that and the apples and pears we got from the orchards, we did ourselves very well and spent a most enjoyable day. We eventually arrived on the course on the evening of the 2nd October, being promptly hauled before the Adjutant for being two days late.

It was a very good course; we spent most of the days on practical field work, learning how to disguise and camouflage, but most of all on observation exercises learning to spot any changes in the trenches or the open country opposite to us. In the evenings we were taught what reports were required and how to make them. We were given excellent typewritten notes of all these things. On Saturdays, after lunch, we had some time off and visited Albert and Amiens. At the end of the course we had an exam. and reports on our work. We had been very well housed in a large chateau, with excellent sleeping accomodation.



17/10
22/10
We completed the course on the 17th October. It took me another four days to find out where my Battalion was and to reach them as they had moved out of the Ypres area after the October 4/6th attack at Broodseinde. This was a very successful attack in which all the objectives were gained but with two hundred and twenty one casualties. G.H Pemberton, the Adjutant, was awarded the DSO after he had taken command of the Battalion when Jimmy Milne was wounded. The Padre and the doctor were both killed. Charlie Melling, who had been in command of 'W' Company, was also wounded. 2nd Lieut. Brewer, who was acting as Int. Officer, was killed and Sgt. Blackledge received a bar to his Military Medal.

The Battalion remained in the vicinity of the battle until the 17th, going then by rail to Lillus where I joined them on the 21st at Bully-Grenay.

Ward-McInaid came back from the Senior Officers Course at this time and took command of the Battalion on the 10th October, being promoted to Acting Lieut. Colonel.

The 9th Battalion was in the 11th Division. We wore a yellow patch on our backs with the number eleven outlined in black. Perhaps I should state that each division consisted of three brigades composed of four battalions (later reduced to three). Each battalion had four companies, with a strength of two hundred and forty men divided into four platoons each of four sections. In practice we were lucky to have about one hundred and eighty men in the company at any one time. Each division had, in addition, a Machine Gun Company, Field Companies, Field Ambulances, Pioneers, etc. Our brigade consisted of the 8th Northumberland Fusiliers, the 5th Dorset Regiment and the 11th Manchester, besides ourselves. The brigade had a splendid reputation until we were unlucky to be disbanded in February, 1918. Our sister battalion was the 8th North. Fus., with which we were very friendly. When out of the line the men played against each other at football and the officers at hockey, as well as generally entertaining one another. Each company had a Captain in command, a 2nd i/c and four 2nd Lieuts. each with a platoon which included a sergeant, two corporals, four lance-corporals, a Company Sergeant Major and a Quarter Master Sergeant. The Battalion in addition had an Intelligence Officer with a sergeant and sixteen men, a Signalling Officer with a similar team, a doctor and four orderlies, and a Padre, in addition of course to the HQ under the Adjutant and a band. Then there was the

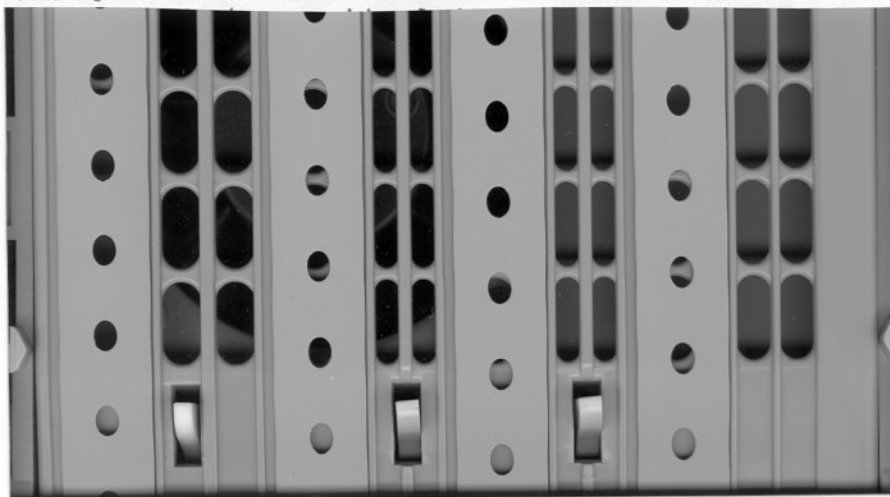


Quartermaster, Lieut. Flint, and the transport section under Lieut. Pollitt. The Quartermaster was responsible for all the feeding of the Battalion and for all supplies of equipment and ammunition. The Transport Officer had all the horses and mules under his control; we had no motor transport of any kind, everything being pulled by mules normally. There was one horse for each company and also those for HQ.

I rejoined the Battalion on October 20th at Bully-Grenay, taking up my duties as I.O. There was a new S.O. Bailey as well as a new RC Padre. We were allowed to form a 'B' mess instead of being in the HQ mess. This suited us down to the ground as we got on very well together. As most of the natives were RCs the Padre always got the best billets and every attention. He was a bit odd but a nice little chap; his hobby was translating the Bible from the original Latin, when he wasn't looking after the comfort of the men. Bailey was a commercial artist and very good at sketches.

From October 20th to December 23rd we were in the trenches around Loos and Lens, either front line support or reserve. At the start of this period I was sent to Lillers for about three days to Army HQ on a higher intelligence course, where I had a very nice billet over a draper's shop.

Meanwhile, the Battalion was in support at Lens. On Oct. 31st we moved into the front line. The front here had hardly changed since 1915 when we had captured Loos and Hill 70. We held a line just short of the crest of the hill on the outskirts of Lens. The Germans were anything from one hundred to one hundred and fifty yards away, just over the crest. The trenches were well dug and protected with plenty of wire in front. We had good, deep dugouts that were well drained. In the support lines there were plenty of houses with cellars (this was in the suburbs of Lens) which were pretty well shellproof as they had been shelled to bits, the bricks and timber on top of the cellars taking anything but a direct hit and possibly even that.

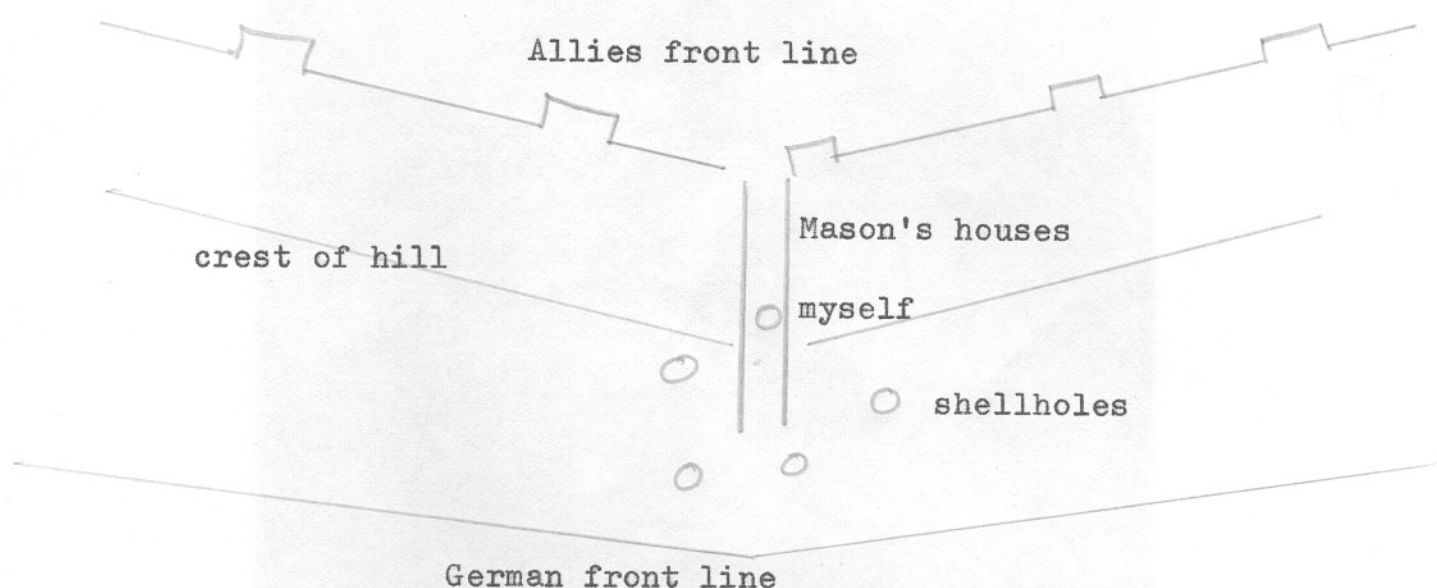


We had been told that an attack by the Germans was imminent. Consequently my job was to get all the information I could and to observe all movements. If you can imagine Lens, a mining town about the size of Chester, with suburbs of innumerable streets of small cottages surrounding it, the whole lot having been flattened by gunfire. The earth was all churned up and one mass of shell holes, with not a living thing in sight, just utter desolation. Tracks led up to the reserve lines and then communication trenches to the support trenches, and then again to the front trenches. All the communication trenches had their own names such as Nabobs Alley, etc. and I remember on the side of one trench that there was a large dud German shell about three feet long on which some wag had written 'A Conscientious Objector'.

About two miles behind the front line were several mining villages where we and the French were billeted when resting. Up and down the landscape were enormous slag heaps from which we got a certain amount of observation. Behind the reserve trenches were the guns of all types and sizes, well dug in and sandbagged. They were mainly concerned with counter battery work on their German counterparts but they could also be used to put down a barrage in case of an attack. They had their observation posts in any suitable spot up at the front, and also made use of balloons from which they could see the results of their firing and direct their fire. The balloons were anchored to the ground and about 2/300 feet high. They were constantly threatened by enemy aircraft. It was a risky job with many of them being shot down, the O.O. escaping by parachute, if possible. Meanwhile, we were trying to bring the aircraft down with rifle fire, which wasn't very effective, and elsewhere the anti-aircraft guns were harassing them. Some miles back of course were our own aerodromes, our planes taking large numbers of photographs of the enemy lines and back areas, besides going for the enemy balloons. The photos were sent up to the Battalion HQ where it was my job to interpret them; this was a fairly skilled job and it was for this reason that I had been sent on the higher intelligence course at Lillers.

When I went to the front line on October 31st, filled with enthusiasm for my new job, I reviewed the whole position having regard to the necessity for good observation. The following sketch will show the position roughly. There was a good field of fire of 50/60 yards up to the crest, then the ground sloped gently down to the German line. From our trenches we could not see much of the ground in front of or behind the German line for some considerable way until the ground began to rise again to the Cite St. Elie, another suburb of Lens.





I decided that the ruins of Masons Houses was the most likely spot and obtained permission from Battalion HQ to take out four men at dawn on November 2nd, staying out there all day if possible, to observe carefully the whole German position and activity. The order issued to all companies is still among my papers. 'Z' Company, commanded by A.E.R. Gilligan, held the line at this point and I made all my arrangements with him.

About 2am Sergeant Blackledge and I set out on patrol in order to decide where to place our observers and to generally size up the ground. Gilligan had promised to secure our left flank with a Lewis Gun team. It was a pitch black night. As usual we went out with a couple of Mills bombs in our pockets and my revolver in the holster strapped on - you couldn't manage a rifle as well as crawl around as it was necessary to escape the sentries' eyes when approaching the German lines. First we reconnoitred Masons Houses and then pushed on as far as the German wire, where we lay and listened to them talking. We crawled further along, examining the wire, before starting back. All this had taken about half an hour. We were about thirty yards to the left of Masons Houses and about sixty yards from our lines when we saw a German patrol of six men moving in a crouching manner about twenty yards away. We immediately dropped to the ground in a shell hole, each of us taking a Mills bomb from his pocket and extracting the pin whilst holding the arm of the bomb down in our hands and ready to throw. It was a moment of high tension. I could hear my heart beating so hard I thought they must surely hear it. I whispered to Blackledge 'not yet', and they passed within a few feet of us without seeing us. After an interval we made our way back to our own lines and discovered that what we had taken for the German patrol was, in fact, the Lewis Gun team who had mistaken the position they were to take up. What a mercy we didn't bomb them and it showed me how careful you had to be when moving about at night in No Mans Land, as well as the importance of everyone knowing what was going on.

Just before dawn I took out four men and placed two on each side of Masons Houses in shell holes, one man behind the other by about ten yards, from which positions they would have a good view of all the German lines and communication trenches when it became light. These men had instructions to make notes of all movements with times and positions, etc. I myself took up a position in the middle and to the rear. However, as I suspected the loneliness and danger might be too much for some of the men I commenced to move the earth so that I could crawl into the first shell holes and then into the forward ones without exposing myself. It was a good job I did as the front man on the right was just cowering at the bottom of the shell hole, too nervous to look out. I spent about half an hour with him, reassuring him and showing him how to observe. I then went to the other flank and explained how I would keep in touch with them and how they could retreat under cover, if necessary. The rear man relieved the front man every two hours.

Actually, there was very little movement and we formed the opinion that the Germans were holding the front line very lightly in the daytime. There were no signs in the back areas of much activity such as would be necessary if they were going to mount an attack, as had been suggested. So we decided this was not likely. Later on, when a raid for identification was planned, it was carried out in daylight; as the line was being

lightly held the raid was very successful and casualties were avoided. However, some German plane must have observed the freshly displaced earth between my shell holes and at about 3.30pm they began to shell us very heavily and we had to withdraw, fortunately without loss. We had seen all that we wanted to anyway. We got a very good write-up in Divisional Orders but Ward McInaid got the credit.

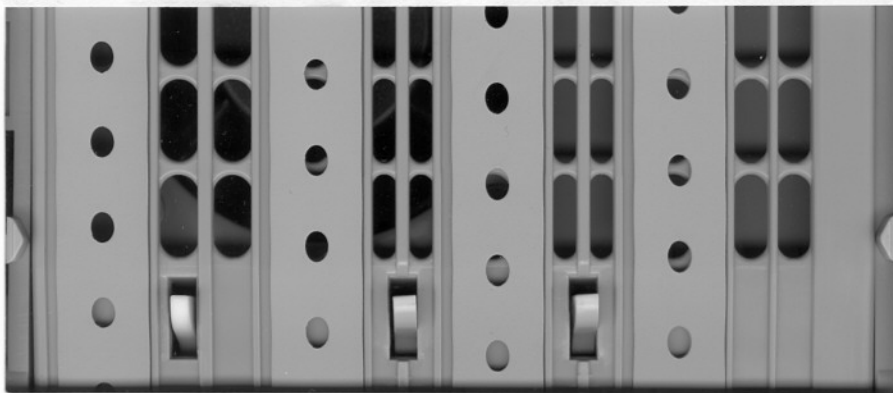
In another part of the line, further right, I had a trench dug one night about fifty yards out to the crest of the rise overlooking Lens, taking up my position, alone, just before dawn. The enemy were now alerted however, and within an hour I was being dive-bombed by a plane and machine-gunned all the way back to our lines, an exceedingly nasty crawl as the trench was full of black beetles.

5/11
10/11
29/11
In our next tour in the front line I set up, one night, a sniper post in the parados. This had metal sheet protection and a slit for firing through. It overlooked a sap head which the Germans manned at night. I took care to camouflage the disturbed earth. This was very successful and we got three before breakfast. Ward McInaid of course was in high favour and received a lot of credit for our offensive spirit. I didn't like it when, in reserve, he said to me 'We'll find you something else to do when we go up next week'. Well, up to now all these had been my own affairs but when we got in the line he decided that I was to recover the body of one of the Northumberlands which had been in the German wire for about three weeks. This was in order to prevent identification. As I pointed out, the Germans must have got all the identification they wanted long ago. But he was safe in his dugout and dead keen on further glory, so he fixed the night. As it turned out it was full moon and as clear as daylight. After weighing the matter up I went back to Battalion HQ and said that I didn't think the operation should be attempted. When Ward McInaid pressed the matter I told him point-blank that I would not risk my life or the lives of any of my men on such a foolhardy and unnecessary operation. I suppose I could have stagemanaged a show, as he would never have known, but I was too direct and, after one hell of a row, was sacked from my job and returned to my company for duty. Actually, my case was one of several reported by the Adjutant Pemberton to the Division when Ward McInaid was demoted from command of the Battalion.

2/12
9/12
15/12
So, M.I.5 lost one of its most brilliant recruits! Personally, I didn't mind going back to 'W' Company as Inglis now had command of 'Z' Company and Healey had gone to French Mortars. I took over as 2nd i/c, with a good chance of further promotion as it arose. It was during this period that I learnt more about running a Company from Jack Hayes than could have got from anybody else. Being an ex S.M. he knew all the tricks of the trade and as he let me do most of the work, under his supervision it was invaluable experience for me.

27/12
3/1
On December 22nd we were withdrawn from the trenches and arrived by bus at Lapugnoy on the 23rd. We stayed here until January 21st. The two days before Xmas were very busy for me; the first I spent riding a bicycle all over the place on the look-out for beer as we wanted to give the men at least two bottles each. While doing this I also managed to get a bar as well. The second day Pemberton asked me to go to the Field Cashier, about ten miles away, to draw all the money for the Battalion and for all the individual officers. I was allowed the Company horse for this job, which proved quite exciting as ours had a certain amount of Arab in it and had not been ridden for weeks while we were in the trenches. Everything went alright for the first few miles until I was going over a railway line when a train, which was passing underneath the bridge, let off steam. The horse of course took fright and set off hell for leather. I simply could not pull her up. A village hove in sight, everyone scattered right and left, and we crashed down the main street. Fortunately a long hill came after the village and gradually she began to tire but I kept her at it until I had full command. Without further incident I arrived at my destination and put the horse up at the local estaminet. Then, having drawn the money, I went back and had a drink and something to eat. I must say I didn't feel very easy with thousands of francs on me so I didn't waste much time and arrived back at the Battalion quickly and handed over the money. What with the cycling and the horse riding I was darned sore but the next day was Xmas and we had a busy time getting everything ready and dishing the pay out. Then we waited on the men when they had their Xmas dinner at midday; they had a splendid spread and plenty to drink. Afterwards they had the day off to do what they liked, mostly sleep and write letters and then to the estaminets with plenty of money in their pockets.

Our Company was billeted in the big barns of several farms on the



outskirts of the village. Later in the day we had the Officers' dinner and what a smasher, oysters, soup, fish, turkey and pudding and nuts etc. and plenty to drink, so we did ourselves proud and we deserved it after three months of very plain fare, but plenty of it.

The weather was very cold with about six inches of snow everywhere. We settled down to steady work, making up kit, drilling and firing practice etc. On New Year's Eve another company let in the New Year at our Mess. We then got hold of the band and went around the village pulling everybody out of bed including the C.O., Adjutant, Doctor etc. The poor Doc was wandering around in his pyjamas and greatcoat for about three hours. Then we went on to the Northumberland and had a riotous time there. Apart from these wild parties we had a fairly steady time. I had plenty of work to do as Jack Hayes went sick, so I had his work to do as well as my own. However, I coped and we had some enjoyable evenings, pierrot shows, and a boxing match between our Smasher Massie and Gerry Ford from 'Z' Company. Gerry Ford was the dirtiest man in the Battalion and there had been some talk of giving him a sauna bath to get his weight down. I was able to get some hot baths in at my digs, in a big wash tub before the fire in the kitchen, when they had all gone to bed. I had managed to lose my servant Bird and now had a good young man called Roberts, who came from Salford and who looked after me very well. I don't know whether I have mentioned two men at our company HQ; Mills, the storekeeper who was a villainous looking chap from Rochdale and never properly shaved and just the type to mug you in a dark alley, and Box, the sanitary man, responsible for the latrines etc. He was a real sanitary man, most unprepossessing and always looking as if he had slept in the latrines. However, I forgave them a lot as they were always the first to volunteer when I had some dangerous job to do; in fact, I quite liked them. On one occasion orders were given that all men, including HQ staff, cooks, etc. (who were usually excused) had to fire on the ranges. So, one day when we had finished firing and I was preparing to march the Company back to billets, only a squad of about sixteen men remained to clear up the range. I asked who was the oldest soldier in order to put him in charge and take responsibility. Who should step forward but Box, so I had no option. Later in the afternoon, on my way up from the Company HQ to my billet, I saw a body of men marching down the main street and recognised Box at the head in full command, giving them 'march to attention', 'left, right, left, right' and a magnificent 'eyes right'. It shows how a man responds to the occasion.



During this time Jack Hayes went missing. As far as I could gather he was on the binge and sleeping at some estaminet but I couldn't get any sense out of his servant, Lamb, who was scared to death of him but also very devoted. So I had to cover up somehow and didn't report it, though I am sure the Adjutant knew. We all kept our mouths shut as otherwise Jack might have been court-martialled.

On another occasion at this time my old platoon Sergeant, Smith, the Stockport bricklayer, was acting as S.M. He turned up several minutes late to Company Orders one day and, on my asking for an explanation, said it was not yet two o'clock. To prove it he pulled out a tobacco tin in which were the remains of a watch pointing to five minutes to two. That was typical Smith but he did his job very well, knowing exactly how we wanted the company run having had long experience. You simply couldn't get angry with him. He used to entertain me when we were on the march and I learnt a lot about life from him. One day he was obviously in pain and I asked him if anything was wrong. No, he said, it was the missus, she must be in labour as he always had labour pains when she had, and sure enough he was right. I have heard of this effect on several occasions since.

At this time the Battalion was given a Croix de Guerre and it was decided to give it to Smith, as, though he had never done anything outstanding, he had always done his job well and had been in many actions since the Battalion had been on active service.

Another incident which comes to mind was my receiving, as OC the Company, a letter from some female in Rochdale accusing Private Mills of having caused her pregnancy. My mind boggled at what sort of a woman could have been with Mills but there is an old Lancashire saying 'Every faux face has a faux fancy'. I had Mills up for orders but he was very indignant about it, saying he was only one of many and that it was impossible for me to sort it out. So I wrote to the woman and enclosed a letter from Mills in which he denied all responsibility and told her to stop worrying his officer.



As I said, I was learning a lot about human nature and life's problems from the men's letters and they often came to me for advice. Fancy me at nineteen and previously almost without worldly experience. But by this time I had outlived my 'Babe' days, being 2nd i/c of a company and a Subaltern. I had to act as Mess President at Battalion dinners and everyone seemed to accept me, much to my amazement sometimes.

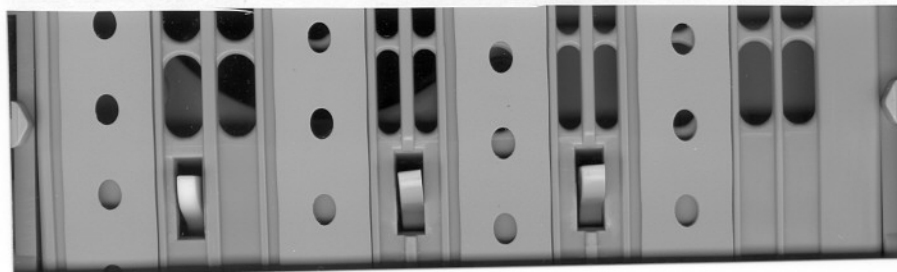
The type of officer we were getting was deteriorating in some cases. I remember one, a market gardener from Kent, who reported one of the N.C.O.s for lack of discipline and familiarity. I didn't care for the officer and on going into the matter formed the opinion that the officer himself was to blame; he seemed to encourage familiarity with those under him and then reported them when things got out of hand. So I ticked him off and cautioned him about his future behaviour.

Just about this time a Russian, 2nd Lieut. Mende, joined us. He was a cheerful lad whose speciality was jumping on the mess table and doing the typical Cossack dance amongst the glasses.

After staying about a month at Lapuqnoy we were ordered back to the trenches. I was very concerned about Jack Hayes who was still missing. I warned his servant of the serious consequences if he did not turn up. Lamb must have got news through to Jack as he turned up on the morning of departure, reporting sick to the doctor and being given two days in dock. He then came back and took over command again without any explanation and I never asked him for one.

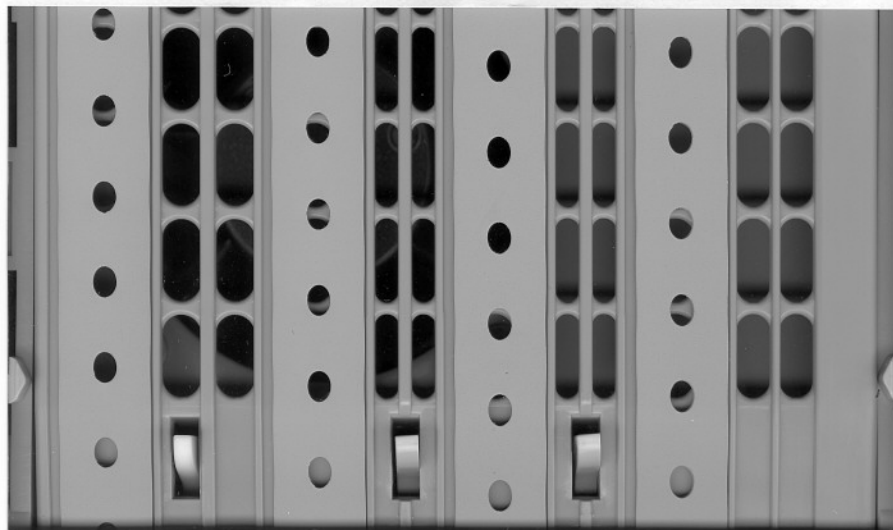
13/1
20/1
We had to start at 6am and I was up until 2am on the 20th January issuing the orders, as they came very late from Battalion HQ. Everything had to be cleared up and the order of march decided as we were the leading company.

On the 21st we went into Support lines at Vermelles. On the night of the 22nd/23rd we took over the front line at Cite St. Elie, Hullock. The position at Hullock was peculiar to the situation. From the support line you entered an old mining shaft where the tramlines were still in operation and used to bring up food and supplies. We went some 4/500 yards down the tunnels and surfaced in circular strongpoints, about two hundred yards apart and held by each company. Except for those on duty in the trenches, you were in deep dugouts with electric lighting installed. Very comfortable indeed and a very quiet front. You never saw a Boche and a shell was almost unheard of. Indeed, I formed the opinion that the Germans withdrew from the front line in the daytime and that was at least three hundred yards away. In fact, after a few days, I satisfied my curiosity by crawling over in daylight and found that this was so.



And now I must tell you of an experience I have never had before or since. On first arriving I weighed up the ground in front of our position. Two of the features were a sap head and a very large shell hole, both of which looked as though they might be occupied and give cover for a near approach to our strongpoint at about sixty to one hundred yards distance. Accordingly I decided that on the first night I would take out a patrol and investigate the shell hole; the following night I would send Mende and another officer to look at the sap head, as Mende had never been out on patrol before. Well, I went out with a sergeant and six men and after fifty yards left the men in the charge of a L/Cpl. with orders to support us if necessary. I went ahead with the sergeant. The shell hole was on the left and the sap head on the right. After going another twenty yards I told the sergeant to wait and watch for any movement from the sap while I went forward and reconnoitred the shell hole. I went all round the shell hole and found no trace of occupation. I returned to the sergeant and things seemed so quiet that I decided to have a look at the sap head as well. This was where a trench, running out of the German main lines, came to the surface. I crept up to it and, having looked all round it, decided they were not manning it. Then I went back, collected the men and returned to the strongpoint, where I made out my report without mentioning the sap head as I wanted to see how Mende and the other officer would conduct themselves.

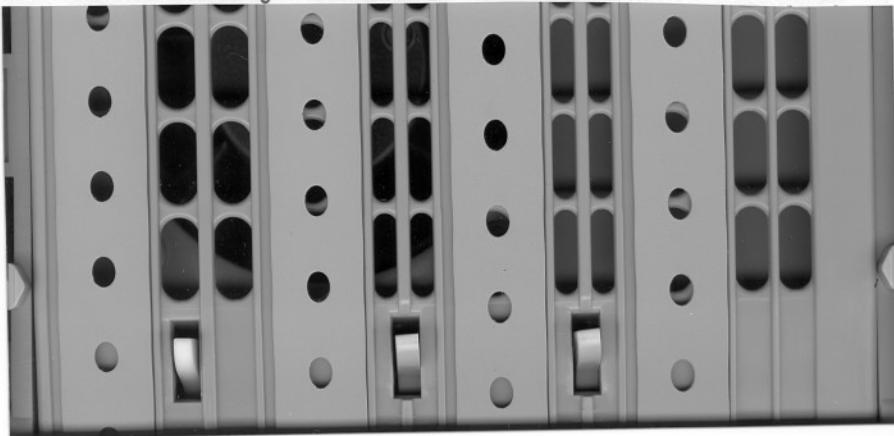
The next night I duly sent them out. When they returned, about half an hour later, we were sitting around the table in the dugout, reading and talking and as safe as houses under about twenty feet of earth and all the station fully manned. They came back very excited to report that there was a strong Boche patrol lying in wait across the sap head, but they had returned without being seen. In my imagination I saw myself having run into this trap the night before and my bowels turned to water. I never knew what this old Biblical saying fully meant before, but it was the most frightful sensation and I was trembling with fear.



Fortunately, I was seated with my back to the wall, with my legs hidden by the tablecloth. After about two minutes I gained control of myself without anyone noticing and then said that I would take out a fighting patrol, and asked for volunteers. That was the only way I could prove myself to myself. It seemed so absurd when I had never been safer, but that is how it happened.

I took two officers and about fifteen men, placing one officer with a machine gun away on the right and the other with about seven men on the left. I myself was in the centre with 5/6 men. Having placed the force personally, I started to move forward, stooping at first and then crawling, taking advantage of any cover, the whole line being kept in touch. To make the whole thing more bizarre, when we got to the sap head there wasn't a soul about, nor could I discover any trace of any occupation. As I said, it was Mende's first patrol and the other fellow with him wasn't very experienced. Things can look very queer on a pitch-black night in No Mans Land. You can look at a wire post on a tree stump long enough to convince yourself that it is a man. There is only one way to settle it and that is by moving to a flank and gradually getting nearer. I had spent so much time in No Mans Land when I.O. that it had become second nature to me but it was rather scarifying to anyone inexperienced. This is why I nearly always left the patrol some way back and completed the survey alone or with just my sergeant. If someone panicked the Germans would fill the air with Very Lights, making the whole place like daylight and putting us at the mercy of their machine guns or possibly a gun barrage, which would make it extremely nasty to get back.

Anyway, I had learnt another lesson, namely that anyone can be subject to that debilitating fear. It helped me to be considerably more sympathetic a few nights later when I found one of the men I had placed on patrol in a hopeless state of funk, teeth chattering and shaking with fear. It took me about ten minutes before I could get him more shipshape, by talking about his family and home.



I don't know whether I mentioned before that we had a narrow exit out of the side/rear of the strongpoint that we could use to mount a counter attack from or to bring enfilade or cross-fire onto the enemy in case they got too near. It was of course well below the walls of the strongpoint, well camouflaged and had a sentry on day and night. One night I was prowling around outside on my own, checking on things, when I noticed that the sentry seemed very still. I crept up on him and, finding him fast asleep, removed his rifle without incident. I then leapt on him, seizing him by the throat. He thought his end had come and had the daylight scared out of him. I then pointed out to him that, if I was going to report this, there would be no option but to have a court-martial, the extreme penalty for sleeping while on sentry duty being death. However, I thought I had brought home to him the enormity of his offence and so took no further action. Not quite the orthodox way of dealing with the matter but he was a decent enough lad and not likely to offend again. However, I had the corporal in charge visit every ten minutes in future, as, if the enemy had managed to infiltrate, they could have done enormous damage.

And so, on February 12th we came out of the line, only to be told that under the new reorganisation we were to be disbanded and spread among our other Battalions. This was as the country was so short of reinforcements it was impossible to keep all Battalions at much above half strength, so in every Brigade one of the four Battalions had to be disbanded. We were the unlucky ones in our Brigade. On what basis they made their decisions I don't know but we were furious that a Battalion of our fighting prowess should be scattered about.

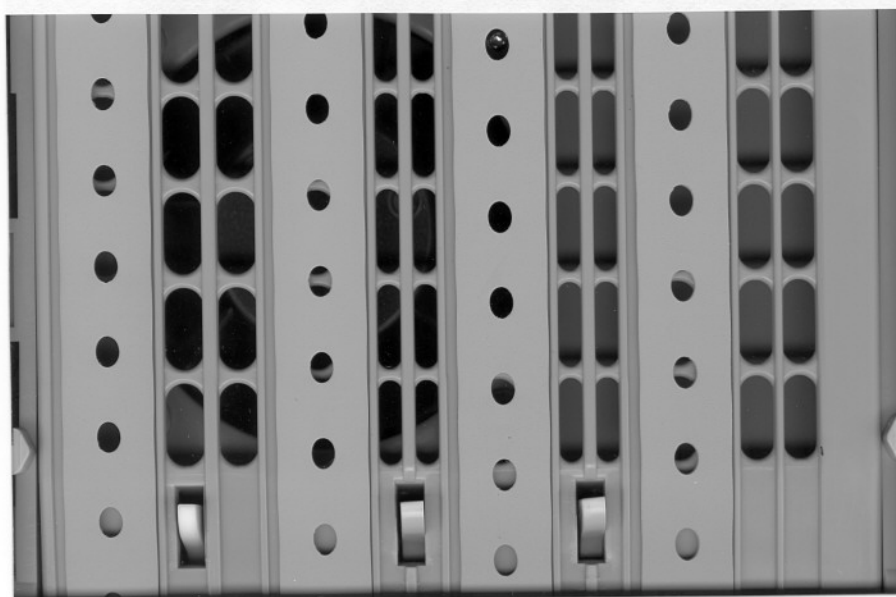
The really serious problem that arose was what we should do with our considerable stocks of drink as we had only about ten days to go. We decided to make every effort to drink it all and then to divide out between us anything that was left. Fortunately for me, after four days my ten day leave came through and I departed for England to recover.

I don't remember very much of that leave but I do know I went over to Bakewell one day and that that was the last time I saw Uncle Dick. I suppose I did the usual things and went around seeing people but I do remember a curious feeling of unreality about this life, where everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves and carrying on as usual. I know there was food rationing, etc. but the gap between our austere and hazardous existence for very little pay, and the money nearly all of the stay-at-homes were making, and the enjoyments and theatres booming, hit one in the eye. It made you feel apart from them, a feeling of disgust, and instead of returning to the front with regrets it made you feel almost



glad to be going back to a life of devotion to duty and good comradeship, and not the pursuit of selfish ends. I don't want to sound as though we were a class of wild idealists, we were anything but. When we came out of the line we hit the roof, drinking and gambling far too much, but you had that feeling of solidarity and comradeship, everybody mucking in together and helping one another. I don't infer that all the people at home were of the selfish kind - I know my own father worked on endless committees to forward the war effort, as well as being a special constable, and of course he worried about me. He had a very serious illness through overstrain. But I am referring to many of the business men and people in essential occupations, who seemed to be doing very nicely, one hearing of much profiteering. That is why every effort was made in the 1939 war to regulate prices, stamping on any undue profit in order to avoid the scandals of the previous war.

16/2 Well, having got that off my chest, I will resume. When my leave was completed I crossed over the Channel on February 16th, eventually finding that I had been allocated to the 11th Battalion which was in the 25th Division and for most of the winter had been holding the line in the Laqnicourt section in the Somme area. The Germans had retreated to here in 1917 when they shortened their line. The 25th Division had come out to Achiet-le-Petit on February 11th, where they stayed until March 12th. I made my way to Achiet on February 17th, having stayed the night at the Officers Club at Boulougne, arriving there after dark. I had been immediately recognised by one of my friends from my white blanched riding breeches.



The next two months proved to be the most hectic period in my life. When the Battalion had been disbanded it was easy enough to absorb all the men as all formations were under strength, but the officers had always to be at full strength. When our company was sent to the 11th we were entirely unwanted. Consequently, Jack Hayes was 2nd i/c of a company, while I was made 2nd i/c of a platoon in 'C' Company with Lieut. Nathan as platoon commander and Ward as Company O.C. Well, you can imagine my feelings after having been somebody of importance in the 9th, and senior subaltern and 2nd i/c 'W' Company, only to come down to 2nd i/c of a platoon and anybody's dogsbody. I had arrived on Thursday night and saw the Adjutant for my posting, but nobody else. So, when one or two of my friends suggested we went off to Amiens, about twenty miles distant, on the Saturday after lunch, I was all for it. There were other Bns. in the camp, a bus being run to Amiens from where we were picked up at midnight, arriving back in camp about 2am. We had had a good time in Amiens, doing some shopping, a haircut and plenty to drink with a very good dinner and show afterwards. We got to bed about 3am. I was pretty tired and slept heavily until about 9am when I was unceremoniously awakened by my batman saying that I was Company Orderly Officer for the day, the Company being already on Church Parade. I hastily dressed and dashed out, only to find that the C.O., who I hadn't met, was already inspecting the Company on No. 3 Platoon accompanied by the Orderly Sergeant. Well, I didn't know what to do but fell in behind without saying anything. When we moved off to No. 4 Platoon I ticked off a man in the rear rank, in a very loud voice, for not standing properly to attention. Then, when the C.O. had finished I saluted smartly and took over, but he never said a word.

So, I saw them into church, went back to shave and have some breakfast and then met them to bring them back after the service was over. Of course I should have looked at Company Orders but in my position in the 9th I was excused even Battalion Orderly Officer and, having been out late, never thought about Company Orders. About noon an orderly came along to tell me to report to the C.O. as early as possible. I knew then I was for it. The C.O. was alone in the office and greeted me quite pleasantly, apologising for not having met me before. Then he ticked me off for my efforts earlier on. I explained what had happened and expressed my regrets at my behaviour. His name was Lt./Col. E.C. De R. Martin, DSO, MC, Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, and afterwards I always got on with him exceedingly well.

The 2nd i/c of the Battalion was Major Massey (the son of the New Zealand Prime Minister) and the Adjutant was Capt. Potts.

Well, a few days after this incident I was made Battalion Orderly Officer. I made up my mind to see the job was properly done. The Battalion was quite a good one but by no means up to the standard of the 9th as regards organisation and discipline, though they did very well in action. When I went around the huts about 10am to inspect them I found them in a most slovenly way, some beds not made and the huts not properly swept out. So, after seeing a few of them I told the Sergeant to call

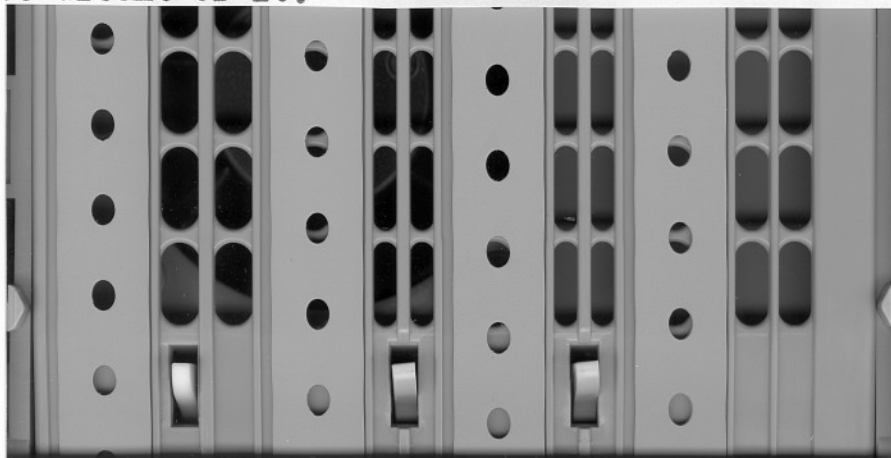


out all the hut orderlies on parade. I gave them one hour to get everything in order, at the end of which time if I found anything that didn't please me they would be put on a charge sheet.

Meanwhile I carried on and visited the detention tent, where I found one of my 9th Battalion men. On asking the Sergeant in Charge what he was accused of, he couldn't tell me and had no copy of the charge sheet. Then I went to the canteen and on asking for a list of offenders (they were not allowed to use the canteen as a punishment) the orderly looked blank and said there wasn't one. Just then Major Massey came along and asked if everything was in order. I told him I was disgusted with the state of things and rattled off the various complaints, adding that I was reporting to the Adjutant but that I thought he would find the huts etc. in a proper state later in the morning. And they were. Several other lapses occurred but I had stirred things up a bit. However, I was never made Battalion O/O again.

We were expecting the Boche to make an attack at anytime and we spent our time mostly in training. The air was thick with rumours. One day the C/O ordered all junior officers on parade for tactical exercises in attack and fairly open warfare. Well, we had been practising and doing the real thing all summer so it was second nature to me, and it was nearly always me who had to supply the right answer. It was a pretty poor show and the C/O was disgusted. He said there would have to be further exercises in two days time but that Mr. Ackerley was excused. So I was making my mark in the Battalion. I can't remember how soon it was that I was promoted to command a platoon but it wasn't long.

One day we went for a route march over the old Somme battlefield. We were passing a Pioneer Battalion who had parked their un-wanted kit alongside the road with their waterproof capes on top. I turned round and shouted 'Private -----, weren't you short of a cape on yesterday's kit inspection?' and went marching on. Then I heard a voice 'You silly b-----, he means you to pinch one'. Such were our morals where Army property was concerned. We saw nothing wrong with it, yet in Civvy life we would not have dreamt of it.



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On March 12th the Battalion left Achiet-le-Grand and marched to Fremicourt where we spent our time digging trenches to strengthen the Corps line, and improving communications, as the presumption of a German offensive was very strong and the Corps and Reserve line were in a very poor state. The weather was now very good with plenty of sunshine making things quite enjoyable. I had a very good birthday party in warm sunshine one afternoon, making short work of a very good cake sent from home. The officers also spent much time in reconnoitring routes up to the front line, held by the 6th and 51st Divisions, and generally getting the lie of the land as we were expecting the attack any day. Eventually it was given definitely as the 21st. We were due to relieve the West Yorks. on the night of the 21st, but at 5am on that day the Germans put down a very heavy barrage so we 'stood to' at once and prepared to move up the line in support of the 51st Division Highland. I was placed on 'B' team under the C/O, Major Massey taking command and the Battalion digging-in that night about four miles NE of Fremincourt.

The Germans had broken through our main defences but apart from a few patrols no contact was made on the 22nd. The main offensive started again at 5.30am on the 23rd. At first the enemy was repulsed but gradually we were outflanked and had to retire. This happened several times until, late in the afternoon, after loosing about half our effectives, we withdrew first to Fremincourt and then, during the night, to Biper court. We in the 'B' teams camped at Biper court to await events but on the withdrawal of the Brigade from the front line it was decided to reorganise. The 'B' team of our Battalion and the 9th Loyal North Lancs. were amalgamated into one Battalion commanded by Lt.Col. Martin. This was called the Lancashire Battalion. A and C Company were placed under 2nd Lieut. Bornstein MC, while B Company, comprising C and D Companies of our Battalion, was placed under myself, each with three further officers and C and D companies provided by the L.N.Lancs., as shown in a copy of orders in my possession. The C/O told us that he was informed by Higher Command that there were no reserves behind us at present and that we were to delay the enemy advance as much as possible without holding on too long, so that the enemy were denied a breakthrough. Early in the afternoon of the 23rd the Battalion moved out and dug-in on the Biefvilles-Sapignies spur on the left of the Brigade in support.

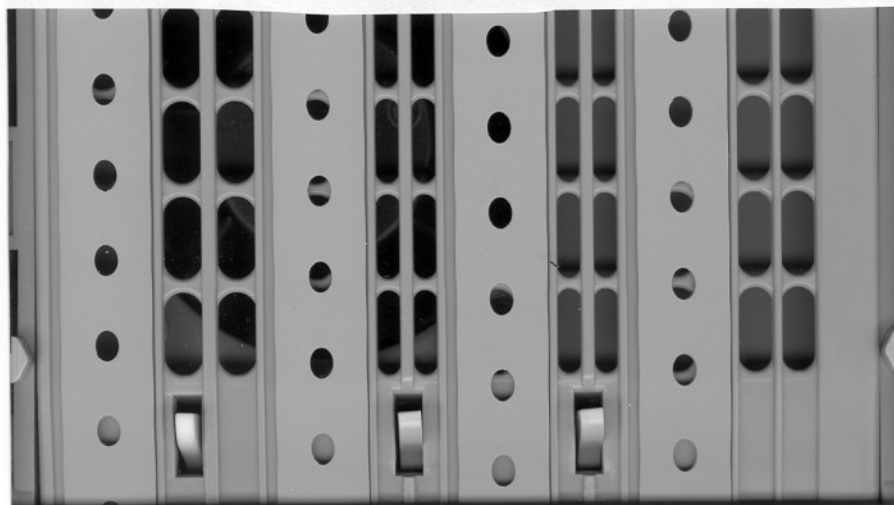
I was on the left of our Battalion and dug-in about 60 yards back from the crest. Later that afternoon the Boche put down a heavy barrage. I managed to contact the C/O of a Middlesex Battalion that was dug-in lower down on the slope of the valley in the direction of Sapignies and



explained our position to him. In view of the gap between us I decided to bend my line back so as to safeguard my left flank. The barrage was still on but I had found on my journey to the Middlesex crowd that, owing to the configuration of the ground, it was passing harmlessly overhead. However, it sounded very frightening and all the troops were keeping their heads well down. So, to show them how easy it was, Mr. Showoff, when about one hundred yards off our line, lit a cigarette and strolled slowly along and explained to the left-hand platoon what I wanted and that they had nothing to fear from the barrage. I don't think they believed me but I got them into position and dug-in for the night.

It was during the next day that the 42nd Division came down the valley on our left to reinforce the line towards Sapignies at a point where the Boche had made heavy attacks and the position was rather confused. Years later I found that their righthand company was commanded by my lifelong friend Walter Gresty MC and bar, although we never made contact with one another during the fighting as things were so confused and our flanks continually in the air. Also commanding a company in the Lancs. Fus. in the same division was Arnold Boyd MC, later my employer and then partner, who was wounded early on that same afternoon.

It was while we were moving down to take up our positions on the afternoon of the 23rd that we saw a most amazing sight on the road from Bapaume to Achiet-le-Grand, which we had to cross. The road was absolutely blocked with G.S. wagons, gun trailers and vehicles of all sorts, artillery men walking wounded, ambulances, etc. Many of the men were in a high state of inebriation, with handfuls of cigarettes and tins of food, as the canteen at Bapaume had been abandoned and thrown open to the troops who had stripped it bare. Unfortunately we could not share in the looting. I saw one man slumped across the back of an artillery wagon with blood coming out of his ears he was so drunk. Talk about a rout, if the German planes had got amongst that lot they would have done untold damage, but the day of the low flying aeroplane was not yet.



The night of the 23rd and the morning of the 24th passed quietly for us but there was heavy fighting in front of the Arras road and during the afternoon the enormous ammunition dump, which stretched for half a mile along the Bapaume-Arras road, was set on fire, providing the finest 5th November show that I have ever seen, and going on well into the night. Cases of rifle bullets went off like rip-raps, fuses went off like golden rain, Very lights in beautiful colours went up as well as bombs and shells and mortars exploding. Nothing was left to fall into German hands, but what a waste of money and effort.

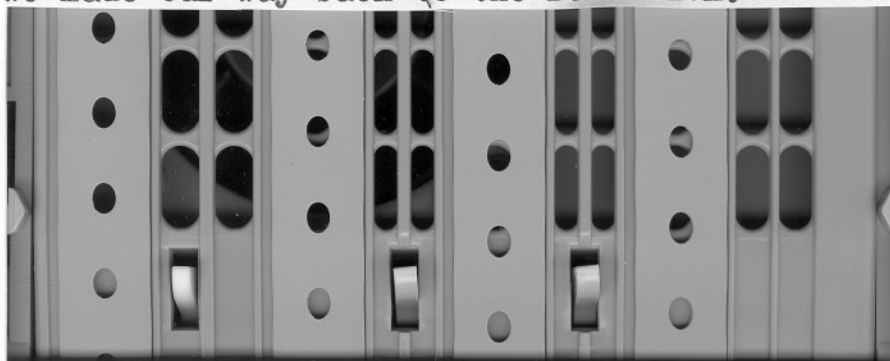
The Germans attacked again on our front on the morning of the 25th. That was a strange day for me and I will try to record the true facts as far as I can remember. We repulsed the first attack but then had to retreat, taking up a position in a sunken road. During the fighting here, amid all the din of battle, I heard some silly devil singing at the top of his voice 'I'd give the sunshine to gaze in your eyes, I'd give the stars from the brightest of skies, if only you will be true', etc., etc. It was some time before I realised that the silly devil was myself. Our flanks went and we had to retreat, myself being left with a few men to cover this move. Eventually we had to break for it and unfortunately two men were wounded and unable to move, one being shot in both legs. I stayed behind with them but, as they were about twice as heavy as I was and there were about three hundred yards of ploughed field to cross to get to our next position, it was pretty impossible. They begged me to leave them and escape, so I put them with their backs to a tree and started to make a dash for it. I hated leaving them and it has often worried me but there was nothing I could do. As it was I was the only target on the landscape as I started my wild dash over the ploughed field, shedding my mack, haversack, etc. on the way with machine guns spraying bullets all round me. Mercifully I made it and I think it was then that the rumour started that I had a charmed life. My pal Healey told me that his servant had written to him to this effect.

We started to dig-in on this position and, while we were doing so, an engineer officer with about twenty men came in. As I had a gap in my line I told him to fill it. That wasn't his idea at all and he refused, so I whipped out my revolver and told him to get in the gap or I would shoot every man-jack of them. I must have been wild and suffering from hysteria, and I don't know what I should have done had they refused, but fortunately they took one look at me and decided to fill the gap. As I had a very long front line to look after I had to be away for sometime and, when I returned about thirty minutes later, they had cleared off and so I had to thin my line further.



Owing to our right flank being turned we had orders to retreat again later in the afternoon and take up a further position in the rear. Once again I was given the job of covering the retreat so I sent my company off and retained one platoon to cover with. I gave them half an hour to get established and, as there had been no more attacks, sent the platoon off to join the other while I did a bit of reconnoitring myself. There didn't seem a German about and then I came across Tommy Rufus who commanded D Company - he was awarded the Military Cross for his conduct in the fighting on the 21st and 22nd. How he came to be on his own like me I don't remember but probably he had been covering the retreat elsewhere as we had a very long line and I suppose he was doing some reconnoitring like me. We compared notes and decided to find the Battalion. Just then there hove in sight a battery of field artillery at full gallop towards the German lines. It was a splendid sight, just like a tattoo. However we halted them and asked them where they thought they were going. When we explained that we were the only people between them and the Germans they decided to retire for further orders. It just shows the confusion that is inevitable in a retreat, as it is almost impossible to send an up to date position back to the higher command and even to keep in touch with your flanks was almost impossible; each body of troops had to take its own actions.

Rufus and I continued on our journey and then occurred the reflex in my feelings, from having been what I can only call fighting mad, all day; I became absolutely depressed and felt I could easily keep on walking back and let the whole thing go hang. It was then that I could better understand the feelings of the sergeant at whose Court Martial I was a judge. It could happen to anyone. For the time being of course, you must understand I had had nothing to eat or drink all day and was in a highly emotional state. However we found a tin of pork and beans someone had dropped and managed to open it, sat down and shared it between us and talked things over, by which time I had recovered my sanity and we made our way back to the Battalion.



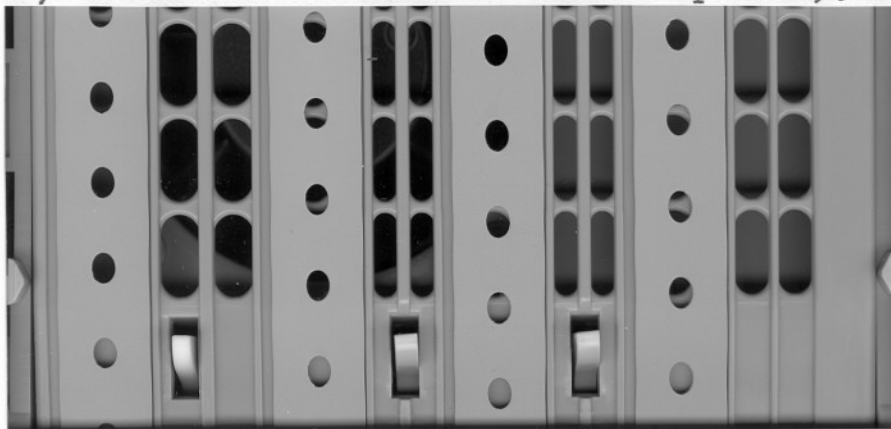
The Battalion was by now a cohesive whole and they were starting to construct a line of defence in touch with the rest of the Brigade. By the time I found B Company it was almost twilight and after seeing that everything was going forward I decided it was necessary to try and find out where the enemy was located as we seemed to have lost touch. So I called up one of my officers and explained that I wanted him to take out a patrol to reconnoitre the position. This he was most anxious to avoid and practically refused and if I wanted the information why didn't I do it myself. Well, I couldn't do it myself as there were strict orders that a company commander in these circumstances must stay with his command. I could understand his attitude in a way as he was several years older than I was and had actually come over to France on the same boat and we were together at Etaples, but he along with several others came to the 11th Battalion and there was a certain amount of envy that a youngster like me, and from another Battalion, should be promoted over their heads. It was natural I suppose but then I had seen more action than they had and was more experienced in command and had caught the COs eye. While I was trying to be reasonable and explain things a message came that we were to prepare to move again as we were to be relieved by the 62nd Division, the first of the reserves to come up. So the argument ended and we marched out and reassembled around 10pm in a field near Bucquoy. I should say that the whole of the time the weather had been very fine and sunny during the day but very cold and with frosts at night.

Our transport managed to find us, with the cookers and even some of our baggage and so a hot meal was served to all ranks before we lay down on the ground to sleep as near as possible to a huge fire we had lit. I was lucky to have my flea-bag come up with the transport so I and two others of my officers got in it with the blanket over us. How we managed it I don't know but it helped to keep us warm and we slept the sleep of the just, in spite of a very heavy frost. When we awoke at dawn the fire was made up and everyone had to thaw out before we had breakfast.

During the morning of the 26th we took up our position in one of our old trench lines in front of Gommecourt, and proceeded to put it in some sort of order in case the Germans broke through the 62nd Division. However, the day was quiet as far as we were concerned and at about 11pm we received orders to move out and assemble on the main road to Souastre. Then we marched all through the night and on the morning

of the 27th arrived at a little village near Couin. I have been on some route marches but never one like this, with the whole column asleep on the march. When we stopped for the ten minute break every hour we had to post men to keep awake while the rest of the Company slept at the side of the road. You must remember that we had been fighting and retreating and digging-in for six days and finished on the 27th and 28th by marching thirty-six miles in thirty-six hours. We had breakfast at the village and then billeted the men for a few hours sleep. I slept on a tiled floor in some house and it was about the hardest and coldest lie I have ever had.

However, we were off again by 2.30pm and marched to Puchevillers where we arrived about nightfall. The next day we marched to an area south of Doulleur. During this march B Company's permanent Officer Commanding, Capt. Beswick MC, came back from a course and took over command and I reverted to 2nd i/c. The 25th Division received very high praise from the Commander in Chief Haigh because, though constantly attacked, it was never dislodged from any position but had to retire to conform to the general retreat. It is a very difficult operation to know just when to retreat and when to hold, especially when your flanks are continually being exposed and it is difficult to keep in touch, but I still think we could have done better. But the confusion and each Company or Battalion having to act on its own without knowledge of the position elsewhere make it extremely difficult. Mind you, the one saving grace is that the enemy is in almost the same position as you are and while we were retreating on our supplies they were having to bring their supplies and guns up over bad country, with no roads over trenches and shell-holes, and having to continually regroup after having sustained heavy losses. But then of course they could bring up fresh divisions to sustain the attack whereas we had no support and heavy losses in men and equipment which we could not make good. However, the Germans could not sustain their impetus for ever and when our reserves finally came up they were eventually held. (It was on the evening of the 25th that I saw for the first time a group of tanks go into action and a big raid of 50/60 bombers on Bapaume. I had never seen so many before. Years later I found that two chaps I knew were in that show, one in the tanks and one in the planes).



I must also stress the high morale of the troops throughout the operations and also in the subsequent fighting on the Lys. We never actually doubted that we had the measure of the Germans and that we would eventually get the upper hand. I don't know why but we did, and we were amazingly cheerful most of the time in spite of our heavy losses - we had one officer killed, two missing and eleven wounded, and over half its strength in other-ranks. In this kind of fighting physique and fitness were of the utmost importance and many of the older men and those of sedentary occupations, of whom we had had a preponderance in our recent drafts, were at a big disadvantage - they simply could not run fast enough at times. As I read recently in the memoirs of Lord Lovat 'you have to be a young man to enjoy going into action'.

On March 31st/April 1st the division entrained at Candas for Caestre in the 2nd Army area and took over the line on April 2nd in front of Bloegsteert from the 2nd Australian division. The river Lys ran through the middle of No Mans Land in our sector; the land here was very wet and low lying, and streams ran under the duckboards in the trenches. You couldn't have deep dug-outs but only excavate in the sides of the trenches with very poor overhead cover. We only held the trenches for a few days and during that time I remember someone had a birthday and we had a party with a gramophone in one of the shelters. It was a very quiet part of the front and we had been sent there to recuperate.

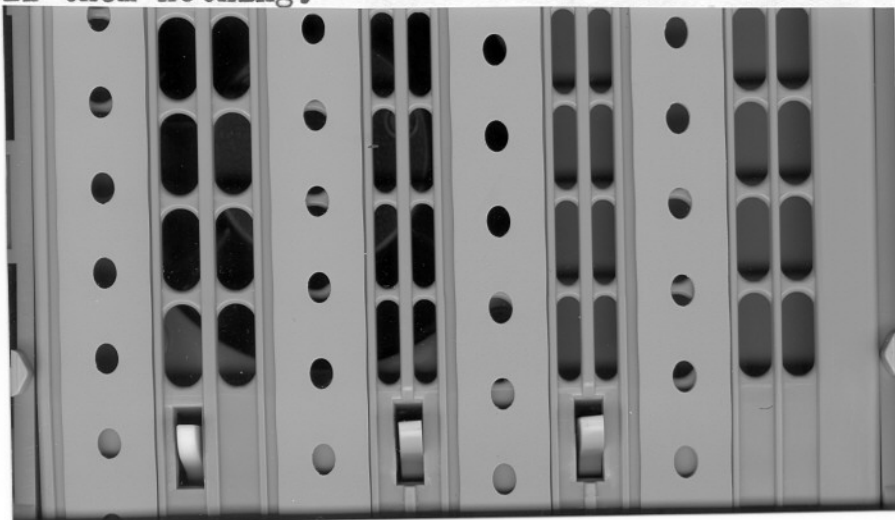
After a few days we were withdrawn to refit and receive reinforcements. We took the first opportunity of having a dinner and night out at the Officers Club at Armentieres which was still largely filled with Australians from the supply bases and dumps which were still there. They had held this area for a long time and, while we were having a drink at the bar, some came over and began talking very big. One big fellow, about six foot four and weighing half a ton, was boasting how long they had been fighting in France and I remarked 'no bloody wonder if he had sat guarding a dump well behind the line in such a quiet spot for the last eighteen months'. I thought I was for it as he advanced menacingly but I stood my ground and he was eventually held off by his friends and led away. I think he was just a loud-mouthed



and was probably more frightened than I was . However, we had a good dinner and enjoyed ourselves. We were in huts and the place was swarming with rats, so when we got back to camp we got our torches and revolvers and went out rat hunting and got quite a few.

Over breakfast the next morning, April 9th, we received a report that there was very heavy shelling on the front line but we didn't take much notice as it was a very quiet part of the line and nobody had any idea of the Germans making an attack there. On the day previous (April 8th) we had received two new officers and about sixty other ranks in our company; most of the privates were of the nineteen year-old class and the NCOs were ones who had been combed out of cushy jobs in England, all very inexperienced just having arrived in France. Several officers had gone into Bailleul to shop and buy-in when, at 11am, we were told to fall in and be ready to march into action as the Germans had broken through the front line, which was held by the Portuguese at this spot. The whole line had simply disintegrated and no one knew where the Pork and Beans had gone and when they would stop running; I never saw any throughout the operations. We were about ten miles behind the front line near Meuse (?) Eglise and were told that we had to march through Steenwerk to Bac-st-Maur, where we were told that Brigade HQ would be established. All this part of the front line was pretty well unspoilt country and the civilians were living and farming quite close to the front line.

As I said before, we had had no time to absorb our re-inforcements so all I could do was to inform them of what we were going to do and, as I couldn't know them from Adam, they must take a good look at me and obey my orders to the letter. This was essential as all officers went into action in Tommies' clothes and everyone looked alike. As we marched through Steenwerk all the people flocked to their doors; they were very anxious to know what was happening and some were already putting what they could together and preparing to evacuate. However, we could tell them nothing.



Bac-st-Maur was about three miles ahead and we were marching in column of fours with the transport in front. After about a mile we suddenly ran into machine-gun fire. The transport hurriedly turned back to the rear and we spread out in extended order on each side of the road, we being on the left. Captain Ward, the officer commanding of C Company (which I had joined at first) was wounded at the head of the company while marching and later died of his wounds. The doctor said he shouldn't have died if he had lived a clean life but his blood was poisoned with disease and he never had a chance.

I don't know whether it was the excitement or what but during the pause before we started to advance again I had to find a quiet spot and evacuate myself - hardly a dignified procedure during an action but nobody saw me.

We then got orders to advance. At one spot where there was a lot of open ground the machine-gun fire was especially heavy and for untried troops it was rather unnerving. Most of the time we had fairly good cover with hedges and ditches but the men were quite good really and followed to a man when I gave a lead. One of the bayonet-fighting sergeants from England performed well, carrying on as though he was on the parade ground, in an exercise. Well, we pushed forward for about half a mile and captured a farmhouse which we turned into a company HQ, as we were finally held up just past it and it was now late in the afternoon. Meantime the 9th Loyal North Lancs on our right had been pushing forward to Bac-st-Maur but were also held up. The 3rd Worcesters were on our left but we were unable to make any contact with them. The farmer's wife at our HQ was in labour and the baby was born some time during that night. What a time to choose to arrive.

About 2am we were told that the brigade was to make a concerted attack, the 9th Loyal N.Lancs to capture the little village of Croix de Bec while we were to advance as far as the River Lys and push the Germans back on the other side. It was a most difficult attack to organise as it was pitch dark and no one knew the ground at all. Soon after it started I found the whole company, or so it seemed, bunched together on a road that ran along our line of advance. Having sorted that out we advanced again but were soon held up. However, at 4.30am a further attack was organised, and it was while we were organising this that I gained contact with 2nd Lt. Bernstein MC on our right. We agreed on our plan of campaign. This was the last time I saw him as he must have been killed during the advance. I found his grave in a

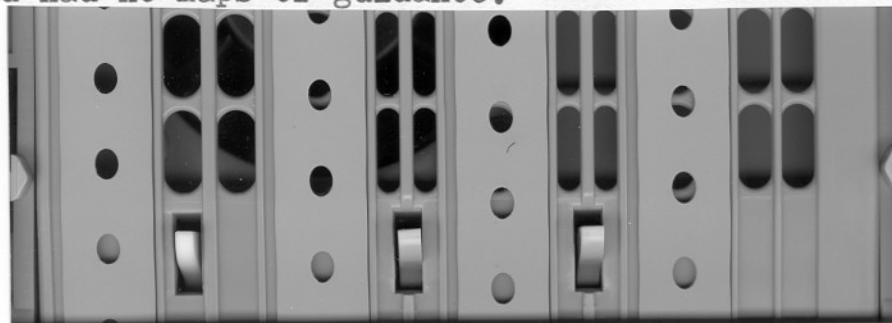


little burial ground just outside Croix-de-Bec when we visited there, one time in France. He was a very nice chap and a credit to the Jewish race.

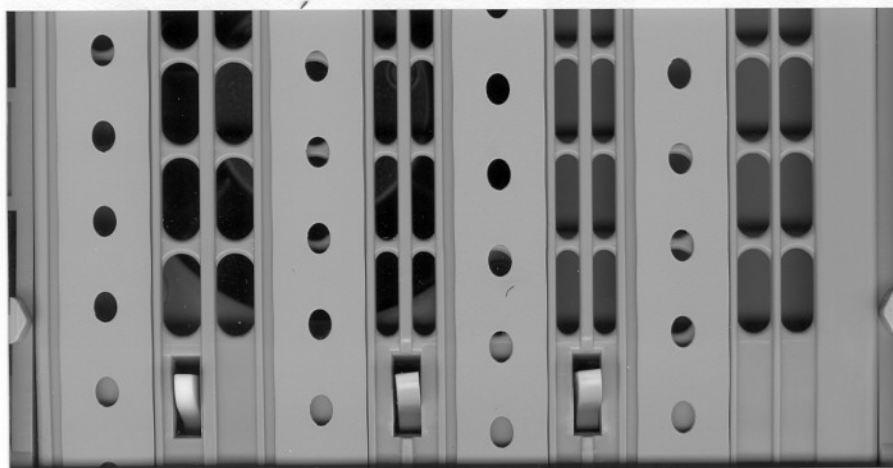
In this second attack the 9th Loyal N.Lancs captured Croix-de-Bec but we failed to capture the river bank and so they were forced to withdraw about 7am owing to enfilade fire. It was about this time when their CO, Lt.Col.Wienholt, DSO, rode into the village on horse-back and, not seeing any of his men, rode down the main street shouting 'where are the bloody North Lancs?'. The Germans, who were now holding the village, opened fire on him but he was able to turn around and make his escape at full speed. He was a real character.

At 9am we were ordered to make another attack and ran right into the German second day offensive which we managed to hold up, stopping them in their tracks. I still had no contact with the Worcesters on the left and by 10.30am the machine gun fire was very heavy and, by the sound of the gunfire, the enemy seemed to be outflanking me. I went back to the company HQ to report the exact position to Beswick who gave me orders to withdraw down the road which ran down the middle of our front. I gave the order to my troops on the right of the road to withdraw slowly to the road, and then I went forward to the left and gave the same instructions to Drinkwater and Torrance. They started alright but then the last platoon made a dash for it instead of retiring quietly under perfectly good cover and paid the penalty in casualties. It was then that two of our company stretcher-bearers did excellent work in getting the wounded out and thoroughly deserved the Military Medals they collected.

Meantime we seemed to have fewer men from the right flank which was much more exposed than the left and meant crawling in the open. I enquired if the order had been passed right up the line but they said yes and that there were quite a few dead where they lay. I have often blamed myself since for not having personally crawled up to satisfy myself but I had to organise the retreat down the road in small parties and at the same time keep a line to cover the retreat as by this time the Germans were aware of our position and were pushing forward under a very heavy machine gun barrage. We retreated on the farmhouse HQ and evacuated the HQ staff and Beswick. We had no contact with any other troops as we continued to retreat and during the confusion Beswick and I became separated, I eventually finding myself on my own with about 20/30 men that I had collected. It is very difficult to describe the confused state of affairs as the country was so flat and wooded and there were no land-marks. We had never seen that country before and had no maps or guidance.



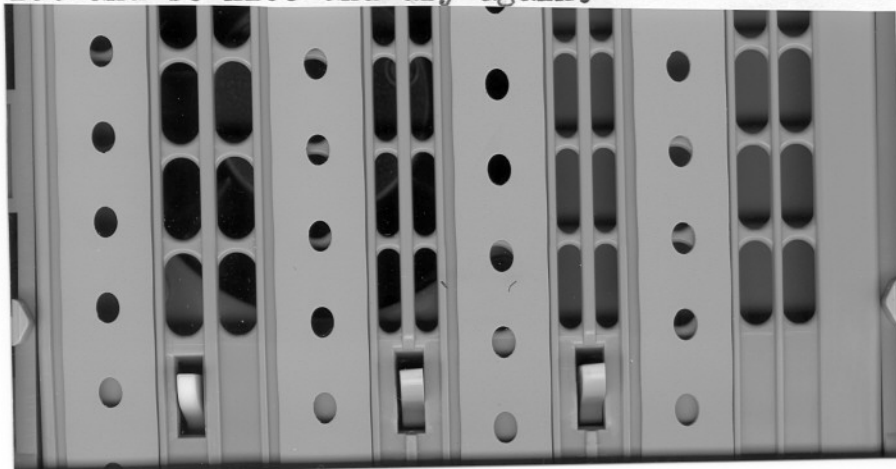
I thought I was retreating on Steenwerk but actually I was well left of it. I had no contact with other troops until I came on an artillery officer strolling along. He said he had a battery about two hundred yards back but didn't know what to fire at. So, I arranged to string my men out when they had a good field of fire and said I would give him protection. Having got my troops well established under cover my next thought was how I was to get out of the position under pressure from the Germans as there was a wide stream about fifty yards behind us which I later found ran up to Steenwerk station about a mile out of the village. However, I found my way down to the stream and was practicing taking cover through some bullrushes when suddenly a voice asked me 'what the devil I was doing'. It was Capt. Potts, the adjutant, all on his own and trying to get some cohesion into things. So I explained my position and he told me the Battalion were collecting to take up a position behind this stream, the Stil-Becque - a tributary of the Lys, about half a mile north-west of Steenwerk, running from Steenwerk station to Pont de Pierre. I then made arrangements to evacuate my position and to find some way to the other side of the stream which was about fifteen feet wide. While moving along the stream I found what I took for an island about midstream and decided we could jump on that about four feet and off again onto the other side. So of course Muggins must make the first leap and the whole thing proved to be a jam of logs and brushwood which must have been there some considerable time and looked solid enough. Well it wasn't and when I had extricated myself I had to swim to the other side, being absolutely soaked to the skin. But, moving ahead I found a small bridge and directed my party to cross by it. Everybody enjoyed the 'joke'?



It was by now late afternoon and we joined up with the rest of the Battalion on the line of the Stil-Becque. Our right-hand companies had been involved in heavy fighting in Steenwerk itself and Lt.Col.E.C. de R.Martin DSO was reported missing and was eventually confirmed as a prisoner of war. Command was taken over by Major Munday, a very nice chap who came from Rhodesia. We had shaken off the enemy for the time being and had time to reorganise in our companies and to join up with the Loyal N.Lancs. on our right. I should say that the wonderful weather continued throughout the operations, blue sky and sunshine all day though cold at night. So you can see that I was not in the best of trim to spend the night lying outside but I had no way of drying out. Somehow I managed to doze at times.

When morning came on the 11th we were ordered to advance and try to clear the outskirts of Steenwerk. In front of us was an enormous field with a farmhouse in the centre about halfway to Steenwerk. We started to advance about 9.30 in a typical early morning mist. We made good going and captured the farmhouse but were then held up. It was then that I saw Jack Giddings wounded but he was able to make his way back. Jack was a very nice chap and I met him again later in Manchester where he was a director of Giddings and Dacre, the wholesale suppliers of plumbing and other building materials just near the Cathedral bridge over the Irwell. He was a great friend of Rawle of Halliday and Constantine and we went over to their house at Chapel-en-le-Frith about 1936 but that was the last time I saw him as he died soon afterwards.

While we were at the farmhouse I spotted some valises lying out in the open, abandoned by some artillery officers, and decided to investigate. There were three and I had my pick of underclothes and shirts. I was in the middle of changing when the order came to advance, so I told Sgt.Major Abbott to 'carry on' and I carried on changing into a very good pair of breeks and magnificent field boots, only retaining my tommy's jacket which had dried out by now. What a pleasure to have got rid of that lot and be nice and dry again.



Although we advanced further it was impossible to reach our objective as the Germans were holding in strength and they had many machine-guns, so eventually we had to withdraw to our original line. We had a quiet night and also the following day, the 12th, apart from sending patrols forward. That same afternoon Beswick sent me back to Battalion HQ, based in a large farmhouse to the rear, and about four of us had a magnificent meal that we cooked ourselves and opened several bottles of white wine we had found in the cellar. It was very mature and very strong and tasted like nectar to us. Afterwards we got some feather-bed mattresses out on the floor and what with having had no sleep for the previous two days and nights, a good feed and plenty of wine, we slept the sleep of the just until the following morning. When we went out after breakfast the sun was shining, everywhere spring was bursting out and the animals were enjoying themselves; as Major Mundy observed to me, everything looked idyllic. The farmer and his family of course had abandoned the place some days ago. However we were soon back with the company and relieved others for a bit of a rest.

The enemy had made an attack on the right at the Pont-de-Pierre in the morning and had just made some impression but the position was restored very quickly. This was the 13th and the rest of the day passed fairly quietly on our front but the enemy made further progress on our flanks and we were gradually being squeezed in a salient. We were ordered to make an organised withdrawal during the night of the 13th/14th which we did quite successfully. By 5am on the 14th we were digging ourselves in on the forward slopes of the Mont-de-Lille, about 1 mile SE of Bailleul and forming a connected front.

The enemy soon found out that morning that we had retreated. Having brought up a considerable amount of artillery by now they soon registered on the new line we were digging. They gave us a very hot time and caused a number of casualties but the men needed no pushing to dig faster and gradually we were getting well down. During one heavy spell I was moving along to the right of the line, where I had a detachment, and stopped to have a chat with Capt. Rufus of A Company where they had dug an HQ which was very deep. As the shelling was very heavy he urged me not to be a 'damn fool' but to stay with them until things calmed down. However I was worried about my men as I had not seen them for the last hour and I decided to get on. They had had one or two wounded but were by now getting well dug-in and everything seemed to be in hand; so, after about a quarter of an hour, I started to go back to my main body.




On going through A Company section there was great activity amongst stretcher bearers and digging party. Poor Tommy Rufus and his Sgt. Major had copped a direct hit and been blown to blazes. So I was lucky again, as I had been about an hour earlier when supervising and urging on the digging-in and a shell landed at my feet splattering everybody with earth. It must have been a dud as when everything had cleared and the troops were frozen stiff expecting to have to pick up my pieces there I was standing up and shouting at them to b..... well get on with it, it wasn't a Sunday School party.

That afternoon the shelling got worse and you felt as though you were being sniped at by shells but we were well dug in and I amused myself by sniping at the Germans at about 800 yds range as they were gathering at the foot of a hill for an attack, eventually made later in the day. Beswick, who was now in command of the Battalion, had taken up his HQ in the convent at the summit and sent down a request for me to go to HQ and report on the whole situation. I went up and did so and Beswick said I had better get a sleep for a few hours as I had been up the previous night and looked like being up that night as well, which I was. During this period the Germans attacked around dusk and managed to make an inroad to our defences but fortunately 2nd Lieutenant Ward, who was bringing up about thirty re-inforcements from somewhere, took charge and made a counter-attack with great success, throwing the Germans out and pursuing them down the slope. For this action he received the Military Cross.

While all this was going on I was in the land of Nod but when I awakened I started looking round the cellars and found a stock of full Rum jars. So I rejoined the front line bearing gifts. I was received with great enthusiasm and dished out a good ration all round.

During the early hours of the 15th we were relieved by the 17th Brigade, a Midland Territorial, and we withdrew to the high ground overlooking the Bailleul-Meteren road. It was sometime during the fighting that my previous servant Roberts, from the 9th Battalion, came up from somewhere and immediately attached himself to me and took over, acting as servant and runner. As I had lost my razor he said he had found one in a haversack, thrown away by someone, and, after he had sterilised it in boiling water, it enabled me to get a shave that morning on the 15th. I have used that razor ever since up to about my 81st birthday but finally the thread has gone. I am afraid I looked on it as a talisman and refused to change it for any other. Such is superstition.



A microfilm frame showing a section of a film strip with sprocket holes and a central vertical slot.

Later in the morning we were told to dig a new line of defence about 200yds down from the top of the ridge, which was heavily wooded, so as to give a good field of fire. We knew there were forces holding a line on the forward slope but they were well forward and we never made contact as we were so busy digging in. We were on the alert all night and in the early morning I took a fighting patrol up to the ridge and beyond but could make no contact. Later we heard our forward troops had melted away in the night and we were again in the front line. About 10am Beswick sent word that he was sending Capt. Hutson to relieve me and I was to go back to HQ. I was handing over to Hutson when we noticed a German party had taken over a farmhouse about halfway up the slope. Well they had to be ejected and Hutson asked me if I would take charge and clear the position. I was fed up as I was tired, no sleep for the last thirty-six hours but, as Hutson said, who else had he got to do the job satisfactorily, so I reluctantly agreed. You must remember that many of the troops were inexperienced young soldiers, or older ones dug out from cushy jobs, scrapings from here, there and everywhere and we had had no time to weld them into a fighting force. So, when I asked for volunteers there wasn't one. Not like the old W Company. Shades of Box and Barlow. So I told off a 2nd Lieutenant and ten other men to accompany me.

