

trenches to Bazentin le Petit. Our guns were massed about here in amazing numbers and a continuous desultory fire was maintained day and night. We took up positions with our guns on rising ground near Bazentin and could see part of High Wood across the small valley which separated us from it. A few shells fell near us but not very many; this was the day before the attack and everything was being moved up into position. A battalion of Australians passed by us on their way to forward positions and aeroplanes were busy overhead. The 47th Division was in the centre of the attack with the Guards on the left and Australians on extreme right. Tanks were to be used for the first time (we called them caterpillars then), and we passed two of them shrouded very mysteriously in the road on our way up. It was now late afternoon, 14th September 1916, and the sun was very hot overhead. High Wood was getting a lot of explosive thrown into it and we felt very glad that we were only giving overhead fire and that we were not in High Wood itself where some of our guns were in position.

Shortly before dawn broke on the 15th we got our guns ready in the darkness and loaded up and checked the elevation and direction and then stood by waiting; dawn was breaking faintly with promises of a fine day when our artillery fired their first few shells, and then the drum bombardment fell like a thunderclap on the German positions; the whole of the crest in front was hidden by the smoke from the shells and the fumes rose higher and higher until soon nothing could be seen - not even the red shell bursts. We gave our overhead fire ~~the~~ for the set

time and then stopped - our job in these positions had been finished and we were no more use here. We stayed here until the afternoon when it was obvious that the advance had succeeded but it was unknown to what extent. Later we heard that we had taken High Wood and the whole line was pushing on towards Flers. In the meantime we were holding tight, knowing that sooner or later our turn was coming to go up there, and the shelling was still pretty heavy. In the late afternoon word came that water was badly needed by our guns which took part in the attack, and I and two others were chosen as the honourable bearers of two petrol tins full of water each. So from Bazentin we staggered in the hot afternoon with our awkward load and up the communication trench to the Wood; we soon left this however for the top as it was so blown in that we were better off out of than in it and large groups of very badly wounded and dead were lying in traverses; the Wood itself was a mass of wounded who had crawled there for a little cover. We were pouring with perspiration as the tins were heavy and we did not waste more time than we could help on the journey. Trenches crisscrossed through the Wood and we passed through here pretty nearly at the double - shells were falling all over the place; we then reached what the previous morning had been the German front line and this trench had been simply smashed to bits in most parts and was full of blown off legs and arms and trunks and dead bodies in various shapes. We passed over this and eventually found one gun team in a shell hole full of infantry - they all looked pretty well knocked up and I was hoping we would not have to stay there as the shelling increased and some of it was very heavy stuff; there

was no cover but the shell hole and the whole place reeked of shell fumes. After a time, however, the three of us went back to a surprisingly good dugout in the German front line that had survived the bombardment, and after staying here until darkness, were told to report back to Bazentin and we made our ~~jour~~ journey back in the darkness as quickly as we could.

Next morning, however, our whole section fell in to ~~g~~ move up the line; we reached the top of the crest quite safely when we were held up for a time by some heavy shelling. In the narrow piece of trench in which we took cover my steel helmet received a nasty bang from a piece of shell which knocked my helmet over my eyes. We left this cover and topped the rise and were moving rapidly downwards on the other side, exposed most of the time to sniping, when I was hit by a bullet in the right arm. I dropped down and investigated the extent of the damage and then went back to be dressed. From here I was soon cleared away from the Somme and in a few days arrived at Norwich hospital. Farrington was killed near the Wood; also Farmer, whose legs were blown off, and others, after I was wounded.

I rejoined the 7th after my leave and after various moves in England obtained a transfer to the Machine Gun Corps and was sent to Clipstone in Notts. After more training here I was drafted about July 1917 to France. We had a rough crossing and some long hot marches to join our unit, but eventually found we were attached to the 8th Division who were resting behind Ypres.

Before finishing with High Wood, however, it may be mentioned that the tanks were only partially successful - one that we had working with us stuck quite close to the Wood so did not do much in the engagement. Up to High ~~Wood~~ Wood I had spent just twelve months in France without a break and about nine months of this with the machine guns, but High Wood finally broke up our machine gun section. But besides casualties I afterwards heard that Sergeant Herring was sent to the base as an instructor with Sergeant Payne, and many others applied for commissions in the M.G.C. and returned to England. These included Stirling, Webster, Sporle and Sivell. So that the 140th Brigade Machine Gun Section 'B' ^{Company} existed no more after High Wood as far as our old section was concerned.

However, on my third return to France I joined the 8th Division and speedily found myself in the line again passing through Bailleul and Ploegstroet Wood. The old Wood was full of early graves and old shell holes and forcibly brought home to one how long the war had already been on (it was now July 1917). Many of the graves were overgrown with grass and the original wooden crosses had become stained and weather marked. Many of the ~~th~~ trees were standing in the wood and the undergrowth was again growing and getting quite thick in places. Old trenches made in 1914 were still standing quite strongly, with their names, such as Bunhill Row, Oxford Street, still plainly showing, but the front had shifted from here to the far side of the wood in the open, although the Wood was still shelled and sheltered many of our field guns.

We spent some time in positions about here and

had a fairly quiet time except for one dummy attack in which we took part and gave a lot of overhead fire. For this purpose we shifted to an isolated piece of trench in some marshy ground and we were nearly caught by some very heavy shells which fell very near. For cover in this trench we tried to clear the mouth of an old German dugout which had been blown in and had remained in disuse for probably many months. We managed to clear the entrance sufficiently to obtain a little head cover as there was not much protection in the trench, but in the mouth of the dugout itself a German had been killed and there left, and we were forced to expose him in our scraping operations, although as these were done at night, we did not know for sure until daybreak what we had been digging at. His flesh was green and as we were compelled to stay quite close to him for about twenty four hours, it was not very pleasant, and we left him finally with much pleasure.

A strange position that we had in this sector was in an old German concrete shelter almost on the edge of the River Lys opposite Warneton, and why the Germans did not smash the thing up with heavy shells I could never understand, as it overlooked his lines and was quite isolated, and we had two machine guns mounted near the roof. Probably in the event of an attack he was perfectly prepared to blow the whole thing up at a minute's notice, and I believe that later on in the war this actually happened. But we were very comfortable in it for some days.

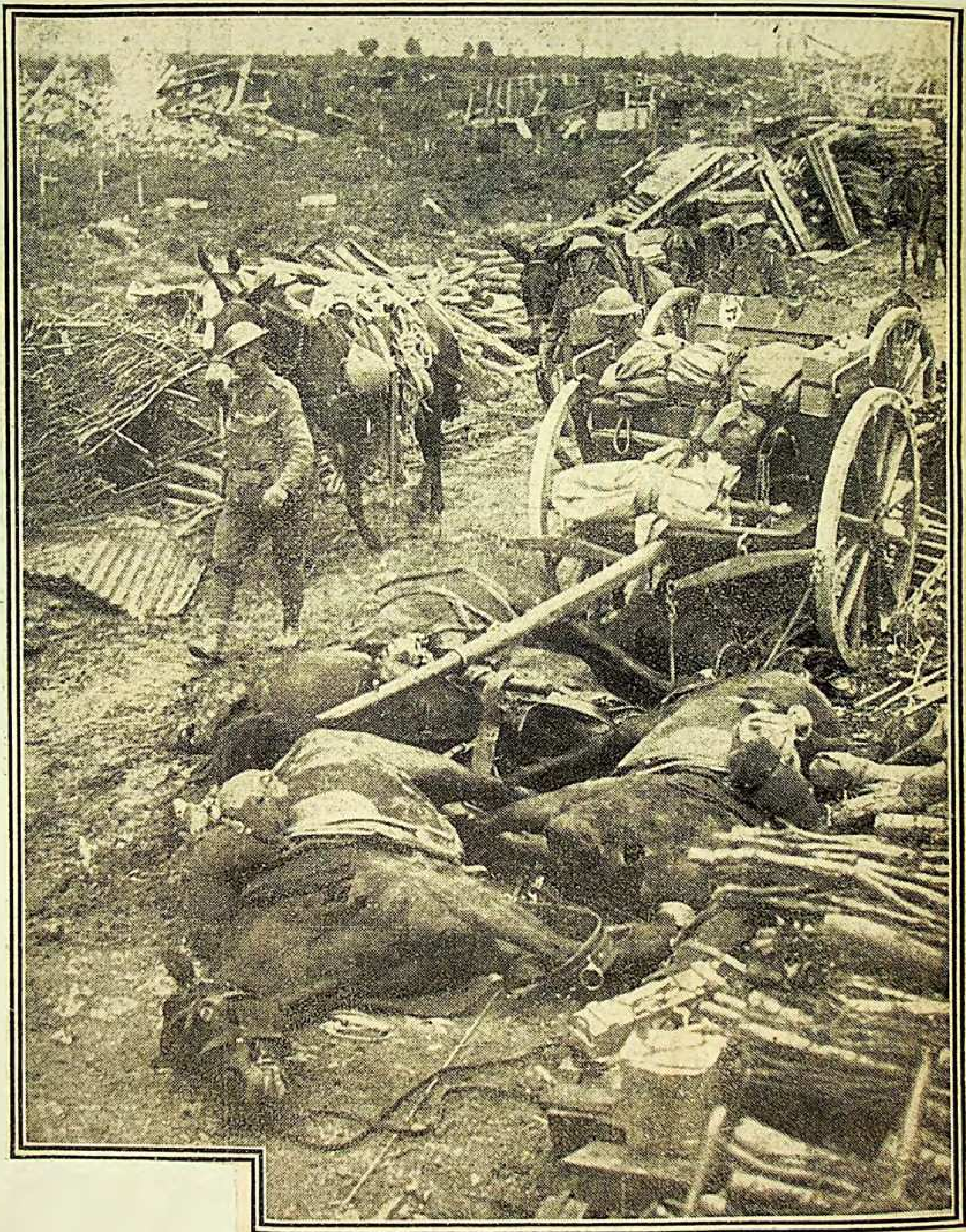
We had many different positions in and around this sector and got to know Ploegstoert Wood, Armentieres, Neuve Eglise, etc., very well. Our rests were spent in

huts near Steenvoorde, but air raids were getting very frequent and although no bombs were actually dropped on the camp several fell very near and one aeroplane came down low enough to fire his machine gun at the camp but his aim was high and nobody was hurt.

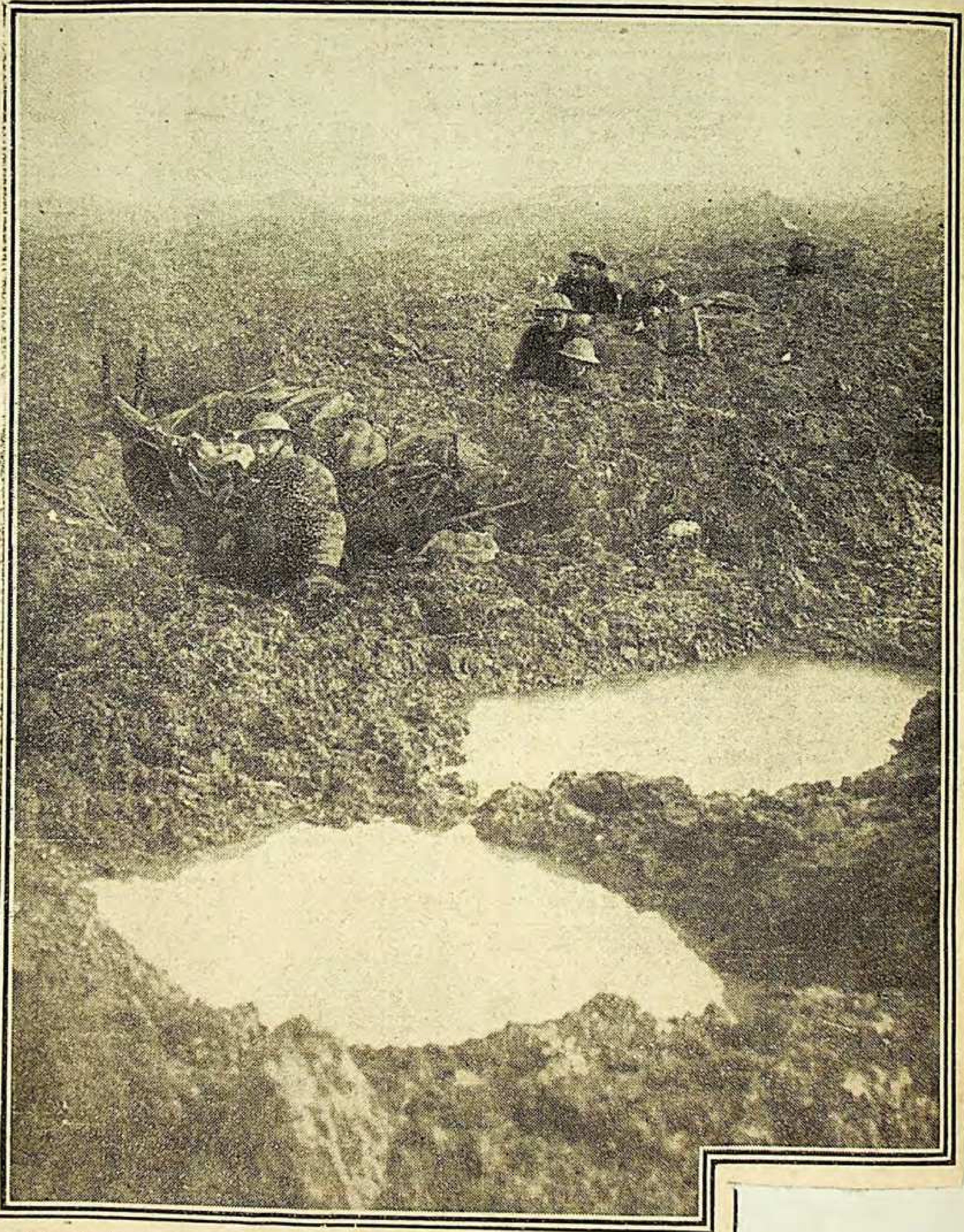
We did not have many casualties in this sector - a few killed and some wounded, as on the whole nothing very much happened. I was ill for a few days after turning up the dead German, but soon recovered without leaving the line.

Towards the end of October 1917 we heard that we were to go to Ypres, and the news did not make us very joyous. However, early in November we made the journey and detrained near Ypres and marched to St. Jean in the darkness and mud, and found that we were to go into tents for the time being. We entered these dripping tents and lit candles but as soon as we had lit them an air raid warning went off and out went our candles. We arrived in the Ypres sector in darkness but even night could not hide the place - thick glue-like mud was everywhere and directly we arrived we could not help realising that we were in for a pretty swinish time. The drumming sound of the German bombing planes was our welcome to Ypres and we left it, some months later, one cold frosty morning with many of us missing, to the tune of high velocity shells which seemed to say they were sorry any of us were leaving the Salient alive.

We were not allowed much rest in the tents, as after a couple of hours rest, the Canadian guides arrived for us, and we unpacked our guns from the limbers and followed our particular guide along endless duck-



Tommy carries on amid the terrible destruction of the St. Jean-road, Ypres, which all day and every day was strewn the wreckage of war.



Holding the line at Passchendaele. There is no trench, but only a series of water-filled holes amid a sea of mud. Somehow, the men had moments of cheerfulness.

If you want to find your sweetheart
I know where 'e is,
'E's a 'anging on the 'ole barbed wire.
I seen 'im, I seen 'im,
'anging on the ole barbed wire I seen 'im,
'anging on the ole barbed wire.

boards in the darkness over black mud and putrid water; there was certainly not a dry piece of land that I saw that night, and some of the holes full of water looked deep enough to float a small ship. We all of us had a load of some kind and these got heavier and heavier as we toiled along with eyes fixed hard on the duckboards on the lookout for loose boards or gaps in the track. At last, however, dawn appeared and we found we had only reached Gravenstafel ridge and could get no further in daylight. We were forced to stay under cover on this ridge during the day therefore and the next evening we passed Waterloo dump and followed a little winding road to Passchendaele village. At least the road was partly visible at the start, afterwards one simply felt for the road; in parts it was completely under water from a small stream which had been dammed and overflowed and dead mules and men were still lying on it covered with mud. Fortunately for us the road was not shelled until just before we reached the village, or the remains of it and then they burst on either side of the road. But things around looked as depressing as they could possibly look; the whole place looked as if it had been through several violent earthquakes and we hurried on to reach our positions. It was now quite dark and without any delay a guide took our gun to its position, which proved to be in the middle of a field in a shellhole covered over with an old piece of thin galvanized iron which might have kept water out but nothing else. Here we stayed all night and the

night was fairly quiet but in the early hours of the morning when it was still but half light, hell itself was let loose and I realised what was meant by the term "drum" bombardment, because no one sound could be separated from others except when a shell burst exceptionally near to us; apart from this it was just like a huge hammering on millions ~~of~~ ^{of} drums so that one loud continued roar resulted. Shells were falling pretty thickly round about and the fumes from these worked their way into our little shelter, giving us an awful thirst. The smallest whizzbang would have gone clean through our cover so that we did not feel very happy. It was like this on and off for the four days we stayed in this position, but after the first day a system of reliefs was started, by means of which we did 12 hours in the hole and then 12 hours in a good deep dugout in Passchendaele village (or the heap of brickdust that went by that name). Unfortunately I fell in ~~th~~ for the daytime shift, which was the noisy one, and as dawn broke each day we had to scamper like hell from the dugout along a small track and cross a field to our little hole and stay there until nightfall. One morning a shell burst just outside the dugout door as we preparing to leave and blew my companion down the stairs again on top of me and plunged the whole dugout in darkness of course.

During the first two days we tried deepening our little hole in the field with entrenching tools so as to get more cover, but when only about 3 feet down we struck water so had to stop and only made ourselves more uncomfortable.

One night during the few hours we were spending ⁱⁿ the the dugout resting, the sergeant came down the steps and reported that the two men on one of the guns were killed - he had been round visiting the posts at dusk and had seen them lying dead in their shell hole. Arrangements were made for their identity discs to be collected and men detailed off to bury them, when the men we were speaking about in hushed tones, came down the steps, as it was relief time, and started settling down to some tea before turning in. It appeared that they had only been lying down and were possibly dozing when the trusty sergeant saw them, and he, possibly anxious not to spend too much time in the dangerous open, had jumped to conclusions unnecessarily. One of these two men, however, was killed later on near this very spot. *His head was blown off.*

At the end of four days we were relieved, and we positively galloped back ^{in the darkness} along the Passchendaele Road - at least we started off with this intention, but the mud and the road itself were against us, and before we reached Gravenstafel Ridge we were just dragging ourselves along and panting for a drink of water. This we luckily obtained from a cluster of petrol tins full of water which had been dumped, and we then took our time along the duckboards to St. Jean where some hot soup was awaiting us - also an air raid. But this did not trouble us at the time as it seemed such a flea bite after the ridge, and I know I just curled up under the table after the soup and went fast asleep.

We stayed at St. Jean for a day or so and then went back to Vlamertinghe to rest in preparation for

an attack that the Division was making. From Vlamertinghe we returned to St Jean, and one night gathered our tools together and wandered back to a spot near the ridge to prepare positions for the morrow's attack. On the way up a heavy shell fell right amongst some transport horses at the end of the plank track, just before we arrived, and knocked out a couple of men and horses.

I did not take part in this attack as ~~my~~ although it seems trivial, my boots were so very bad and there was not another pair for me, that I was kept behind at St. Jean. My boots arrived shortly after the attack had started. We had many killed and wounded: one very heavy shell fell right into one of our gun positions and killed three and buried the remainder. During the course of this action two members of the section were sent down with a stretcher case to the first dressing station near Waterloo Dump, and after taking the wounded man to the station, instead of returning to their positions they came back to St. Jean and refused to return when told to do so by the Sergeant Major. They were placed under arrest and after being confined for some days, were tried and sentenced to a few days field punishment, so got off rather lightly under the circumstances.

We had various other positions about the ridge but eventually a fresh division came up to relieve us and I acted as guide to the Machine Gun Company relieving ours in the line. We started off quite well, but unfortunately I had obtained a water bottle full of rum

from the quartermaster sergeant, and on nearing Waterloo Dump I first felt the effects of the occasional sips of this that I was taking, and when the relief suddenly darted to cover when the road commenced to be shelled, I remember that they seemed rather ^{to} amuse me as I stood outside the shelter watching the effects of the shells bursting on the road. Shortly after this, and just past Gravenstafel Ridge I must have collapsed into a shell hole full of mud, because I knew nothing more until some hours later when I awoke on a stretcher outside the pill-box (turned into a dressing station) on the ridge and found myself covered in mud and with my tin hat and water-bottle missing, and feeling very weak and groggy. I obtained permission to leave the station and after waiting for a little shelling to stop I commenced the journey back to St. Jean in the darkness.

It was a rotten journey back alone on the Passchendaele Road and I made as great speed as I could, but felt knocked up by the time I had reached the plank track. I found a water cart there and had a good drink and by this time felt so exhausted that I perched myself on its cold ~~iron~~ iron back and let it carry me back at a slow pace towards St. Jean. It was November and an iron water cart is not a very warm conveyance in cold weather but it gave me a badly needed rest. It branched off some time before it reached my destination and I struggled on as best I could on foot - I had never~~y~~ felt so fagged out and my legs were doubling up under me. I found the camp and crawled into a tent and got what sleep I could until

morning when we fell in to march to the station, as we were going right back on a rest. I must have looked a rather remarkable sight in the early morning, as the mud on me had hardly time to dry, and if I looked as I felt, I must have looked a ~~ge~~ groggy sort of spectacle. Nothing was officially said to me however, and we reached the train to go back on our rest. We went well back away from the line and on detraining found we had a long night march to our billets. It was a very clear moonlit night and bitterly cold - I well remember how infernally cold the moon looked on that night. I did not feel at all like a long march, but most of us after our stay at Passchendaele were a little unfit so that the march was not done in record time and we all did the best we could. I tried another lift on our own water cart, but on this occasion soon got off as I preferred to march rather than get frozen to the water cart.

We eventually reached our destination, which proved to be a tiny hamlet consisting of two or three farm buildings and nothing else, and we were very glad of the hot tea and soup which awaited our arrival, but the usual delay followed of drawing blankets and arranging details for the morning, so that we finished by being completely fed up again.

The next morning I awoke feeling very ill and saw the doctor who found I had a very high temperature, and on his instructions I remained on my bed of straw in the billet for two or three days until I got better - I think it was influenza, the result of my exposure and the rum during my acting as guide to Passchendaele, but it left me feeling pretty rotten for the ~~the~~ remainder of our rest.

Barnes was very good to me during this time; also an old Frenchwoman with a face like an old wrinkled apple just round the corner who lived in a very quaint little farmhouse, with a wide open chimney filled with sides of bacon curing and the fire was generally made of charcoal level with the floor. She sent me in hot soup quite often and I sent back what I did not want of my rations. I also got plenty of hot milk from her. Poor old Barnes was killed later on during the big German offensive.

We were now nearing Christmas 1917 and I had a letter from Lewis here. He had been at Poelcappelle while I was at ~~Passen~~ Passchendaele and he told me in his letter that he was hoping to return to England shortly re his commission; I envied him very much as I knew we had the Ypres sector to return to again after our couple of weeks' rest, and the war showed ^{no} signs of finishing, on the contrary.

Snow fell very thickly for several days and we had our Christmas dinner in a large marquee - it was nothing very exciting - roast pig. We were miles from even the meanest of shops and just had our own canteen to supply any extras.

Our rest soon came to an end and we entrained for the third time to Ypres after a long walk to the station through snow that was several inches thick all the way and made marching difficult.

We stayed this time near the canal in Ypres but were very soon on our way to the ridge again. It was totally different this time going up however; for one thing it was now ~~but~~ bitterly cold and everything was

coated with ice. The roads and tracks all had a thin coating of ice over their surface and we were slipping all over the road during the latter stage of the journey to the line; the shell holes were frozen over and on several days while we were here it meant breaking the ice in a shellhole in order to get water for shaving and washing. It was strangely quiet all the way up to our position and we reached our position without incident. The position itself was just behind the front line (or the shell holes called the front line) and was in the remains of an old cellar. The chief trouble during the stay here was the cold; it was fearfully cold and in spite of treatment our feet gave us trouble as we could not move at all during the day. But on the whole we were delighted to find the sector so much more quiet although it was still far from being pleasant.

From this position we moved back to Waterloo Dump near Gravenstafel Ridge and I had a good look round here as it was very interesting; many tanks had been hit in this place and left as they were hit and the insides of some of them were rather gruesome. Many bodies were still lying in the shellholes; lots of these were covered when the shellholes were full of water and mud, but during a dry spell the shellholes gave up their dead and fully exposed the black and green bloated bodies or parts of bodies. I should think there were hundreds of them scattered between Gravenstafel Ridge and Passchendaele.

We stayed in the Passchendaele sector until the end of February 1918 with many changes to different

positions and with intervals just away from the line at Vlamertinghe, Steenwerck, etc. I also went on an anti-aircraft course at the R.A.F. camp at Poperinghe.

Just before we left the Ypres sector to go back to St. Omer, gun positions for the artillery were being dug just in front of Ypres as it was expected that a big attack from the Germans would come here. Of course, finally it did come and partially succeeded, and our old camp at St. Jean appeared in the front line once more.

Nissen huts were now becoming very popular just behind the lines and all rest camps were being built of these characterless things. They consisted of a wooden framework covered with a semicircular galvanized iron roof and had the advantage that they could be put up in about half an hour.

However, we left Ypres with deep feelings of gratitude, for of all the miserable, gloomy sectors of the whole line that I had seen, Ypres capped the lot. The surrounding country was dreadfully flat and the mud from the front line back for miles was everywhere; when we first arrived in November 1917 the whole place was one huge morass with water trickling everywhere. Shells would come from all sorts of queer directions and the whole place was one vast burial ground. Ypres itself at this time was simply a mass of stones and rubbish with barely a wall even standing anywhere. But we were leaving ^{the Salient} Ypres, and as it happened I was not to see it again during the war. We had left many of our company behind us on those swinish ridges and those of

us that came out had the Salient firmly impressed upon us by our four months stay there.

The weather brightened up for our arrival at a village near St. Omer and became almost warm. We soon cleaned and polished ourselves up and discipline tightened; ceremonial parades of all kinds were started including changing guard while the band played; the battalion falling in to the tapping of a drum, etc. We also did a lot of gun firing on the range. It was obvious that we were being keyed up in readiness to be shifted to the scene of the big German attack which was now expected daily, but when it did come it happened at the extreme end of the line and we were rushed off helter skelter to fill the gap as well as we could.

We had been about a fortnight away from the line at the time and one day, early in the evening, I was in an estaminet at St. Omer settling down for the evening, when suddenly word came through that all were ^{to} return to billets at once and stand by for orders. We returned as quickly as we could and received orders to fall in at once in full marching order; we then heard that the Germans had attacked in force and had broken our line in the Somme direction, but could gather nothing more except that things looked bad.

After a few hours waiting we were pushed off to the nearest railhead and commenced our journey to where the attack was taking place. The rail journey took a long time, about a day and a half I think, but we finally detrained at Rosieres (a fair sized ^z town). It was a splendidly warm afternoon near the end of March and we waited about in the sun on the siding of the station

for orders and no sound of firing or anything at all to remind us of the war could be heard. So far Rosieres had not experienced any warfare and the whole place seemed very peaceful and drowsy. Little did we know at the time that in a few days we should be falling back through this town with shells falling in the streets and many of the buildings on fire. However, we were not kept waiting long in the station; lorries arrived; our heavy valises were dumped; and we mounted the lorries in skeleton battle order with our guns filled up and ready for action. The lorries departed in a whirl of hot dust and we bumped along for a couple of hours or more before we were tumbled out at a small village of the usual straggling French kind. Shortly after our arrival a few shells were sent into the village and these gradually increased in number until it became rather uncomfortable; we had to take cover as best we could by the sides of houses as we had to remain here until dusk fell and shrapnel was sending the tiles of roofs flying; the transport had a few casualties.

Just before darkness we fell in and then found that one of our company had hidden himself in a cellar and had to be dragged out. I do not remember what happened to him but he was probably suffering from shell shock or bad nerves. We pushed up the road outside the village until we reached an old German trench and placed our guns in position in front of this. We had passed some infantry on our way and were told that there were more in front of us somewhere by a canal. We elevated the guns to an angle of about 45 degrees and kept up an intermittent fire all night.