

CSC/1

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VICTOR

Sept 1914

It was on September 7th 1914 that, together with Les, Lewis and others, I went to Sun Street in the City, to join the 7th City of London Regiment. High spirits were general and the whole affair appeared to be a great game. The morning was very sunny and a small crowd of intending recruits had very soon gathered round the door. On the doors being opened there was quite a rush to get in and although the sergeant at the door tried to keep Lewis out as being under age (which he was), we got him through, and once he got past the door he passed all the necessary tests. I think the medical examination took place the same afternoon, and this proved to be only one of the many more or less similar examinations which were to take place in the war years that followed. At this time, however, all this sort of thing was a novelty to us, and I think we all expected to have finished with the army in a few months.

The medical examination was successfully passed by all of our party, and the days that followed in London were spent in learning the elements of squad drill, and marching in such places as Finsbury Square, Regents Park and similar places. We very often tubed to Regents Park. Songs were sung on the marches, and for some time we were all in civilian clothes; then khaki caps were issued and we were these with the rest of our clothing ordinary civilian, and we could not have presented a very martial appearance at this time.

On the whole we had a very easy time during this stage of our training (especially getting home as we did each evening), but I was looking forward to getting away from London, and ~~at this time I was~~ eager to get to France. Finally one morning we entrained for Burgess Hill in Sussex and by this time we had been completely fitted out in khaki.

Our first billet was in a large draughty recreation hall, but this was given up after a few days as being unhealthy, and our company removed to Tower House. We were served out with palliases and paraded to draw straw for these. Here we slept in the empty rooms and the first stage of the breaking in to army life commenced.

Our training here went forward another stage; we did longer route marches, and although at this time we had no equipment, we carried our overcoats rolled across our chests, which I think was far more uncomfortable than carrying full marching order. Putties were still a troublesome matter to me to roll properly, and although we had long ~~reg~~ rifles issued ~~to~~ us, we had done no actual firing of any kind.

Things that stand out in this place among others are the illness of Dad, who was more ill at this time than we then realised; a long route march to Chailey Common and the long wait there in the cold (the plaintive tune played by the band on this day is still fresh in my mind together with whole battalions swaying to the time of it); and our first church parades and experience of living with the rest of our section night and day.

After a few weeks here, a batch of us were taken for transfer to the 1st Battalion, and Les and myself

with others entrained for Watford to join the 1st, leaving Lewis behind with the 2nd battalion, <sup>with</sup> ~~which~~ which he remained until the 2nd Battalion went to France as a unit some time later.

Les. Clifford and myself were put in a private <sup>which was unsuitable.</sup> billet in Diamond Road after shifting from two others.  $\lambda$  We drew our raw rations each evening and brought them back for our landlady to cook. Tom Card was the gallant landlord and he worked in the cocoa factory nearby and was fond of playing nap. The three of us, Les, Clifford and myself, slept in one room and the billet was moderately comfortable.

The training was harder here and included many inspections, notably a big one in Cassiobury Park. We also fired a course after marching to London Colney and being billeted there in uncomfortable empty rooms. The weather was very cold and wet (about January 1915 I think) and the time we were in this place was most ~~an~~ uncomfortable especially on the miserable range itself where there was no protection from the bitter cold, except a little cottage where hot coffee could be obtained. I found afterwards, however, that this was typical of all ranges, and the weather was also generally bad whenever I went to a range. It nearly always meant standing about for nine-tenths of the day doing nothing but shiver, the remaining tenth being spent in a little firing and a lot of cleaning. We also did some firing on a range on the road to St Albans. However, we completed our course at London Colney and journeyed back to Watford to be inoculated. This was the opportunity to get

to London for a couple of days as two days' sick leave were given at this time, and the 'bus would take one right into London under the Watford arches.

We were now nearing the time of departure and had been issued with most of our kit. Les's eyesight had proved troublesome and it was ~~finally~~ decided that he should be transferred back to the 2nd battalion, so that I was finally left by myself in the 1st battalion. I was in London when a telegram arrived from Clifford telling me to return at once as the battalion had received orders to prepare to depart immediately. This was the last occasion I saw Dad (in hospital), and he was looking desperately ill at this time. He had been buried when I next returned to England.

I arrived back at Watford to find everything in a bustle of movement, and in a day or so, towards the middle of March 1915, we were paraded in the dark streets with all our belongings on our back (and mine seemed terribly heavy). Followed a train journey which I do not recollect very clearly (probably slept most of the time), and then the arrival at Southampton docks; piled arms and waiting about for orders to embark. We received our first issue of bully beef and biscuits here.

It was an awful job to shave on board in the morning (although at this time I hadn't very much to shave off fortunately), as the trouble was to get water and everybody wanted what little there was at the same time; then the re-packing of my valise at which I was not very expert at this time, was an awful job. I had made no particular friends up to this and so had to follow my

own trail. I had far from settled down to army life and found it a rather hard sort of game, until I shook down to it myself later on and learnt to follow the old army motto.

We landed at Le Havre on St. Patrick's Day, 17th March 1915, and began for the first time the weary climb up the hill to the Rest Camp at the top, which at this time consisted of tents and marquees. After a night here I found that I was to be left behind with a few others as "reinforcements", and the battalion left us the same day. I was not at all pleased at this and felt rather miserable at being dropped again in a strange place among more strangers. After the battalion had gone, we reinforcements were herded together like lost sheep <sup>and marched</sup> to a camp farther off, and inserted in tents at the rate of about twenty to a tent.

Our time for the ~~two~~ three or four weeks I was here consisted of various fatigues - coaling at the docks, unloading of heavy cases of tinned foods from the boats and wheeling them on trucks to huge stacks of tinned food, carcasses of beef, great sacks of loaves, etc. This was very heavy work. And then, of course, we had the usual squad drill, route marches and guards. The camp was composed of reinforcements of the different regiments for the whole of the 47th Division, while one section was put apart for the Canadians who had their reinforcement camp here.

, It seems strange now to think of the way we all queued up outside the mess hut with our messtins and knife and fork, with the daily rush to get served, and

the grabbing of bread and jam at tea time. The food on the whole was fairly good.

I received the cablegram here telling me of Dad's death, and immediately applied for leave (Flower) which was not granted. I was very upset at the time and crept away to have a good howl. Shortly after this was I was given 14 days C.B. for breaking bounds <sup>with Pebble</sup> to go to a small village, Montevilliers. I don't remember why I wanted to go there, possibly just to get away from the camp for a ~~bit~~ time and leave the mass of khaki behind for a while. However, we (there were two of us), were discovered and punished accordingly.

I managed to visit Le Havre a few times as I was attending the dentist there, and I found these visits a great change from the camp, and enjoyable, but for the dentist's chair in the background. I was anxious to get away from this camp, in fact I believe everybody was, as it was a rotten place and only had a good Y.M.C.A. hut to relieve its monotony. But soon the order came through for us to re-join the battalion, who were at this time at Givency near Festubert, so that one warm spring morning we marched to the railhead at Le Havre, boarded our cattle truck and were trundled towards the mysterious "line" about which we had heard so much from 'old' soldiers at the base.

We found that the battalion were out resting in a small village near Bethune; my company <sup>was</sup> were in a barn next to a cemetery - a French civilian one - with the usual sprays of artificial flowers on the graves which gives them rather a lighthearted but tawdry appearance. I was unfortunate enough here to



miss a parade, and by the time I arrived, the battalion had moved off on a long route march. I believe I did have some idea of missing this march - I had gone sick with two badly poisoned fingers - but as a reward for being successful I was given three days' field punishment, consisting of one hour in the morning and another in the evening of being handcuffed to a limber wheel, and confinement for the rest of the time. During this confinement I learnt to play the mouth organ greatly to my own satisfaction. I finished my last day in confinement at Gorre, and that same evening, which was drizzling with rain, we paraded, in full marching order with newly issued waterproof capes round us, to go up to the line. It was very wet and dismal looking in the big square and the country we moved through was likewise, with the ground mushy underneath, but I was excited at being about to go to the line at last. We eventually reached a spot where rifle firing could be heard distinctly and then very soon arrived near a different sound - that of bullets whining overhead - very mournful noises some of them made while some were just sharp vicious sputts. There were no actual trenches here and communication with the front line was made by means of a shallow ditch shielded on each side by wooden hurdles. Up this we went and we had reached the front line at last, consisting in this part of the line of a sandbag breastwork only, as the ground was too marshy for digging. My shirt and vest were wet through with perspiration when I arrived (at this time we carried full marching order

into the line), and my first act in the line was to get out a clean shirt from my pack and proceed to change it with my wet one. Lt. Ferguson observed me doing this and gave me a suitable lecture on the serious ness of being in the front line.

Very little shelling had taken place during our journey to the line, if any, but rifle fire was much in evidence, much more so at this time than in the later years of the war when shelling took its place.

In the line itself we received orders to fire our rifles intermittently all night while we were on s entry; rifle firing was more or less continuous therefore throughout the night with occasional heavy bursts at different parts of the line, although there was really nothing to fire at but the flashes of the rifles in the German lines. I suppose the front lines were about 300 yards apart here. We worked in pairs - one sleeping for an hour while the other was on sentry just by him, and so on throughout the night. At this time of course, there were no steel helmets, aerial torpedoes (or very few), rifle grenades, etc.

Our first shelling came the afternoon of my first day in the trenches, when a few whizz bangs were sent over and exploded some 100 yards or so behind us, but at this time shells did not greatly impress me; it was only later on when I saw the fearful damage they could do to a man that I began to get a wholesome fear of them. Our first casualty was a fellow shot in the head and killed while drinking from his water bottle. It was in the early morning and his head probably appeared

above the parapet while he was drinking.

These first few days in the line were more or less uneventful, although they were eventful enough for me at the time. There was water fetching, which was carried in stone rum jars, and the carrying of rations at night; these were carried in to the line in bulk, i.e., a box of bully would be carried up whole, or a tin of biscuits would be carried up as it was - an awful job. These were split into sandbags later in the war and were much easier to carry. Then there was the cooking of grub individually in the trenches, which meant making a very small fire with thin sticks; all this I found damned awkward and uncomfortable but became an expert later on.

After being relieved from the front line we spent a few days in a fortified farm in reserve - a trench running round a small system of farm buildings with some barbed wire in front. Later we had a little training and some bayonet practice in preparation for the attack which was shortly to take place. For the first attack at Festubert on the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1915, we remained in positions in the fortified farm, but this attack was not a success although the bombardment sounded enormous to me at the time.

The following Saturday, 15<sup>th</sup> May, we moved to reserve positions, and early on the following Sunday morning our bombardment commenced preparatory to the attack at Festubert. Very little shelling came near us, but in the early afternoon we received orders to move up, and wended our way in artillery formation across open

ground to the communication trench. We soon arrived among the shelling while still in the open and had several casualties. The communication trench was half full of brown liquid mud and the afternoon was very warm, and working our way up this narrow winding trench, which in places had been blown in, was very hard work. Wounded were coming down, and one case on a stretcher was nearly covered from head to foot in bandages. It was not at all a cheerful prospect and I am afraid I failed to see much pleasure in our undertaking at this moment. We reached our old front line breastwork after our tussle with the mud, and here things were still merrier. The shelling was pretty heavy and whizz bangs were skimming the top of the breastwork, and many wounded were lying around. Scaling ladders were in position against the breastwork and on Captain Casson giving a blast on his whistle, we climbed these and did our best to move quickly towards the German trench (this had already been taken - we were moving up to reinforce). The shelling between the lines was heavy and some big shells were falling sending up great black clouds of smoke: we could not move very quickly as were carrying our full pack, and in addition a shovel, or bag of rations, or a packet of sandbags. I had not gone more than ten yards from our breastwork when a cloud of dirty gray smoke suddenly burst up all round me and I felt myself spinning round. I knew I had been hit, and thought, strangely enough with a very happy feeling, that one side of my face had been blown away; it felt just like that, and when, on

getting back to our breastwork I took my hand away from my face and discovered <sup>no</sup> ~~on~~ ~~the~~ blood on it, I thought I had made a mistake and would have to get on back again, but on feeling myself over I found a hole in the right ~~sh~~ shoulder of my tunic and the stretcher bearers were soon bandaging the wound for me. The shell that had hit me had burst right amongst our little party and had killed one (Cawkell) and wounded seven others.

I felt a little groggy and must have looked rather dissipated, as my hat had been blown off, one of my putties was undone, and of course I had dumped all my equipment. I returned back along the same communication trench that we had worked our way along earlier in the afternoon. I passed New and Pennell in 'C' company who were coming along, and eventually reached the field dressing station at the end of the trench and was dressed again. I was then given a seat in a horse ambulance and taken to Bethune. I felt very contented with things; the wound was not troubling me much and I knew I was well away from the line for some time to come. We arrived at Bethune at dusk and were greeted there with plenty of tea and bread and butter. After this I had the hole in the shoulder examined and a squirterfull of iodine pressed into it; this caused it to bleed profusely and the pain started from about then and lasted all night, which I spent very restlessly. I know I got practically no sleep; wounded were coming in fairly thickly and during the night the town was shelled.

, The next morning I did my best to have a clean up as I was in a filthy state with mud all over my clothes,

but I was not very successful with only one arm available, and later in the day I was put into a so-called hospital train at Bethune. The carriages were just hard wooden passenger carriages and most uncomfortable for wounded to travel in, and the greater part of the journey I was in a half stupefied state as the aching pain in my shoulder was getting very bad. At one of the halts, however, I found the fellows in my carriages were helping me out, as the R.A.M.C. were coming along the platform asking bad cases to alight and I was placed on a trolley and wheeled into the hospital. We had reached Boulogne. It was now quite dark, and without any medical examination, I was shown a rough bed and did my best to get some rest. For another night my clothes remained on and it was not until the following morning that the nurse took off my dressing and the wound was examined by the doctor. He immediately had me put to bed and my temperature taken; the hole had turned a nice shade of greenish yellow and did not look very handsome. A nurse helped me to undress and I was soon in bed, where I had my first bed bath; a hot fomentation was ~~ea~~ clapped on my shoulder and I settled down to another far from restful night. I found it hard to get water and had to shout hard before an orderley came to me but I got it eventually. The following morning (or about four days after I was hit), the doctor probed the wound and marked me for England after hesitating whether to operate on the spot or not, while I anxiously awaited his decision. I wanted to get to England and did not want to spend any more <sup>time</sup> ~~than~~ in France

than I could help, so that I was very glad when he decided to put me on the boat forthwith; I was thrust into a suit of pyjamas, placed on a stretcher and lowered into the boat the same afternoon.

The journey across to ~~Folkestone~~ Dover made me seasick but I was quite happy when we arrived near land and ~~were~~ <sup>was</sup> finally put in the train. We arrived at Oxford at about 2 a.m. but even at that time there was quite a small crowd of people outside the hospital. I was taken to the Examination Schools and carried up the wide curving staircase; put to bed, given another bed bath, a glass of hot milk and an aspirin and fell asleep until morning. It felt fine to wake up and know that I was back in England again and in a clean bed and with nothing to do but wait until the operation was over. I did not mind this in the least as being in the shoulder it was not in a very vital spot.

Mum called on me when I had been there a day or so but I think she thought she must be careful not to stay too long as she only stayed a few minutes although I think she would have liked to stay longer; a day or so later Winnie turned up. I was operated on after I had been in Oxford about a week. I went quite confidently to the operating theatre and laid down on the slab, and the ether gave me no trouble, but the after effects of this stuff were bloody. I was violently sick and came to swearing like a trooper. I somehow connected the taste of chocolate <sup>with</sup> ~~that~~ that of ether for some time afterwards, which was sufficient to put me off chocolate for a very long time.

The piece of shell extracted from my shoulder was given me by the nurse and I still have it.

After the operation I progressed rapidly and spent a very enjoyable fortnight in the hospital and was taken out for motor drives on several occasions, and once or twice on the river and out to tea. I went over most of the colleges in Oxford.

At this time people were doing all they could for you, and many presents were brought in by visitors and left by the bedside, such as eggs and cigarettes. There were several bad cases in the ward, and one, a Canadian, who had both ~~feet~~ his feet taken off, died while I was there. He fell out of bed one night and this, I expect, hastened his end.

After having been in Oxford for about three weeks I was considered well enough to be sent away to a convalescent home, and with a few others left Oxford for Goring on Thames. This proved to be a lovely place and I saw it at the finest time of the year - mid June. I was nearing my twentieth birthday and the summer promised to be a fine one so that I was as nearly happy as it is ever possible to be. I had nothing to worry about for the present as my leave was to come at the end of convalescence.

Strawberries and cherries grew plentifully in the grounds around the house - it could not be called a hospital - and the River Thames was close by. There was a small recreation room in the house with a gramophone and billiard table and my bedroom (about six of us in it) was next to this.



After our wounds were dressed in the morning we had the rest of the time to ourselves and quite often took our lunch out with us and stayed out nearly all day. The nurse from the hospital at Oxford paid us a visit here and brought me some tobacco as she had promised. The village of Goring (and Streatley) was a very pleasant place and the Thames here is simply great.

After three grand weeks here with splendid weather, I was pronounced well enough to go on leave in London and when my leave had expired I reported to Sun St. for duty again.

My luck was still very much in because the duty was of the lightest description and we slept at home each night. Recruiting was the great thing at this time and we took the game up with enthusiasm although I must admit that I did ~~not~~ not get one recruit myself and my efforts in this direction were not very strenuous. It must be remembered that this was midsummer 1915, long before the shadow of possible conscription had begun to spread over the country, in fact at this time it was not even thought of by the ordinary person. Our little party looked upon recruiting as a huge joke and simply enjoyed ourselves to the best of our ability. We would be given a certain part of the City of London to patrol and were intended to ask likely looking fellows if they wished to join the army.

In the intervals of recruiting we did a little drill and an occasional guard at Hammersmith. But towards the end of August 1915 our little party of returned wounded, which had been gradually swelling, as

more and more reported back from hospital, were entrained for Ongar and were followed by a company of the 3rd Battalion. We had, of course, all this time been kept entirely separate from the 3rd battalion (and the 3rd battalion were not at all a promising looking lot). The place by which we were intended to camp proved an ideal place with numbers of apple trees in the background, and nearby some trenches which had been dug as part of the defences of London. Otten and myself volunteered as painters and were given the job of camouflaging all the tents with great blotches of paint. And so we passed a few more entirely carefree days, but our easy time was drawing to a close. Rumours of the Loos attack, in which the 1st Battalion had taken part, were trickling through and it was clear that the casualties had been heavy; reinforcements were called for immediately, and as it was considered that we returned wounded were the only ones with sufficient training, we were called together, sent off on a few days leave, and from this reported back to Orpington in readiness to cross to France again. The whole thing happened very quickly - kit inspections were rushed through, and the medical examinations, and finally towards the end of September 1915 we were ready to cross again to France.

I was greatly disappointed at this time by Otten's commission papers coming through, so that we separated from each other here and I did not seem him again - I believe he was killed on the Somme in 1916. We had been constant companions during recruiting and got on very well together, so that on the eve of our departure to find that he was not coming with us was rather a blow and I missed

him very much. However, we departed to the station to the tune of the British Grenadiers, and detrained at London. On the station I managed to get hold of a lot of whisky and carried some with me in the carriage in a bottle. I was not fond of the stuff at this time and drank it, I think, simply because it seemed the thing to do, added to which there was always the excitement of leaving England again (excitement or depression). On the train journey to Southampton I was violently sick and arrived at Southampton feeling very shaky and groggy. A few days were spent here in wooden huts and we had very little freedom.

The journey over to Le Havre was rather rough but I was not sick although very near it. We again marched up the hill to tents, and this time found a number of the 7th in the camp who had been lightly wounded and were now gathered together ready for the next draft back to the line. Several other units, including the Guards, had detachments here. We did not worry about the place much as <sup>we</sup> were only passing through and knew we would not be there long, and very soon we marched to the station and boarded the cattle trucks for the line. After the usual long drawn out journey we detrained near Bethune one evening and were taken in the dark by our guide across country to Mazingarbe - a small straggling village behind the line at Loos and consisting of two main streets only, a few odd estaminets and one or two broken down shops selling chocolate wrapped in silver paper and nothing much else. (I revisited this place again in January 1919 nearly four years afterwards).

As we arrived near the village the star shells could be seen rising and falling <sup>in</sup> the far distance - the night itself was a very black one.

There were no billets for us at Mazingarbe as the battalion were in the line and our arrival was unexpected, and so we slept as best we could on our waterproof sheets in the open. During the night there was a little long distance shelling just to remind us that we were back near the line once more.

The following evening we fell in for the line, and I was feeling pretty windy with recollections of my last experiences in mind. We found we were to carry in the battalion's rations, so that besides our full marching order, each of us had a sack of provisions to carry, and this journey was, I think, one of the hardest I ever made. It was a long cry from Mazingarbe to the line, the trenches were awful affairs to get through and none of us was very fit after our easy time in England. However, late that night or early the next morning we tracked the battalion down in some very shallow trenches well in front of Loos, and for the rest of the night our little party was side tracked in a chalky sap until morning. Some of the trenches here were dug through almost pure chalk and this was especially noticeable during wet weather when great chalky smears were given off from the wet trench walls in passing them. Many casualties were taken past us in the night as trench mortars in front, which we could hear smashing away, had been doing some damage.

I myself had hardly got my wind yet, it seemed only yesterday that I was in England on recruiting work,

and now I was back again in the line with that rotten crashing noise at intervals in front of me, and all of us looking fed up and miserable. We received a rum ration in the morning and were then posted to our companies. I found that I was among an entirely strange section and this did not help to make me feel at home, and the next few days passed very slowly.

The trenches about here were all very shallow as they were fresh ones that had been dug in consolidation of the freshly won ground, so that shelling was rendered much more effective, there being such little cover. There were no dugouts, although back in the old German front lines there were some splendid deep ones.

From now on for a month we were constantly in the trenches without a break; either front, support or reserve lines, or prowling at night about Loos fetching rations or drawing spades for working parties. This was a far longer time in the line without a break than was ever done later in the war. The only good purpose it served was to get us thoroughly used to trench life and to take everything as a matter of course, but the health of the battalion was not improved and mine in particular was getting rather bad.

One position among many others that we had during this period was in the trenches <sup>in front of</sup> ~~of~~ the famous Loos chalk pits. Our lines could be enfiladed here, so that when shelling commenced we all had to clear out of one piece of trench and crowd into another at right angles to it. This was all very well during day time but during the night this could not be done so easily.

At another position by a double gap( an old communication trench leading from our line to his and consequently blocked by both parties - hence 'double block' or 'gap') a German trench mortar killed seven of our men, the whole of the occupants of one traverse, and that same night I, with G.New, helped to dig for the bodies. Not a very comfortable job as it was very easy for another trench mortar to follow on and do some more good work. We found most of the bodies, two or three of which had been killed by concussion only and were not scratched, but of course buried in the earth.

In the trenches about here, as there were practically no dugouts, holes were scooped out in the side of the trench near the floor (they resembled nothing so much as a shallow grave in the side of the trench), and these were used to sleep in by one and sometimes two men. In wet weather, however, many of these collapsed and buried the occupants, and orders were eventually given to stop these being dug.

At last we left the line for a rest at Lillers, and the march from Mazingarbe to the station at Noeux les Mines was a very painful one for me. I got a sharp pain in my left shoulder as soon as I lifted on my pack, and as well as this I was feeling all out. On reaching Lillers I also contracted a mild form of dysentery which was very bad, although not bad enough to send me to hospital by army standards.

We were about four weeks at Lillers 'resting' and one of the chief things I remember was the awful job I had getting the mud off my clothes, especially my great-

coat. The mud seemed a specially adhesive kind that buried itself right in the cloth itself and was an awful job to remove. I felt groggy for the greater part of the time here but very gradually got better.

There was plenty of spit and polish of course while we were here, and also inspections and guards; but after all we were behind the line and there were shops and estaminets.

The month soon went by and from Lillers we moved to Philosophe (a small woebegone looking village with only one street just past Mazingarbe on the way to Loos), and after a couple of days here in the ruined houses, we moved up to the front line by the Hohenzollern Redoubt. This was a filthy part of the line; the trenches were in an awful state, full of mud and water (duckboards were greatly lacking at this time) and in one part of the trench we were in the water was well past the knees, and there were no dugouts or shelters of any kind. Rifle grenades and trench mortars were frequent. It was here that I went on my first covering party. We moved over the front line late one night and spread out to about two yards apart and then laid down in the open for a couple of hours. There was practically no shelling but plenty of rifle fire and inches of mud and slush. On the whole I did not find it too uncomfortable. This was about Christmas 1915 and Christmas Day was spent in the front line here. A mine was exploded on our front on Christmas morning and the shelling was very brisk for a time; I remember that as the trench could be enfiladed three of us took shelter round a corner of the trench and

spent a hectic twenty minutes until the shelling began to slacken off. The battalion had several casualties.

About this time steel helmets were given out - one between ten men or thereabouts; also trench waders - long rubber boots that reached right up the leg; they kept the water out quite well but if worn for any length of time caused the feet to become swollen and very painful.

New Year's Day 1916 saw me with three or four others in a small system of trenches well behind the reserve line, called Lone Keep (near Philosophie). Now that a couple of months had passed since the attack at Loos and we had been all over the ground, there was no shadow of doubt that the small piece of ground gained was captured at an enormous price in casualties, and the attack, I think, could be written down as a complete failure. We had certainly taken Loos and pushed our trenches a little way beyond, but the salient so caused rendered the line difficult to hold and casualties continued to be heavy. The ground itself was dismal looking. The famous Loos 'towers' (great iron erections over a mine shaft) could be seen from most parts of the line and the big mounds of slack called 'crassiers' dominated most of the trenches. The ground for miles surrounding Loos was crossed and criss-crossed with trenches and saps, and at night time, slithering and feeling one's way in the darkness and mud, it was most difficult ground to cross. Of Loos itself a few walls still remained and quite a lot of cellars, but even in peacetime it must have been a miserable little place.



However, I opened the New Year behind the line, so started well. With me were three others I find by looking in the only diary I have managed to retain. We had simply to mind the place and feed ourselves (the latter being more difficult), so that it was a welcome change from the actual trenches although we slept in a dugout which was simply running alive with vermin. I have a note in my diary of our New Year's breakfast which consisted of two eggs each, Quaker Oats, bacon and bread and jam. But after about ten days in this place we moved up to the line once more, and spent a lot of time around Loos and the Double Crassier, Maroc, etc.

On one occasion I acted as guide for an incoming battalion. I met them at Maroc; it was a black night but there was no trouble at all until we got to Loos, and then I must have taken a wrong trench as I found myself more or less lost and was forced to get out on top occasionally to get my bearings. But the mutterings and cursings behind me when it was found out that I was lost were most ghastly to a poor guide who was only too damned anxious to deliver the battalion to the line safely and then get out to Les Brebis himself for a rest.

There were many carrying and working parties in this sector, and one night in particular we worked all night carrying up boxes of bombs to the front line by Loos.

During our second rest at Lillers I was sent for a course of instructions on the Maxim gun and short-

ly afterwards received orders to report to the machine gun section for duty. My particular gun section proved to be in the cellars at Maroc, and here I joined them, and from that time on remained with machine guns until the war ended. In the end a machine gun was as familiar to me as a rifle was to an infantryman. It proved to be heavy work coming and going from the line as all the guns and apparatus connected with them have to be manhandled in the trenches and sometimes carried for very long distances, but the work was far more interesting than with the poor old infantry, especially out of the line.

We shifted from the cellars in Maroc on the eve of the Kaisers birthday 27th January 1916, and I had the doubtful honour of carrying the Maxim gun for the first time. The way led through and over various trenches with the weight of the gun dragging me down at every step. This gun was one of the old Maxims, in a heavy gun metal case and weighed much more than the Vickers which ultimately replaced them; the Vickers guns when filled with water ready for action weigh about 48 lbs, and this was quite enough weight to carry any distance in addition to ordinary equipment, but the old Maxim weighed another 10 lbs above this.

The Germans attacked along the Loos Hulluch road on the Kaiser's birthday but we were not affected in our positions, although there was some general shelling. For the following day I quote from my diary:

28th January 1916. A party of five of us had to go to our cellar in Maroc this afternoon to fetch more ammunition. We arrived there all right in spite of some shelling but found our house had been nearly blown up by a shell. We carried three boxes of ammunition each and went into

another cellar for a rest. We had no sooner settled down than heavy shelling commenced and we stayed there for about three hours but then decided to risk it. We dashed about 200 yards in the open to a trench, and after about a 200 yards journey in this (rather smashed in) our eyes commenced to smart badly and we put on our gas helmets. It proved to be tear shell gas only. Artillery wires were cut and the trench badly damaged and we were glad to get back to our dugouts. The gas helmets made us pour with perspiration.

The gas helmets mentioned above were the old flannel kind which had to be tucked in the collar of the tunic.

This same night we moved to the front line by the double crassier and found ourselves subject to very heavy trench mortars which on exploding made a noise like a small mine and shook the trench even 300 yards away. I hated these things, possibly because there is a chance of evading them if you see them coming, but as this means constantly keeping your neck craned back looking skywards, it is difficult to be always on the lookout. But trench mortars were undoubtedly murderous things with an explosion that shook everything for a long way round.

Up to February 1st 1916 we remained in the front line, and here I finished "Moonbeams from the larger Lunacy" which I think Ess sent me. We arrived back in Les Brebis about 3.30 a.m. Later in the morning a bomb was dropped in the town and a couple of ~~several~~ civilians killed.

On the 6th we returned to Loos village itself and we had two teams placed in a cellar with gun positions nearby. Two of 'A' Company were killed in the line by a trench mortar. The weather at this time was very cold and our positions were in a trench which was half full of icy cold slushy water, but things were fairly quiet.

On the 10th Feb. we moved to the front line and luckily had a dugout to sleep in and I managed to get a water bottle full of rum which was very useful. Some very good soup came up the line here in large vacuum containers for the infantry, and we obtained some. A German mine was exploded in front of us but one of our machine guns caught the raiding party and the sergeant concerned duly received the D.C.M.

From these trenches we moved to others near Loos and were relieved here by the Munsters, while we returned to Noeux les Mines (a place to which I returned for a few weeks after the armistice had been signed), and entrained to Lillers for a rest. Lillers is a fair sized town and had quite a lot of civilians still remaining in it at this time and many estaminets and confectioners' shops. We were billeted in a barn just outside the town. The weather was bitterly cold and much snow fell. While we were here the attack at Verdun commenced and the German bombardment in the distance sounded very ominous.

From Lillers we trekked through various little villages behind the line and at one of these I received by post a pair of red carpet slippers! from a woman who visited me at Oxford hospital and gave me one or two good motor drives there.

Towards the middle of March (1916), we ended our trek at Gouy, behind the Souchez - Vimy front. Gouy was a putrid little village consisting of a few scattered houses surrounding a cesspool full of green slimy water, and we spent most of our time down from the line in this village in huts left behind by the French, and which had

wire beds in tiers all round the sides One tier above the other. I enjoyed myself here however; I was settled down with the section and beginning ~~to~~ thoroughly <sup>to</sup> enjoy machine gun work and also the life in this part of the line.

Next evening we left Gouy for the line and passed through the ruins of Ablain St. Nazaire and Souchez to the line beyond. We were shelled on the way up and in the darkness I fell in a deep shell hole full of mud, but managed to retain unbroken a bottle of vin rouge which I was taking in the line with me. The ruins of Souchez looked very weird in the darkness and seemed quite surrounded with pools of water and trickling streams. Duckboards had to be followed from here to the quarries, where we shared a tremendous dugout and spent the greater part of the time playing cards and going on ration parties. After a few days here in reserve we passed along a communication trench cut downwards in the hillside, and quite exposed to view in daylight, to the front line. The trench was in a shocking state and very muddy but things were fairly quiet while we were here. The weather was cold and snow fell heavily, making the trenches look quite nice and the surrounding country, but after thawing it was damned uncomfortable, and two dugouts that we had, oozed water from the floor, walls and roof and also trickled from the floor of the trench into the dugout and it was hellish trying to keep warm feet; we wrapped dry sandbags round them after removing our boots but these soon got wet. We heard the famous blue light rumour here - that two blue Verrey lights meant that peace had been declared, but they did not appear here and never did.

From here we dragged our way back through the mud of the communication trench and returned to Gouy about 2.30 a.m. Trench waders in mud were awful things; on this occasion one stuck so firmly in the mud of the trench that I had to withdraw my foot and then pull the wader out with my hands.

A few days later we went to fresh positions on the Lorette heights from which we had a splendid view of the country behind us and could see the ruins of Notre Dame de Lorette. The French must have had an awful job taking these positions and the dugouts round about contained many skeletons and other ugly souvenirs. The weather had become warmer and we had a fine time in these positions, spending the days lounging about in the trench in the sun, and the nights in playing cards as we had a very comfortable dugout. It was now April 1916, and from Lorette we moved to Carency (another village the French had taken in 1915 after heavy fighting but now well behind the line - at least about the reserve line), and here we did a lot of work on fresh gun emplacements near Cabaret Rouge and in the valley below Vimy which could be seen just above us. The valley was an awful place to work in. All work had to be done at night of course and the ground was sloppy and slushy although on the side of the valley and it was practically impossible to make any progress with digging in spite of hand pumps being obtained. The valley had received some very heavy shelling a short time previously to judge by the shell holes of various sizes.

One night when it was simply pouring with rain,

after we had had various other moves, we were met by a guide and taken across the valley and up the opposite slope to the front line on the left of Vimy. It rained all the way and the communication trenches, were like small swimming baths full of liquid mud; we arrived at our positions soaked to the skin. We soon found that we had arrived at the nesting place of trench mortars and mines: the trench mortars came over regularly all day long and now and a gain a mine would be exploded. We had two go up during the four days we were in this position; one of these seemed to go up right behind our trench, it was a most weird thing, I happened to be looking that way at the time and saw a pillar of flame shoot about forty feet in the air and then head the usual heavy rumbling noise, and yet our trench did not suffer in the least except from the usual bombardment afterwards. Even when we were back at Carency or Cabaret Rouge, mines seemed to be always going up at the rate of almost one a day and as the lines were on the crest of the ridge the explosions could be seen splendidly from a distance - it is as well to view these from a distance too.

One evening in the middle of May, Dunkerley was killed at a position near the ridge, being hit by a whizz bang which damaged my equipment and broke my rifle, and we carried him across the valley to Cabaret Rouge where he was buried.

A day or so later when we were back in reserve we had orders to take our guns to positions so that we could give overhead fire across the valley as we were exploding a few mines. Duly to time (in the late evening)

our five mines were exploded practically simultaneously and we opened fire. We had a splendid view of the explosions and also the bombardment afterwards although it must have been pretty hellish up there. First the dull red glare of the mines going up and then for a few seconds not a sound; then Verey lights of different colours scampering skywards in the darkness, a little rifle firing and then the artillery on both sides crashed in. Overhead shrapnel bursting (in the distance just like furnace doors being rapidly opened and shut) and the heavy red glow of high explosives bursting. As I looked on I certainly did not think I should be in one of these craters within 48 hours.

However, I went there and arrived at the lip of the crater about midnight. There were only three of us left with the gun and a small party of Lancashire Fusilier bombers holding the crater which was about 30 yards or more in front of our front line. We got to the crater quietly enough but the 24 hours we spent here were pretty bad ones. We were on one edge of the crater while Jerry was on the other and the sap which led to the crater from our front line was very shallow and the last few yards contained several limbs and bodies of men who had been buried by the blow back from the mine; the position itself consisted of a very narrow, shallow piece of trench, one end of which led into the open and revealed nothing but chunks of white chalky ground, blown up by the mine, giving the place a most desolate appearance even in daylight. Trench



mortars came over unceasingly all day and although all these passed over as we were so close, they fell near enough to send showers of earth over us and the explosions themselves were deafening. Rifle grenades were also thrown over plentifully and these dropped all over the place; these we had to listen for, they fall with a peculiar swish, swishing sound. In the afternoon our own artillery joined in by dropping some shells short; the first one that came over sounded like an express train coming for our backs - it seemed certain to come right into the trench and we all crouched down flat while we waited, but it skimmed the trench and fell just outside and a big lump of chalk thrown up by it hit me in the back and for the moment I thought I was hit badly. Night eventually fell and a few hand bombs were thrown on either side during stand to but nothing else occurred until our relief arrived about midnight and on our way out I was astounded at the damage that had been done during the day by the trench mortars - the front line was simply one mass of huge holes and the trench practically obliterated.

Of our relief, ~~was~~ one was wounded early the next morning and another came down with shell shock, so that they were not so fortunate as our little party.

The next night I acted as guide for the relief to the crater and was glad to get back to the valley afterwards. This valley was generally known as Zouave Valley or Death Valley, <sup>so</sup> the French suffered heavy losses in taking it about the same time that Loos was captured in September 1915.

From the ridge we went to a peculiar secret position in the valley below which was made very well. A

long narrow passage underground led to the emplacement which was quite covered in except for a small hole to fire through. And orders were that in the event of a German attack succeeding, we were to hold our fire until the first waves were past us and then to open fire on their backs. What would happen to us afterwards when the position was discovered was not quite clear; however, we had no occasion to do this death or glory stunt, but it was certainly a very cleverly made position.

From here we went right back for a couple of days and had not been back twenty four hours when the Germans attacked, and we were rushed back to Cabaret Rouge, being met by a few shells and plenty of tear shell gas. We then found that Jerry had taken all five of our craters including the one I was in a day or so previously and had captured practically the whole of "D" Company of the 7th and caused the 140th Brigade very heavy casualties. The 2nd Division arrived to retake the lost trenches but I believe the counter attack was postponed. We stood by in case we were wanted.

Vimy Ridge was a rotten place at this time - the home of trench mortars and mines, but in the various positions in reserve just behind the lines we had a most comfortable time, namely at Carency, Lorette and Cabaret Rouge, which was simply a very deep trench full of fine dugouts, and apparently got its name from the ruins of an estaminet through which the trench cut and which I slept in one night, but it was full of large rats and not a very pleasant place.

The ridge itself was notorious for the number of trench mortars used there, and also the number of mines that

were being dug and exploded. But this proved to my last time in this sector with the exception of a short return about June 1916 when we found that the Germans had consolidated their gains during May, and that their trenches now looked right across the valley, so that the valley could not be used during the daytime as it could formerly.

I had now been with the machine guns for nearly six months and was beginning to become quite an expert with the gun. It was heavy work carrying them in and out of the line together with all the ammunition to be used, but it was far more interesting work than in the infantry and gave one much more independence in the line itself. The guns would be placed in their selected positions in the trenches and rarely fired except by order, and then simply for a given time at a given objective, so that when, in 1918, machine guns should have been fired whenever there was a visible target I found that fire was often delayed under the old, but mistaken idea in open warfare, that the position would be given away too soon.

At the same time we did a lot of night firing round and about the ridge and were lucky in having few casualties. Our post arrived regularly; we had regular spells back at rest; rations were good; and on the whole we had nothing to grumble at.

From Vimy we went back to Bruay for a rest. Bruay was a nice little town well behind the line, with a civilian population and many estaminets - one in particular which sold ice cold French beer which was great

after a long route march on a hot day. The Divisional Follies also performed here. We had a good billet, the whole of the section being billeted in one large attic, and, it being June, the weather was fine and very hot. Our clothing was a little mouldy and rather lively at this time but we were ~~about~~<sup>able</sup> during the rest to reduce the population, which was getting rather thick.

We fell in for many inspections with the consequent washing of equipment and polishing; physical jerks in the early morning; guards and so, but on the whole we had a good time. Everybody knew everybody else very well in the section and got on well together; we had remained the same section, with but few casualties, for some months, through Loos, Vimy, Souchez, etc., and it was not really until September 1916 at High Wood on the Somme that the section was smashed up, and then the job was done pretty thoroughly. However, for the time being we were content and passed our rest well. We heard here of Kitchener's death, it being read out to us on parade.

Our rest at last came to an end (it lasted about a fortnight), and I saw Bruay no more until after the armistice, two and half years later, when I walked through the town after being <sup>in</sup> hospital with influenza, and thought then of our old section as it was in 1916, and it was a very fine section then. Our old billet seemed lifeless and the very town seemed different.

We left Bruay for Aix Noullette, passing through Hersin on the way. Aix Noullette was a smashed up village in the reserve lines and was shelled occasionally. We were thrust into a large brewery cellar, and with <sup>them</sup> as our

base, did a lot of work on gun positions in the line at night. We first received our box respirators here. We were between Souchez and Vimy and one of our positions was in a rather old mine crater in which we found that our gun was mounted practically on top of a dead German who was only thinly covered with soil. I took his bayonet but lost it later.

We did a lot of night firing here as about this time we were making raids along the whole front in preparation for the big Somme offensive; at Vimy we noticed that mines were still being exploded.

In one position in the front line a bombing raid suddenly broke out on our right and our trenches were heavily shelled; unfortunately at the time the infantry were being relieved so that the trenches were crammed and there were many casualties.

We had many different positions in the line always using Aix Noulette as our base, with an occasional bath at Hersin, but finally after one more visit to the Vimy sector we dropped out of the line and commenced our trek towards the Somme. It was now about the end of July 1916 and the weather was glorious and remained so during the whole of our trek which was a long one.

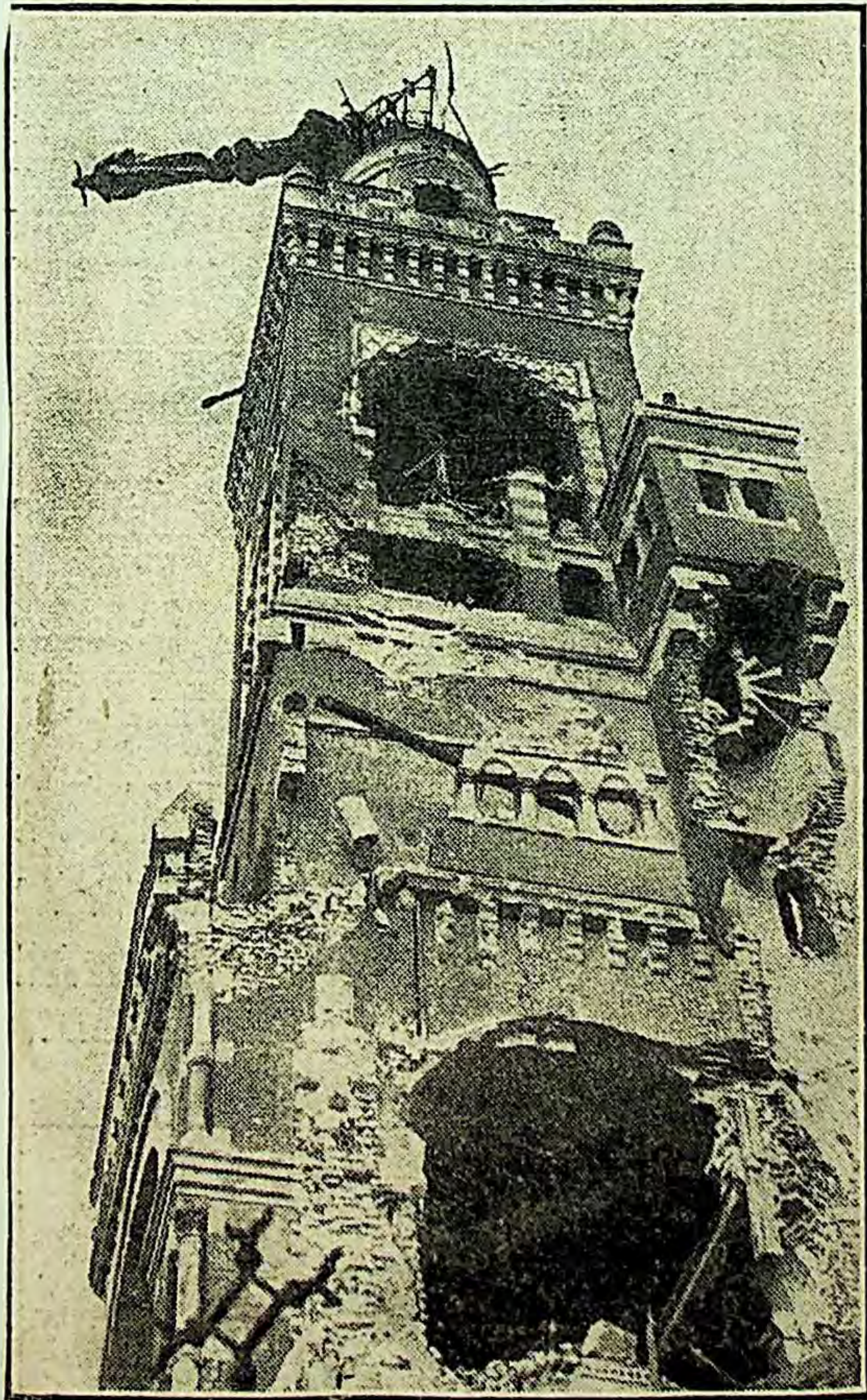
My 21st birthday was spent at a place called Lathieu near Ourton on the trek. We were billeted at the time in an old farmyard among piles and piles of straw. The weather was very hot and because of this we often commenced our march very wearily in the morning so that we had finished before noon; the nights were spent ~~sleep~~ sleeping in the open on our waterproof sheets, or if we

had time we built a slight shelter out of two or three waterproof sheets and a few sticks. Some of our halting places were in fine places; several times in or near orchards and quite often near a river where we could bathe. Particularly was this the case at Neuf Moulins where we were dumped, after a long march, in the middle of a small field full of apple trees and a river flowing nearby; there was a splendid place for swimming near a mill and we also had some good cricket here; our section remained unbeaten at this throughout the trek.

Of course, the whole of the 47th Division was gradually working its way towards the Somme and we had several practise attacks in combination with the infantry, and some of these were pretty hot work.

Towards the end of August we reached Franvillers, almost the last stage of our trek, and which was in fact our last village containing civilians. From here we could see the shelling at night in the far distance at Thiepval, and the bright twinkling shell bursts and Verey lights did not look at all appetising.

We stayed in Franvillers, completing our training until the 12th September, and did much gun practice, including a lot of actual firing at various targets (often tin cans on sticks), and on the 12th September 1916 we paraded at dawn and marched through Albert and halted in a barren plain cut up by trenches near Fricourt. We stayed the night in some old dugouts and next morning at 4.30 a.m. fell in once more, knowing that this march would take us to our jumping off place for High Wood. We fell in in battle order and marched through the captured



Albert Cathedral tower with its figure of the Virgin.