

After we had placed the guns in position and opened fire and shaken down for an hour so everything seemed to be normal and quiet, and as we were short of rations, I took a small party back to the village about midnight and endeavoured to hunt up somebody responsible for our grub, but without success; the village had been more or less evacuated since our arrival. Finally we found an empty house and took the opportunity of a short nap in this place; the floor was of stone, however, and the windows glassless and the moon shining through them did not give it a very cosy look so that we soon left and went back, after our unsuccessful search, to the trench. The nights in March are very cold and in this particular year in spite of quite warm days, the nights were very chilly.

It was now nearing daylight and on nearing the guns it was evident that something out of the ordinary was about to happen, and word came along in some mysterious fashion that Jerry had pushed by us some way up on the left; our positions now fell in for some shelling and the infantry in front of us were seen to be falling back, first slowly and then rather hurriedly. We fell back with them but only retired ^{rather hurriedly} to the other side of the barbed wire - a distance of about 30 yards. We were now entirely in the open, however, and I found a disused dry cesspool near the road in which I placed our gun. This gave us a fair amount of good cover. The infantry were stretched out in a long line in the open on either side of us in a way that reminded me of early manoeuvres at Burgess Hill and Watford. Plenty of stuff was coming over, shrapnel without any cover being particularly unpleasant. Shorrocks was killed, also Lieut. X

among others, before night fell, and it was then found that our gun was out of order and would only fire single shots and that the spare parts case had been left behind in our last position owing to ^{the} hurried move. The shell fire during the day in the open was damned uncomfortable and Shorrocks was actually killed by a shell which did not explode.

Nothing much happened overnight except a few alarms, and there was undoubtedly much movement on the other side of the barbed wire. Of course, Jerry had the trench (one of his old ones), while we were in the open with only the barbed wire separating us. Early in the morning we (our gun) were told to clear out back with the gun to get it put right, so we left our hole one at a time and went back to the village. The infantry we passed, who were in lines in the open behind us, seemed very nervy and heavy rifle firing was taking place in front. The Germans were also putting over some trench mortars. The village itself was being heavily shelled and a splinter narrowly missed my face and hit a wall. About 10 a.m., much to our surprise, German machine gun fire broke out quite near to us, and very shortly afterwards our infantry began to retire - at first slowly - but gradually very quickly until the village was almost blocked by troops. Our limbers were waiting for us and took us back to our next stopping place, about a mile from our positions of the morning. The positions were in the middle of a flat field near the road, and as the infantry arrived they were spread out into a rough line in the open. Men were now coming down the road as if they were a crowd leaving a football

match and there was no doubt about the retirement being forced upon us, and our present positions which had evidently been only just decided on were bad ones. But we seemed to have no artillery supporting us except for one or two field guns, and German aeroplanes came over almost when and how they pleased.

Some heavy shells fell on the road near us and we blew up two tanks to prevent them falling into Jerry's hands. Our armoured cars then appeared and moved towards the village we had retired from and which was now being heavily shelled, and some heavy rifle firing came from the village, but the cars very soon returned.

This kind of fighting was entirely fresh to us and totally different to trench warfare, and in my opinion, retirements were commenced long before there was any real need. Many rumours as to the Germans having broken through on left or right were always coming through, and on our taking up fresh positions it seemed to be expected that sooner or later they would get through our lines.

Early in the afternoon, before he came in contact with us, we shifted back still further to the far side of a railway embankment, which gave very good cover and we mounted our guns on the top of this while the infantry lined up beneath it. A trench mortar behind us fired a few shells and a single 18 pounder also fired occasionally but the rest of our artillery appeared to have vanished. The Germans could be seen crossing the crest well in front of us and machine gun fire was opened on them but they were about 2000 yards away and the effect of the fire could not be closely observed.

We could only see little black figures ^(Germans) running over the brow of the hill. ^{in front} My gun was firing on the light tripod (the heavy one having been lost), when the tripod collapsed and a couple of bullets hit the metal railway line just in front of the muzzle of the gun but no harm was done. A little shelling now occurred but not very much and two German cyclists rode right into our lines before they realised where they were, and were taken; they were poor spectacled ~~specimens~~ specimens. We expected to stay in this position for some time but about midnight we were ordered to fall back again, and commenced a long roundabout march of at least five or six miles and spent the night in an empty house - it was very cold and we ransacked the village to try and find something to make sleeping more comfortable on the stone floor, ^{of the empty house we were in} but found nothing, as the village was quite deserted and horribly gaunt and empty looking.

Next morning we boarded motor lorries and were taken forward to some old trenches and there waited a few hours, but nothing happened except an occasional fright and a little shelling, and early in the afternoon we retired across the open fields to the outskirts of Rosières (the place we had detrained at a few days previously). New trenches had been dug in front of this town and it appeared that we would make a stand here as the infantry were already manning ^{the trenches.} them.

We had time for a good look round Rosières during the afternoon (as the town had been evacuated by the civilians), and no shelling had yet started, and plenty of wine was found in various cellars. We spent a peaceful though watchful night, ~~and~~ ready to stand to

at any time, and early in the morning we pushed through the town; I believe we left two men behind who were dead drunk from the wine they had found the previous day. We were half way ~~through~~ through the town when shelling commenced and we moved pretty quickly to the far side; here we turned to the left and took up positions in the open commanding a valley through which the Germans would have to pass if they broke our lines. A German aeroplane dropped small bombs on the town.

We had two guns with us and both of these were placed in positions to enfilade the valley; in the meantime sounds of attack could be heard in front of the town and it was evident that our hastily dug lines were being tested. We had a fair amount of cover in a sunken road near our positions and very soon shelling commenced. One shell fell slap into the road itself and killed two of the infantry, and a shrapnel which burst overhead sent two bullets clean through my box respirator as I crouched down to take cover, and the shelling at times was uncomfortable, but never very heavy. The trouble was that we were so unsettled, we did not know~~d~~ at any minute what our next move would be as things were getting pretty hot in front of the town, and Rosieres itself was being heavily shelled. It eventually turned out that the Germans were held up here for over twenty four hours before they broke through.

We remained in the sunken road until evening and then returned to Rosieres. I then went with ~~three~~ Lieut. ^{Brown} X. through the town to try and discover the railway station (the one we had detrained at a few days previously) as it was intended that we should place our guns

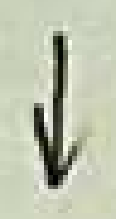
there, but in spite of roaming round the town for an hour or so (and a stroll in a town that is being shelled at night is uncomfortable), we could not find the station and so returned and I got a few hours sleep (three at most).

Next morning the infantry in front commenced slowly to retire in line, and we took up positions with our guns mounted to let them through, and then fell back ourselves. It was a perfectly orderly retirement and we adopted this procedure until the whole line had fallen back about two miles, when we reached some shallow trenches on the top of some rising ground in front of Caix, and here a party of infantry were placed to hold the first two lines while we had eight guns on the top of the crest. I should think we numbered altogether about 250 men. We appeared to be the only party staying here as everything else continued to go back. We heard that the French were somewhere on our left but could see no signs of them; at each flank our trenches ended in the air. Gradually all other signs of life disappeared behind us and we were left alone. It was a beautiful afternoon and everything was silent and peaceful except for the shells which could be seen bursting in Rosieres about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles in front. The country round about had not so far seen any warfare and bore its peacetime aspect, and it seemed very strange to be in trenches surrounded by such country. However, we mounted and loaded our guns and then settled down to wait. I made a meal out of a tin of Nestle's condensed milk that I had with me, which made me very thirsty and water was scarce as usual.

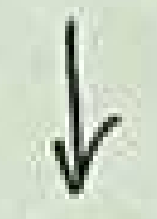
The first sign of the Germans advancing was the appearance of seven or eight aeroplanes flying impudently low over our position; we did all we could to get our machine guns trained on them in time, but this involves dismantling the gun and altering the position of the tripod, and we could not do this in time, and so had to satisfy ourselves with rifle fire, but did not appear to do any damage. These soon left us and then a little light shelling commenced; not the slightest sound could be heard behind us and I do not think we had a single piece of artillery behind to help us hold the position. Very soon sniping started and our first casualty was a fellow near us hit in the side by a bullet. ^(Taylor) They were evidently taking advantage of cover and nearing our position. Our machine guns opened fire on the ground in front although little could be seen as the ground afforded fair cover. Lieut. Massey was shot through the throat and died here among others - the trenches were so shallow and gave little protection against even rifle fire.

It was now about 4 o'clock in the afternoon when we suddenly received the order to prepare to retire. Things now began to move rather rapidly. We dismounted nearly all the guns and the infantry filed past us while we waited. We then followed on and as we neared the end of the short communication trench it was obvious that the Germans were very close and things had been left rather late. We tried to mount a gun on the parapet to cover the retirement of the infantry but the rifle fire was too intense to allow of this being done. The communication trench simply ended in the middle of a

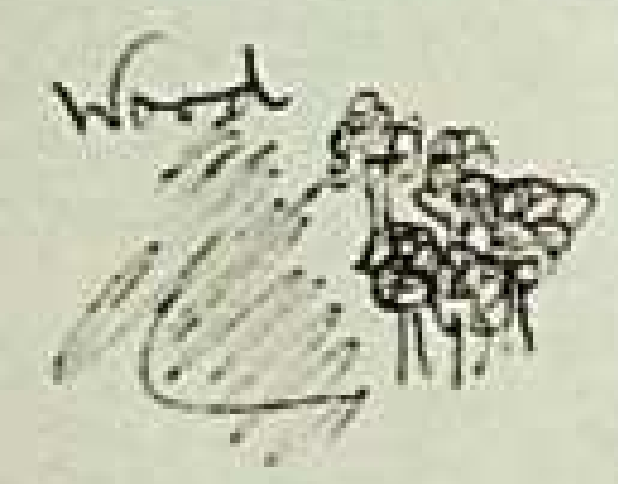
ploughed field (it must be remembered that ~~the~~ civilians had only left this area two or three days before our arrival). The Germans were now very close and they simply fired at us as we appeared, like rabbits, out of the end of the communication trench. On leaving the trench a distance of about 80 yards had to be covered before reaching the road, and the road itself was in full view until the first empty cottage was reached in the village. Many of the infantry had been hit in crossing the field and the road proved to be covered with casualties. I gazed out of the trench on to the ploughed field with the many casualties lying on it and decided to sprint like hell when I got into the open. There were only three of us left in the trench when I left, and I managed to reach the road in safety although it was like running across a target on a rifle range. On the road I dropped down as I was winded, but I got up and tore down the road as quickly as I could, occasionally falling over, as if I were hit, to get my breath. Men were being ^{hit} falling in all directions and it was rotten to see them falling in front of me and hear their cries, and to hear the smacking sound of the bullets as they hit the embankment at the side of the road. I reached the first cottage at last and entered to recover my breath as I was just about all out. After a few seconds here I trotted off again and turned sharply to the left as the Germans were coming down the far end of the village (they had taken the village while we were still holding the position in front). The turn to the left was bordered by high hedges, and so we were hidden from view for the time being



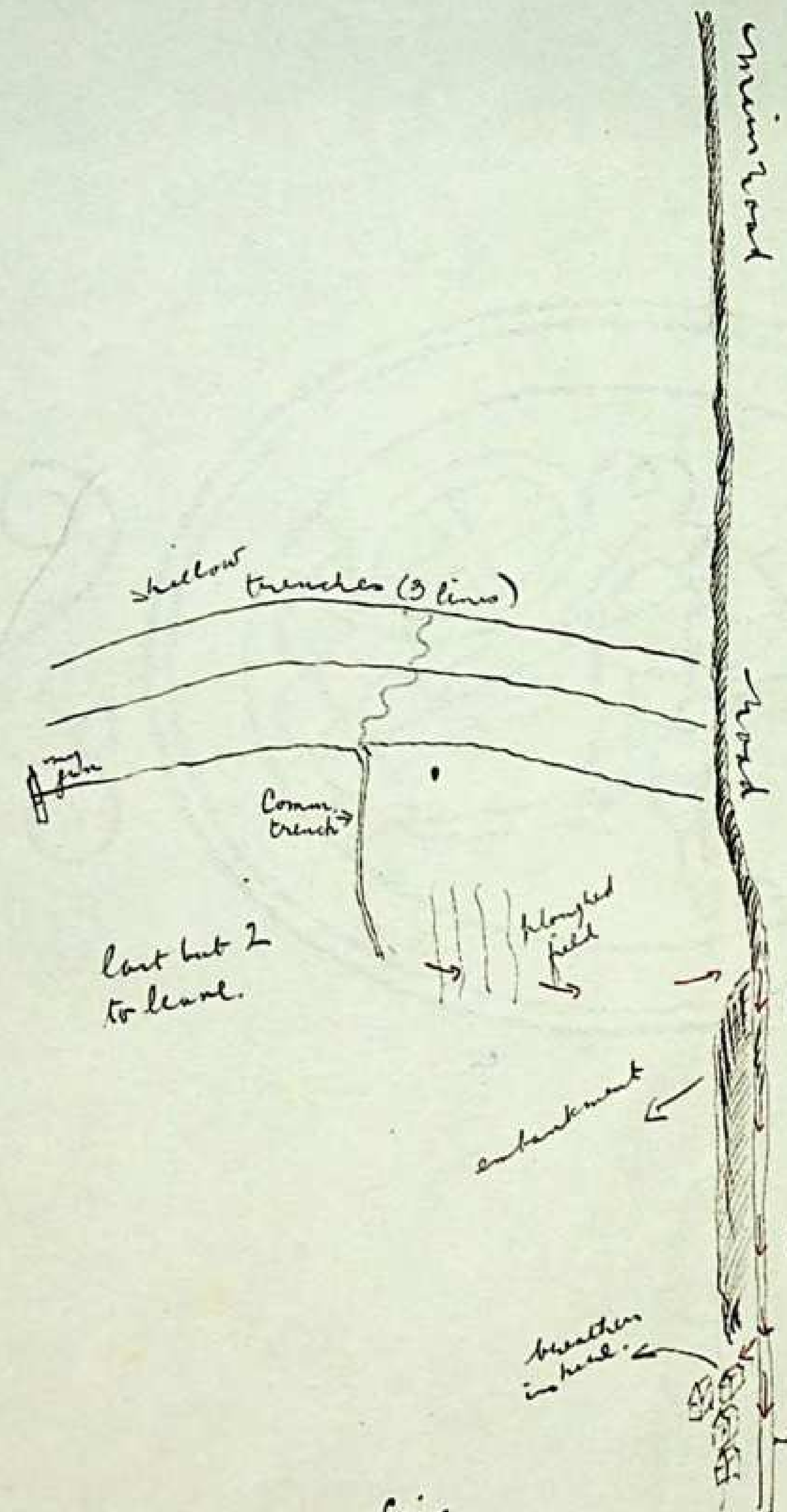
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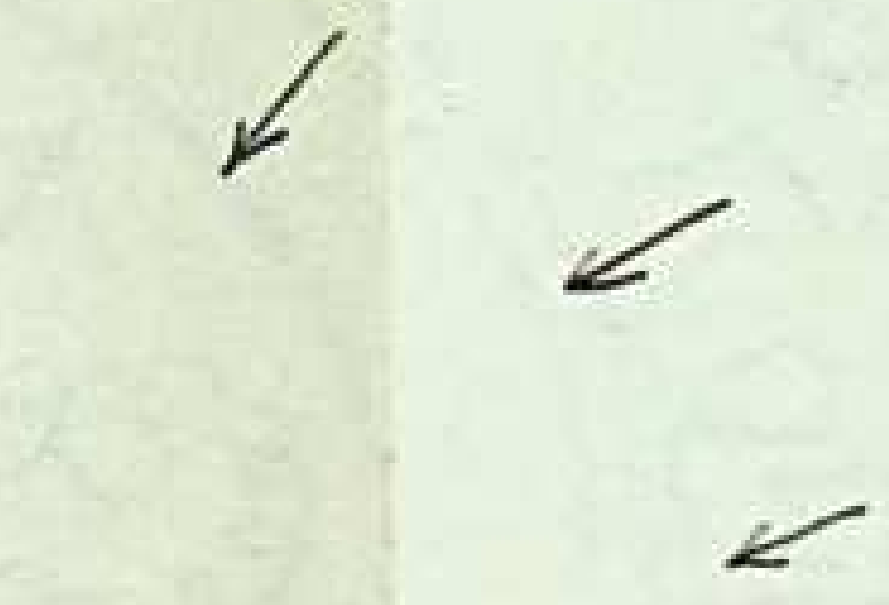
German advance



position on crest



German direction of fire



last but 2 to level.

fall here

entrenchment

felled

breath in hand

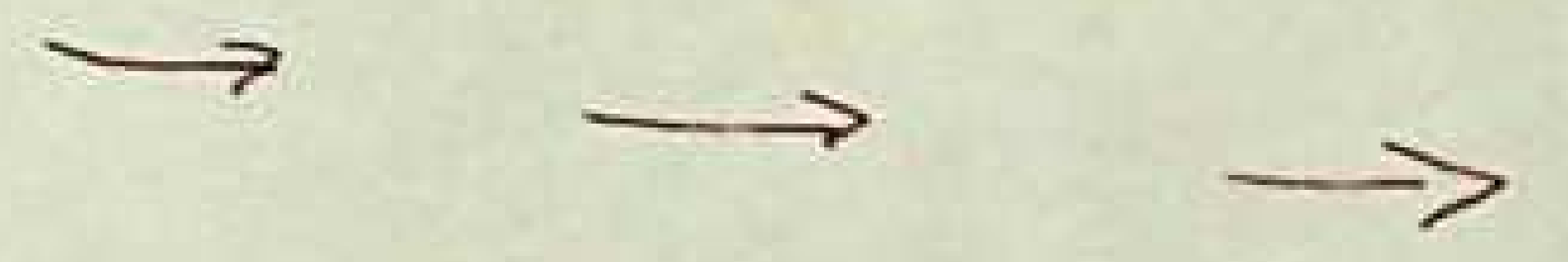
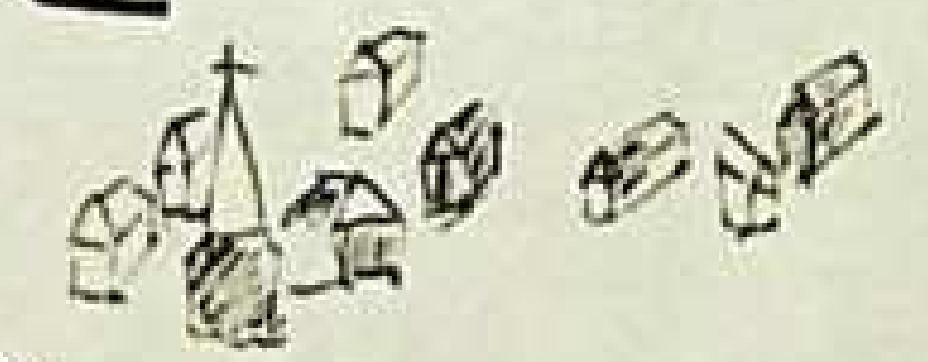
high ridge with
decline narrow lane

rising ground

red arrows show direction of my retreat

Caix

Germans here



but on reaching the upward slope, our small party (there were now about five of us) again came under fire, and the earth was kicked up at our feet, but we finally managed to get clear of this and kept on and on. It was now getting dark ~~with~~ ^{and} ~~some~~ rain, ^{ing} and the rising ground in front was being shelled with some very heavy stuff, and it was here that I believe Barnes was killed. Just after this I bound one or two of our party who had been slightly wounded and we carried on again. We passed nothing ^{moving,} _^ everything appeared to have gone back hours before. We passed empty huts; deserted Y.M.C.A. sheds and aeroplane hangars - all were lifeless and there was not even a sign of life anywhere. We seemed to be going back miles, although behind us could be seen the German verey lights going up in a huge semi-circle.

We finally reached Villers Brettoneux and there confusion reigned; everything was going back; the roads were full of transport and troops intermingled with guns, and at this time I am sure there was not the slightest opposition to the Germans on our particular front. There seemed to be nobody in authority to organise things and our little position at Caix appeared to have been the last resistance offered to his advance - this is how it seemed to us at the time.

However, we drank our fill of water from a well and then entered a large empty villa, found plenty to eat and then lay down in our clothes on the bed that had been left ready to sleep in by the civilians who had hurriedly left the place, and we fell asleep until morning. I think I slept like a log all night. In

the morning the Town Major gave us rough information as to where to find the remainder of our company, and we continued on our way towards them, still going backwards and on the way passing bridges being prepared for blowing up, and finding everywhere civilians leaving their homes with the little they could take with them; a great many were pushing merely a baby's mail cart containing as much of their belongings as they could carry on it.

We found the company ~~met~~ at last and almost immediately were rushed up to Moreuil which the Germans had almost reached, and were put in billets there - the town having been evacuated by civilians. We were barely there an hour when an alarm was given and we were cleared hurriedly out and marched back about two miles after occupying temporary positions for a short time, and spent the night on the open road. It was one of the coldest nights I remember in France and although I was very tired the cold made it impossible to get to sleep in the open - in any case the greater part of the night we were digging positions for the guns so that we were kept a little warm by working.

In the morning a French battalion appeared on the scene in its sky blue uniforms, straggling all over the road. We ourselves were taken well back to a farmyard, where we checked our casualties as well as we could and had a great night's sleep in the straw although our clothes at this time were pretty mouldy and dirty.

The following afternoon we fell in again for the line, and on our way up found that our artillery had

appeared on the scene again together with the French, as we passed any number of guns in position and firing heavily. It was fairly obvious that we intended making a real stand in our present positions if possible. We pushed on, past the guns, under a little shelling, to ground to the right of Moreuil and dug positions for our guns. Some French infantry were in positions in a sunken road near us. When night fell we moved to a small village about a hundred yards down the road and spent the night there although the village was shelled somewhat heavily.

1st April 1918

In the morning we heard that our cavalry had been in action and taken a wood at the top of the r se and we were to go up and consolidate the position gained. We moved over the railway line and half way up the hill, when we halted; many dead horses were lying around and it was clear that the cavalry had been under heavy fire recently. We stayed on the slope for some time under shelling which gradually got heavier, and after a time I fell asleep but woke with a start to find that I had been hit by a rifle bullet in the shoulder. I must admit I felt very glad at the time as it meant my going back, and the wood at the top of the hill looked very uninviting with high explosive shells bursting all over it. I went to the field dressing station a short distance away and then dropped my equipment and toddled over to the village in the rear. Here the street was littered with horses, or remains of them, and in the dressing station a very bad case was being attended to. The man was stretched on an ordinary kitchen table and the

doctors appeared to be trying to pull his legs off by the way they were tugging at them while the poor devil groaned and looked as if he wouldn't last very long; his face was the colour of wet ~~p~~ clay.

I was dressed again here and took my seat in a motor ambulance and was pushed off to Amiens. On the way we passed great numbers of French troops in reserve.

Amiens itself had been evacuated and was deadly quiet;

it is very impressive to go through a town cleared of its inhabitants; very much like going through the City of London on an early Sunday morning, but far more ghostly. Evidences of the recent heavy air raids over the town were to be seen everywhere. After all, the Germans were within a very short march of Amiens and if they happened to break our lines nothing could save the city. I was again dressed here and sent off again to England.

On the whole I think it was expected that we would not hold our positions for any length of time; I think this chiefly because of the lack of artillery ~~supporting~~ supporting us - on some days there appeared to be nothing at all behind us. So that I think the retirement really was arranged, after it was found that he had broken the original line in great force; but that he advanced far more quickly than he was expected to. It was open warfare and quite different to trench fighting and I think it was partly this which caused us to fall back in some cases before there was any real need. On the whole it was a very nervy time as when we took up a position we did not know whether or not we should be thrown out of it in the next half hour; orders were made and countermanded and shelling and rifle firing would suddenly commence most unexpectedly near. Lack of sleep

was felt acutely; often rations were long delayed owing to the continual moves, and water was generally very scarce. At Caix we lost eight machine guns and more than two thirds of the teams manning them.

Sept 1918

My last landing in France during the war took place on Saturday Sept. 28th 1918. We stayed in tents at Le Havre for a day and then entrained to Berguette, about four kilos from Lillers. Next day we moved up to La Gorgue and passed the 47th Division on the way. The following day we fell in to go to positions in the line, and on the way up heard that Major Laing ~~and three~~ had been killed and three officers badly wounded by the explosion of a mine on the cross roads. The Germans had been retreating slowly from this district and on his retreat had been leaving many of the roads mined, and this was one that had exploded at the right time from his point of view.

We moved to trenches by Bois Grenier. Both sides were now back in practically the old positions of 1914 and 1915, and we stayed like this for a few days. Lissenden was killed here.

On the 14th October we attacked and had one or two wounded (it was only a local attack), and had to fall back to our positions and remained in them all night. Big explosions had been observed behind the German lines and everywhere there was an air of expectancy that he would retire from here and on the following morning we fell in and simply walked over the ground that we had been driven from the day previously. It seemed very

strange: it was a cold misty morning, and we stepped out of the trench and just marched in fours over the slashed up ground and past the line he had been occupying a day or so ago. We reached the famous Aubers Ridge that we had hoped to take as long ago as the Festubert attack in 1915, and stayed the night in a pillbox on the crest. The wood on the crest was being shelled with some very heavy stuff but this did not prevent us from doing some investigating as it was obvious the Germans had cleared out hurriedly; he had left behind cooking utensils, equipment, etc., in his shelters and dugouts. I think we were prepared to stay in these positions for some time, but in the morning much to our surprise everything appeared to be going forward just as if we were miles behind the lines, when we imagined we were in the front line, as we had been yesterday afternoon. He had gone back miles over night and we hurriedly packed our limbers and followed on. It seemed very strange to us after years of trench warfare, when 100 yards was a big gain, to find that he had gone back miles; in fact there was no trace of him in any way, and the day before he had been holding us up in the wood!

We passed through villages with civilians left behind in them and through country showing no signs of shelling, and so reached, in the early afternoon, the outskirts of Lille. The bridges had been blown up here, and also the railway lines and some delay was caused to transport, but big preparations were soon begun for making fresh bridges and we soon crossed into the suburbs of Lille. A little firing could now be

heard on the far side of the town, and it was not until evening that we, together with infantry battalions marched through Lille itself. And there we were met by the whole population who had turned out en masse, and cheered and kissed, and given beer and cakes. They were wildly pleased to see us, and it was strange to us to march through a relieved town which had been in German occupation for four years, and find the population greeting us like this. Eventually we passed through and halted on the outskirts of the town. Here in the late evening we met a cavalry patrol returning and pushed forward to a farm about a mile farther on and stayed there the night. All was silent except my tooth which was giving me hell at the time, and I had a rather restless night.

The whole of the next day we marched on, following his steps and reached the village Templeuve in the late~~y~~ afternoon. Here again the inhabitants turned out to greet us in a smaller way and excitedly pointed out the graves of two Germans who had been killed by one of our cavalry patrols just before we arrived and ~~we~~ left with the toes of their boots sticking through the earth.

It was not long after our arrival that shelling commenced, a large convent harròwly escaping the full effects of a large shell. We stayed here the night and then moved up to positions near the canal, the other side of which the Germans were making a stand. We placed the guns in a field and kept up firing all night across the canal. We spent a few days in this position, but all the time loud explosions could be heard and big red glares could be seen at night behind his lines; it was

clear that he was preparing again to fall back.

After a few more days, during which rumours of all kinds were flying around, we crossed the canal on the early morning of the 11th November 1918 without any opposition. An aeroplane was shelled as we crossed the canal and those were the last shots we saw fired.

About noon on the 11th we were marching in fours up the road when a staff officer came up with information, and we halted forthwith, spreading into a field off the road, and stayed there some hours awaiting further orders. It was a bitterly cold and windy day, and not a very happy place to wait about in as there were simply bare forbidding looking fields all round us. And this was how we spent the greater part of Armistice Day. We did not know definitely that the war was over and I don't think we cared a damn one way or the other as long as we got out of the ~~en~~ cursed field we were taking root in. Towards evening, however, we moved into a barn nearby and there spent the night, quite prepared on the morrow to find that the old war was still going strong. I made and ate a good messtin of Quaker Oats here.

In the morning there was not much remaining doubt that the war was realky over; there seemed a different, purposeless, sort of spirit in the air, as if a job had been done, and we were now at a loose end. We marched to another village and halted there a few days; we cleaned and packed our guns for the last time and all ammunition was handed in, and after a time we moved back to another small village near Lille and had many opportunities of visiting that town. There was quite obviously a shortage of food in Lille as the army

canteens were besieged by civilians as well as the troops as soon as they opened. There was, of course, a large civilian population which was daily being increased by more returning civilians, but the life of the city was still very far from normal.

Eventually we moved still further back to Noeux les Mines, but not the town as I knew it in 1915. I looked in at the cemetery and found several grass covered graves of the old 7th, chiefly those who had fallen in the Loos attack of September 1915. Lt. Ferguson was buried here.

I took the opportunity one day of walking from Noeux les Mines to the 1915 trenches near Loos, passing Mazingarbe and Philosopje on the way, but could not get back the atmosphere of the place as it then was, even so soon after the finish of the war. The trenches, wire and shell holes were there, but it seemed ridiculous that we had to cower in trenches that one could now look into from the level of the ground.

However, the war was over and there would be no more nights spent in open slushy trenches, dark ratty dugouts, dank cellars lit by candle stumps, muddy shell holes or freezing pillboxes; or behind the line under canvas, Nissen huts, bivouacs or tumble down houses. No more would we stand to at dusk and dawn and curse the war and wonder whether it would last for ever. No more freezing in chilly slushy mud; no more anxiously waiting for rations to arrive and the the more anxious waiting and listening to the whine of a coming shell; no more dreary evenings in trenches peering over the parapet at flat muddy country scattered

with rusty barbed wire, empty bully beef tins and other rubbish. All this was over for good, but in spite of some pretty mouldy times, there were some good ones to make up for them, and after all it was the most eventful time of our lives for most of us, and gave us four and a half years of open air life which in many ways served a good purpose, even if it were a waste of time from a money making point of view.

Slowly, and then more quickly men filtered away to England and battalions were reduced to skeleton strength, and then to no strength at all. When I returned, the war was already a thing of the past in England and people were scurrying about to settle down once more to a merry money grabbing life, ~~while employers spent sleepless nights thinking of the least amount they could safely offer to their returned employees.~~

CW Cuthbert

1926

They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The Larks still bravely singing, fly,
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunsets glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.
