

FROM THE ST LAWRENCE  
TO THE YSER

FREDERIC C. CURRY

a/n



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FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE  
TO THE YSER







LIEUTS. KLOTZ, STRATHY AND CURRY AT AMESBURY.

# FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

WITH THE 1ST CANADIAN BRIGADE

BY

FREDERIC C. CURRY

LATE CAPTAIN 2ND EASTERN ONTARIO REGIMENT

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAPS

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1916

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To

LIEUT.-GENERAL SIR SAM HUGHES,

K.C.B., M.P., MINISTER OF MILITIA,

TO WHOSE EFFORTS

THE EFFICIENCY OF THE CANADIAN CONTINGENTS

IS LARGELY DUE.



## PREFACE

IN presenting this little work to the public the writer wishes to thank those of his fellow-officers and others who brought to his notice incidents that did not come under his personal observation.

Valuable assistance has been gained from the official accounts of Sir Max Aitken, and from the historical writings of Mr. John Buchan with regard to the parts played by other brigades and divisions with which we were co-operating.

In spite of these attempts to broaden its outlook, the book stands in the main a personal account of the actions of the 1st Brigade, Canadian Infantry.

As such, however, the writer hopes it will be accepted, and not as a detailed history of the events chronicled, though every attempt has been made to check the accuracy of the facts stated.

## PREFACE

One fictitious character has been introduced, that of Begbie Lyte, in order to make the tale impersonal.

In all other cases the true names of persons mentioned, or initials, have been used.

To Dr. Shipley, Master of Christ's College, Cambridge, the writer owes much for his kindly criticisms and encouragement in this work.

F. C. CURRY.

*October, 1916.*

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# FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

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## CHAPTER I

### ANTE-BELLUM

BEFORE the war the Canadian Militia consisted of about 75,000 of all ranks and all grades of efficiency. To a neutral eye it must have appeared to be in a highly disorganised condition, for battalions and corps had sprung up here and there throughout the country with no proportion existing between them and the other arms of the service. And yet within a short two months after the outbreak of hostilities a complete division, armed and equipped, landed in England, and in a bare six months were in the field holding their own line of trenches.

To appreciate the difficulties, however, that attended this transformation we must look back to those happy days prior to

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August, 1914, and witness the Canadian Militia in its own home.

This consisted of the "Drill-hall," or "Armouries," a long, low building equipped more or less with barred windows and castellated turrets at one or more corners. This building is one of the sights of the city, and is pointed out by the cabby or taxi-driver to the English gentlemen and other tourists who come out with the laudable intention of writing books.

If the castellated towers are missing, and the building is constructed on strictly utilitarian lines, one is safe in referring to it as the "Drill-hall"; but if a couple of old cannon, vintage 1800, guard its portals, and barred windows and frowning turrets add to its martial splendour, then you have an "Armouries." By observing this simple rule one can discriminate between the two as easily as telling a church from a cathedral.

The existence of such a building is largely due to the efforts of the local member of Parliament, and the style of architecture varies directly with the square of his popularity with the party in power. Thus a flourishing full-strength battalion may be housed in a dingy, drab wooden structure,

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and in the next town a very ornate and modern building may be tenanted by a corps that is only struggling for existence, or perhaps not even struggling. It is well, however, to refrain from too much criticism of these buildings, pretentious and hideous as they may be, for in them are taught the ideals and principles which so many of our youth have died to uphold in the rain-sodden fields of Flanders.

Considering the shortness of what is locally known as the "drill season," the results obtained are good. General French, in his report of a few years ago, described our horses as "half-broken and our men but little more," but that is only to be expected in a country where a man is considered to be wasting his time if he devotes even the little that he can ill afford to the military profession.

However, even if the half-broken men and horses do kick over the traces once in a while, they eventually "get there," and that, after all, is the Canadian doctrine.

For the purposes of training the Militia is divided into two classes—the "city" and the "rural" corps. There is also the permanent force, our Canadian regulars, who

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exist as a school for "the Militia," as they refer to the non-professional army.

The city corps consist chiefly of infantry, heavy artillery, and engineer corps, the last being generally in university towns and either affiliated with or being actually the cadet corps of the college. One might think the cadet corps would be affiliated with the Militia, but this is a case where the boy is father to the man.

City corps do fourteen nominal days' training a year in the drill-hall, and, of late years, a voluntary camp of five days. For each of these days two night drills of two hours each count as a day; the militiaman receives the sum of four shillings, with a slight increase according to his musketry ability.

The drill season commences in the middle of March, and from then on till Inspection Day—a boiling hot day in June—the voice of the drill-sergeant is heard in the land. This individual is obtained on indent from the permanent force; but more of him anon.

For two nights a week, then, at the season when a young man's fancies are supposed to turn lightly to other things, the would-be Wellington dons a suit of rifle green, or scarlet, or even the heathen kilt, according

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to his taste, and, disguising it with a civilian great coat (regulation coats being issued to 50 per cent. of the establishment), slinks more or less bashfully down the back way to the drill-hall. There he will learn to shift a rifle (weight nine pounds five and a few odd ounces) from one position to another in response to quite unintelligible commands that echo most absurdly from the roof. He will also learn to move around the floor in something like the formations laid down in the little red manual, practising especially those for whom our prayers are desired, the favourites of the General Officer Commanding his district.

For, though regulations wax and wane, the G.O.C. changeth not; neither does he bow down and worship the little tin gods the Army Council set up. But instead, as one by one the formations he used to know are culled from the manual, he watches the new formations with a passive eye and reserves his choleric criticisms for the old reliables' "Echelon to the right" and that maximum of military perfection the "March Past."

In rural corps, however, the season consists of fourteen actual days spent in the broiling sun in camp. Lucky indeed is the company commander who can bring a full

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company every year to camp, for many who come one year come not again, and such are the conditions that no man sayeth him nay lest recruiting be stopped altogether in that district. One sighs for the press gang of Merrie England and subscribes for such incendiary journals as those of the various National Service Leagues, for one has a limited area to secure the recruits from, and must recruit at least 60 per cent. each year at a season when farm labour is at a premium.

Having secured your recruits, you must assemble them at some central point where you have a large quantity of arms and equipment stored, generally at your own expense—though “Sam” Hughes is remedying this—and issue these, stave off complaints that the fit is not exactly up to West End standards, and, if you are an old “stager,” give them an hour or two of drill while enthusiasm is at its maximum.

Then on the required date you marshal your little force at the railway station, shepherd them into the cars, and detrain them a few hours later, under even more trying circumstances, a few miles from camp. Then, with a mixture of patience, perspiration, and profanity, you finally march into your line of

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tents. Here you are met with great glee by the colonel and the adjutant, who inquire blithely as to how many men you have ; this may seem useless, but as the men are strung out for at least half a mile along the route it is reassuring to learn how many there should be in the little procession.

We will take it that the colonel is pleased with your reply, in which case he will tell you that his white horse has arrived, so if you will drop around . . . prohibition rules in our training camps, but a good O.C. has always something under the mat.

What follows in the remaining days of the fortnight must be endured to be appreciated. At the end of that time the shepherding begins again, and for the next month the company commander scours his district, this time locating uniforms which in defiance of his last orders, and prayers, have not been turned in. Very often the man has gone West and the uniform as well. So remote are the chances of seeing either again that the expression "Gone West" has almost the same meaning as the modern soldier's "Nah pooh!"

During the winter months classes of instruction are held in all the training centres, the instructors being the non-commissioned

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officers of the permanent Militia. The amount of good done depends largely on the ability and personal effort of the commanders of the local corps. During these months such officers as can spare the time or have not already done so become, by various long and tedious processes, involving much correspondence, attached to the various barracks for instruction.

This arrangement is a very popular one for all concerned, providing as it does—

1. Frequent leave for junior officers of the permanent force ;

2. An opportunity to drill men who know, by years of experience, what movements one wishes to perform, and who will (D.V.) perform them with machinelike precision despite wrong commands ;

3. A pleasant change in the ordinary drill for the above-mentioned men owing to the aforesaid wrong commands.

In the evenings lectures are given by senior officers who are not young, married, or talented in other ways. These lectures comprise the hundred and one things an officer is expected to know, from "Military Law" to "Protection when at Rest." This last subject will require revision after the

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present campaign, it being the writer's opinion that soldiers never rest—not when there is a foot of Allied soil unturned by a shovel, at any rate.

Eventually one passes an examination of sorts and becomes a qualified officer of Militia. The questions set are not hard—they would doubtless raise a smile if handed to a first year Sandhurst man—but they present real difficulties to officers whose opportunities are limited and whose spare time is largely taken up in the hard and thankless task of recruiting.

Officers of the permanent force are, in the main, graduates of the Royal Military College, Kingston, an institution second to none in the Empire. Field officers of Militia can also take a training course at the college, but the numbers who can avail themselves of this opportunity are limited.

Our staffs are assisted by very able officers loaned from the Imperial Army in exchange for officers of the same rank attached to Imperial battalions.

But the bulk of the instructional work is done, and exceedingly well done too, by the staff-sergeant—the Sergeant What's-'is-Name of Kipling's song.

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He is very carefully selected and trained, and becomes in time a walking encyclopædia of military affairs. He must be a marvel of tact and diplomacy as well, for not only will he meet the officer who knows nothing and appreciates that fact, but also that other type—not uncommon in civil life as well—the man who knows nothing yet thinks he knows all.

## CHAPTER II

### PETEWAWA

PETEWAWA is the training ground of the Canadian Field Artillery and the Permanent Force. Until very recently it was strictly reserved for them, and was regarded, by those who had not been there, as a sort of seventh heaven for soldiers. Later, when the city corps were taken there for five days one June—or was it July?—we changed our minds and decided that, geographically speaking, it was part of one of Dante's seven circles. At present it is the internment camp for enemy aliens, and if they endure it for the duration of the war the Kaiser should present them, one and all, with iron crosses.

Fifty square miles of sandy hills, covered here and there with second growth scrub, it is an ideal ground for the purpose. The temperature rises to 98° Fahrenheit most of the days in summer. What it is like in winter the writer does not know—probably

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covered by this mysterious term “manœuvres.”

The General Idea has been received the night before and duly discussed at the “pow-wow” or conference that always follows the reception of this document. Much time and whisky has been consumed, and the sum of the evening’s discussion is that the General Idea is exactly the same as last year’s, with the exception that the Blue Force is fighting the Grey Force this year. “Last year we had the Red Army to contend with, and the fact that they no longer oppose us is due to the annihilation they suffered”—so says the colonel. “The invasion is coming from the north—presumably the Esquimaux are up in arms against us.”

Dawn brings with it reveille and brigade orders. This is a magnificent bluff on the part of the brigade staff to give the impression that they have sat up all night devising new and wondrous schemes for departing from the beaten path of military science. This is quite unnecessary, as sufficient departures will occur naturally in the course of the day, and nothing on earth will convince the infantry officer that the staff ever work.

The colonel, however, reads the orders to

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the little group around him. First there is the General Idea, laboriously copied from orders of the night before. Then comes the "Special Idea." This, too, bears a time-worn similarity to its predecessors, but passes without special comment. The next heading is "Dispositions": "The advanced guard will consist of one troop of the Missinabee Horse and one company of the Umpteenth Battalion." "Thank God for that!" murmurs the colonel, realising that the one company of his battalion will be spared the arduous duty of trying to replace cavalry, and that the other three will be in the first of the fray and consequently the first out of ammunition and free from the danger always incidental to the use of blank ammunition at close ranges. Moreover, advanced guards have always been his hobby, so he proceeds to issue his orders—verbally of course, though he will write them out later for the sake of curious generals who make collections of such things. While he is waiting for the cavalry to report he engages in very earnest conversation with Begbie Lyte, the signalling officer. Lyte is the serious-faced young man standing arguing with his little knot of flag-waggers. He has just realised that one mis-

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take has already been made in the campaign, for, in the enthusiasm of youth, he brought bicycles to Petewawa. He realises, too, that next year he will either bring no bicycles or no men, for the latter having pushed their machines through three miles of sand from the detraining platform are already expressing their opinion, with true Canadian freedom, as to their usefulness.

This difficulty is tactfully overcome by leaving the cycles in the tents, and the "plot," as he calls the instructions he has just received, is unfolded to them.

Meanwhile the cavalry come up, and the officer-in-charge, knowing somebody who knows Lyte, spends a few seconds in the exchange of pleasantries. His name being Horace Smith, it has been quite conveniently shortened to "Horsey." Smith is one of those geniuses who knows everybody whom anyone knows; consequently he is always able to borrow money. Presently he trots off with his troop, and we know we shall see no more of him until nightfall. In our turn we move off as well, and the main body, already commencing to munch the haversack lunches they are carrying, cherish similar opinions as to our fate.

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Eventually the whole column is moving down the dusty road and presently turns northward, following some wheel tracks that eventually merge into the sand. Then for a long time nothing happens. The cavalry have long since disappeared; the vanguard of one company shows up occasionally on a hill top ahead of us and proves that we are at least moving in the same general direction.

At one time two men detached themselves from the rest of the vanguard and proceeded to divest themselves calmly of their accoutrements. Then followed the feverish wagging of a flag in a manner that suggested news of greatest importance. The colonel becomes impatient as he waits for the message to come through, and suggests mildly that there seems to be a falling off from the standard rate.

Lyte, however, is equal to the occasion, and calls to the reading signallers "Tell the fool to semaphore!" "He carn't," gasps the sergeant in a horrified whisper; "He's young, an' he don't know nothink but Morse." Lyte groans. This young lad was pressed into service a few days previously, on the strength of his boy scout record, to fill a gap caused by another youth who had

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suddenly felt the call of the wild and gone river boating.

Eventually the message is received and the flags on the hill top disappear as the signallers hasten to catch up with their party. It is the type of message embraced under the heading "Negative Information" and stated to be of importance. "Scouts report no enemy in sight as yet, 10.15 a.m.—J. HORACE SMITH (Lieut.)."

There is a feeling that we have been deceived, and we trudge on, kicking up angry little swirls of dust. Sympathy is already beginning to be expressed for the children of Israel in their wanderings. The music of water falling in the distance would be music indeed, for most of the water bottles are by now empty, and great beads of sweat are standing out on the men's foreheads as a result. Men will not learn that drinking large quantities of water when marching only increases their discomfort.

However, other things soon occur to divert our minds; one or two false alarms that the enemy has been sighted are satisfactorily straightened out, with more flag-wagging, and finally the plop-plop of blank cartridge is heard in the distance.

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The advance guard now extends in long skirmishing lines with a view to brushing aside any slight resistance offered by the enemy. Presently we come on the horses of our mounted brethren in little groups of four in rear of a hill, and as we climb the hill itself we see the backs of Smith's gallant troopers as they fire from behind bushes that would certainly prove their death warrants on active service. The enemy are hidden in the edge of a large and straggly wood that only two days before was the scene of a roaring bush fire. Occasionally a man can be seen moving against the background of the charred trunks, but they, too, are making the best of what cover there is. Smith, leaving us to clear the wood, withdraws his men and reports to the colonel, and then moves around to a flank, hoping to cut off the party inside the wood.

Meanwhile the main guard have reinforced the first thin lines of skirmishers, and the enemy are already falling back through the wood. We follow at a more leisurely pace, as the whole place is a mass of charred tree trunks, burnt underbush and ashes. A voice from the rear bids us "Lie down" in no uncertain tones, so, reflecting that after all

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the Government knows best, we do so, and from then on the khaki begins to blend with its surroundings in a way that the inventor of this variety of cloth never dreamed of.

The wood turns out to be pear-shaped, and we, having by chance struck the small end of the pear, emerge considerably before the other battalions, who, having come up on our right, are biting into the largest part of the pear. Sounds of heavy conflict arise, and having still some five rounds each of blank we re-enter the wood and the combat. From then on, as Lyte expressed it afterwards, "Things began to occur just as they happened, like all great battles, the strategy being worked out later."

Twice we engage friendly battalions until stopped by an irate umpire, and once we surround and capture three sections of the enemy's horses. These are found in a little *coulée* running off a dried stream bed. Altogether it is a glorious affair, and is just settling down to the stage when personal combat begins when a bugle blares out the "Cease fire." This is followed by the "assembly," and we straggle to the edge of the wood to find most of our battalion there. The brigade is again formed up and we sit

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down for lunch. The cavalry, our enemies of the morning, trot back to camp, where a hot meal awaits them, and we know we shall not see them again. As we have our blankets following we wonder what is in the wind. We soon learn, however—the rest of the day is to be spent in a route march to Chalk River, a stream about ten miles further north, and bivouac will be made there. Blankets are to be worn “en banderole.”

The whole brigade busies itself in drawing the blankets from the waggons and rolling them into long cylinders, which with a spare boot-lace are made into an exaggerated sort of horse-collar. The luckless owner then thrusts a head and one arm through the roll and he is ready to move on. A hotter method of carrying a blanket could scarcely be devised, but it is much preferable to the antique leather equipment that hangs year in and year out on the armoury walls.

Presently the column moves off along the dusty road, a mere trail winding through the brush, which, pleasant and green at first, soon is as drab and sordid as the weltering men along the road. Now and again a halt is ordered, and we throw ourselves on the roadside while another battalion passes

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through to take its turn at the head of the column. Some artillery waggons pass at the trot, raising clouds of dust and profanity along the line, and then the piping of a whistle starts the whole column moving again.

Chalk River is eventually reached and the bivouac formed; then the joyful shout of "Tea up" is heard. Several buglers at the same time play the "Men's Mess Call" with variations, and for a while contentment reigns.

The officers stroll around to the Y.M.C.A. tent and write postcards home, telling blithely how they are enjoying the lovely weather—not a cloud in the sky! They mention nothing of the blistered necks and sunburned noses from which the skin is already peeling. Begbie Lyte, with a shameless disregard for the truth, buys a postcard of a typical bunch of troops passing up that very same road, and selecting a figure well concealed by dust, marks an X over it, and inscribing "This is me" on the reverse side addresses it to the colonel's daughter.

The cool of the evening soon drives the noisy bathers from the river, and the camp settles down around the inevitable camp

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fires until the warning notes of " Last Post " and " Lights Out " sound.

The moon comes out and shines on long rows of blanketed forms and stacked rifles, and the only sound is the uneasy stir of the horses and tossing of an occasional man where the sand flea is already at work.

Such is a typical day at Petewawa.

## CHAPTER III

### MOBILISATION

It required the outbreak of the war to bring home the inevitable weakness of such a system, and when the Canadian Parliament announced the intention of sending a contingent of thirty thousand men, even the most enthusiastic shrugged their shoulders and said "Impossible."

But the feat not only was accomplished, but nearly trebled in the accomplishment, and if there is one man who can claim to have arisen as a Moses from among the people and achieved this miracle it is Major-General Sir Sam Hughes, at that time known generally as Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia.

Sam Hughes did not arise in a single hour—neither was Rome built in a day. He had been rising for several years, and it had taken the combined efforts of both the Liberal and the Conservative parties to hold him down.

Looking backward one cannot help thinking

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what a pity it was he had not been given a free hand. He supported the Ross rifle, and raised it from the status of a political weapon to that of a military one, and whatever opponents to this weapon may claim they must remember that it was the weapon that held the line at Ypres in those last few days of April, 1915, and had it not been available the Canadian Division would have probably been in England patiently drilling with dummy rifles, and the glory of having saved the situation would have fallen upon other troops.

However, the actual declaration of war drew people's attention to the Militia, and they demanded action.

Some commanding officers made stirring speeches by platform or Press, offering the services of their battalions as complete units—an impossibility to accomplish owing to the terms of enlistment; others with more modesty sent in their applications, without any flourish of trumpets, for service in any capacity.

But along the border, wherever there were canals, bridges, and other public works that might easily be damaged by fanatic sympathisers from the United States, volunteers

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were called for to supply the necessary guards.

Subsequent events justified these precautions, but for some time the men on duty were the object of much attention from the small boy and that type of young man who still roams the streets and declares that the Allies are a long time winning the war !

Spy fever was rampant, and such experts as Begbie Lyte were constantly in demand to investigate lights that flickered in any manner that a vivid imagination might possibly take for signalling.

At other points practical jokes were played, such as driving a calf at night in the direction of the sentry. The soldier receiving no answer to his challenge would fire in the direction of the noise, and a loud laugh would greet him. Once or twice, however, the sentry waited for the laugh and fired in that direction, so that this variety of joke soon lost its popularity.

Once, however, mobilisation had been ordered the militiamen were replaced by men who had volunteered for active service. The armouries began to hum with activity. In the West it was hard to find accommodation for the men who came from isolated home-

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steads and lonely ranches, some even from the Arctic Circle, to enlist. The West still continues to supply the bulk of our recruits, due largely to the fact that the majority are, if not British born, at least the sons of British fathers, and consequently felt the call more personally than the sons of families four or five generations in the country. Quebec, from which province one would expect the most owing to the ties of race and language with our Allies, has been frankly disappointing, although certain exclusively French-Canadian battalions have done, and are continuing to do, as good work as any on the Western front.

A week or two dragged on before the actual order to depart for the big concentration camps came, and various conjectures were made as to their location. Petewawa was suggested as one, but given up as too isolated. Niagara, Barriefield, Three Rivers, and other "annual" sites were other favourites, but each had some objection, for no concentration such as thirty thousand men had been held in the history of Canada.

Eventually, however, we learned that one large camp was to be formed at Val Cartier. Except that Val Cartier was in

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Quebec, no one knew anything of this little hamlet.

Orders came thick and fast ordering this equipment to be worn and that to be left behind. Some days rifles were to be taken and greatcoats left in stores, and next day the rifles were to be left and greatcoats were to be taken. The result was that some of the telegrams went astray, and commanding officers at the last minute ordered what equipment they thought most suitable to be worn.

The Umpteenth Battalion took down the leather harness that had adorned its armoury walls for many a year and spent an anxious day fitting it together, Begbie Lyte and the other officers who had volunteered for the front flitting from one group of contestants to another.

At last every man had a working knowledge of the fifty odd buckles and a hazy idea as to where the straps were supposed to cross his chest and where not. The colonel looked with pride on this difficulty overcome and said, "Thank Heaven! we will probably get a more modern outfit as soon as we strike camp." Alas! We buckled and unbuckled those straps and rolled and unrolled our

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greatcoats for half a year before the new kit was handed out.

This was only one of the many steps that led up to that final day when, with the band playing such cheerful airs as "The Girl I left behind me" and "Will ye no come back again," the active service volunteers of the Umpteenth Battalion left their native town.

The way to the station is but dimly remembered as a haze of faces, spasmodic attempts at cheering, and the waving of many handkerchiefs. Much handshaking and the sudden thrusting of presents into arms already full prefaced the actual pulling out of the train.

The officers gathered on the back of the last car and watched the white faces of the crowd dwindle to pin points, and then a curve hid town and people alike from view.

It was less lonely inside the car, where were officers of another battalion whose men were in the fore part of the train. The elder men talked in low, serious tones as befitted those who knew something of what lay before them.

To Lyte and the younger subalterns it seemed as though they were on the threshold

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of life's Great Adventure, as indeed they  
were.

But they were not facing a war of chivalrous deeds such as they imagined.

Alas for our ideals ! war now appears in its true light, as the game of commerce played on a larger scale with human lives as pawns in the place of dollars and cents !

And as for chivalry, how can it live in the midst of machine-guns, asphyxiating gases, and liquid flames ?

## CHAPTER IV

### VAL CARTIER

A MORE picturesque site for a camp than Val Cartier could hardly be imagined, situated as it was among the foothills of the Laurentian mountains along the banks of the Jacques Cartier River.

A gentle slope, dry sandy soil, and plenty of water made it ideal from a sanitary standpoint, and with the ample manoeuvre grounds available, the shower sprays, and running water piped throughout the camp, Val Cartier was the peer of any camp the Canadians have yet seen.

But when we tumbled out of the train in the early morning there was nothing to show the existence of a military camp except one lonely bell-tent guarding the railway platform and a pair of wheel-tracks disappearing in the clumps of second-growth cedars.

Following these tracks we came upon an opening on either side of the road in which

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

men laboured at clearing away the underbrush. The vivid colours of the jerseys in which they were clad told the world that those on the one side were students from McGill, while those on the other clad in blue and white represented 'Varsity (Toronto). Further along the red, yellow, and blue of Queen's University showed where their University Field Company was at work. The same spirit of competition that existed on the football field now kept the three units working at top speed.

A patch of land that one day was covered with cedars would next day be bare of all but stumps, the brushwood blazing merrily in huge fires. Next day the stumps in turn would be gone and by evening the new area would be covered with tents.

Already some hundreds of tents had been erected on each side of what was to be the main street of the camp. A ditching machine pantingly laboured on one side of the road and dug as much in a day as fifty men. In the ditch already made on the other side pipes had been laid and running water was available.

Showers had been erected for each company, and, most welcome of all, the advance party

## VAL CARTIER

greeted us with a flourish of dirty aprons and ladles and the joyful cry of "skillet."

During the afternoon greatcoats were received, and very necessary they were, for when we rose next morning ice had formed in our pails, and the trees on the mountain side were beginning to turn red.

Long before we left the mountain sides were a wild revel of colour, reds, yellows, and browns predominating, where the frost had touched the leaves. Particularly brilliant were the shot-scarred trees that stood on the slopes forming the stop-butts of the rifle-ranges.

These ranges are worthy of special mention, comprising as they did targets for fifteen hundred men.

The method of construction was simplicity itself. A deep ditch had been dug and the earth thrown up like an ordinary trench to protect the marker. Strong posts had been erected about six feet apart to carry the targets, which took the form of squares of pulpboard mounted on a lever pivoted to the upright. The weight of the target held it behind the butt, and it was brought into view by pulling a short piece of rope attached to the free end of the lever.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

Crude as this arrangement was, it served the purpose admirably, and daily we trudged out toward the mountain, around the foot of which this trench wound much as the German line does around the foot of Messines Hill, and fired ragged volleys into the re-echoing hill sides.

In only two ways could the training have been improved, and neither of these two was practicable under the circumstances. Better checking of the target registers and fire control would have necessitated officers trained better in musketry, and such officers were not available, and had the latest pattern ammunition in clips been obtainable instead of the old square-toed bullet wrapped in paper packages, more practice in rapid fire—the English Army's Mad Minute—could have been had.

But Sam Hughes had to work with the material at hand, and from an army of men who had, in the majority, never fired a service rifle in their lives, he formed an army that he described as being “the finest shooting army in the world.”

Drill was not by any means neglected, and there were few idle hours in camp, even moonlight nights being eagerly seized

## VAL CARTIER

upon by battalion commanders for extra work.

Daily fresh drafts from battalions arrived and were formed into new composite battalions, and daily the proportion of men in old civilian clothing grew less.

Two reviews were held, after one of which the Honourable Sam had many things to say to the officers. He told them that every officer, no matter what political gender, would have an equal chance in the great struggle for a place on the contingent, for instead of the one thousand officers asked for some fifteen hundred officers were actually in camp.

Sam spake yet other homilies to the officers, and his address, delivered from a mound on which he and his staff were drawn up, was irreverently referred to around camp as the "Sermon on the Mount." A story is also told that one of his aides suggested that all could not hear him. "That's all right," he is credited with replying; "they can all see me!"

However, his words had a beneficial effect on all who heard them, and when two weeks later another review was held and His Royal Highness the Duke of Connaught inspected

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

the contingent it was announced that the First Canadian Division was ready to proceed over seas.

Begbie Lyte and other signalling officers were summoned over to headquarters one day and received mysterious instructions from an officer in naval uniform.

Two days later, on the 22nd of September, the — Battalion embarked on a troopship, and after a wild evening's pleasure at the Chateau Frontenac the writer, Begbie Lyte, and some others sought the narrow confines of the ship. The rhythmic throb of the propeller woke them some hours later as the ship moved out to anchor in mid stream.

## CHAPTER V

### THE CONVOY

FOR two days we lay at anchor opposite the Citadel of Quebec and bemoaned the fate that separated us from the twinkling lights of the Chateau Frontenac and the Dufferin Terrace. Then one evening the throb of the propeller drew the crowd from the saloons to the decks and we watched the lights fade away in the night. From the forts long fingers of light followed us down stream, and blinking lights here and there sent us farewell greetings. Up on the bridge we could hear the clatter of the signal lamps, and the sooty odour of petroleum smoke hung in the calm air around us. Begbie Lyte was on the job and became an important unit in our little company. Through him alone would we get news of the outside world for some weeks to come.

Nearing Father Point, below Quebec, where normally the pilot is dropped or taken on when one is leaving or proceeding to

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

Canada, the ship's officers pointed out a small twinkling light that marked the grave of the ill-fated *Empress of Ireland*. We had seen the collier *Storstadt* that sent her to her doom while at anchor off the Citadel, and were much impressed.

As night wore on the groups on the deck became smaller until the ship's officers alone remained, and with darkened port-holes we slipped on through the night. A distinct freshness in the wind spoke of a change around us. We were nearing salt water. Next day we anchored in Gaspé Basin. Already some six or eight ships lay there.

There we lay for some days watching the jellyfish and the gulls while one by one our number was increased to thirty-two.

At this point a diversion occurred in the form of the last visit by the Minister of Militia in a noisy tugboat. More important than the printed copies of his farewell speech that were handed us was the news that now was our last chance to mail letters. In childish simplicity we handed down our mail, thinking the "hame folk" would receive these in a few short days. The sacks were collected and taken to one of the other ships and journeyed across the Atlantic with us.



SAILING DOWN THE ST. LAWRENCE, NEAR BIC.



## THE CONVOY

So our departure was kept secret from all but a few, for, with a shrewd knowledge of the "habitant" mind, Captain Gee, the gallant commander of "E" Company, tied up a few letters in a handkerchief, weighted it with sundry pieces of silver, and dropped the package into a fishing boat that had come alongside with a load of fresh meat. The very amount enclosed spoke of secrecy, and the "habitant" sailor used all due precautions in forwarding the missives.

By Sunday noon the ground swell had driven some of the officers to deck chairs, while the others marshalled the troops on the rear deck for Divine service. Service over, we watched the celebrated Perce Rock fading in the distance and knew that Canada now lay far behind us. A day later and Newfoundland too lay in the distance, and the magic circle of the horizon closed around us.

Interest now began to be taken in things nautical. The sextant, compass, and log were the cause of much discussion, and the usual bets were made on the daily run, the stakes being held by the chaplain.

Three days out and the ship's library was taken by assault, and the sevenpenny novels that formed it disappeared into the cabins.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

In vain an officer was appointed librarian with powers to search and to seize, but conditions were not bettered.

Lectures, physical drill, and other mild duties relieved a little of the monotony, for the journey was a slow one, a condition made necessary by the horse transports, one of which rolled in line ahead of us. Occasionally a stir would be noticed on her decks and a horse that had succumbed to *mal-demer* would be unceremoniously dumped overboard. Such occasions were marked by a fusillade of pistol shots from each ship as the carcass drifted past, for, contrary to traditions, most of us carried revolvers for the first time in our lives and were anxious to display our prowess.

Nearly a fortnight was thus passed gazing in singular apathy at the most remarkable demonstration of the command of the seas that military history of any age affords.

In three long lines, roughly a mile apart, the transports formed an armada such as Philip of Spain never dreamed of.

But about two days out from England a black column of smoke was seen to port, and presently the contour of a heavy battleship could be determined bearing down on us.



CHURCH PARADE.



## THE CONVOY

There was wild excitement till the Cross of St. George could be distinguished at her masthead. It was the ill-fated *Queen Mary*, our latest and finest battle-cruiser. At an almost incredible speed she overtook us and passed up our lines with her crew manning the decks and her band playing "The Maple Leaf."

From then on we always could see the smoke of heavier battleships in the offing, and knew we were getting close to somewhere.

We passed the Scilly Islands about 4 o'clock in the morning, but as cards had continued till late the preceding night few but the ship's officers saw the pin-point of light marking the westward sentinel of the Old World.

Then on October 14th fishing smacks again appeared and the grey coast of Cornwall hove in sight, and by noon we could distinguish buildings along the cliffs.

Passing the Eddystone our course was altered and all hopes of landing at Southampton vanished. Captain H——r was much excited. After nineteen years he was returning to his native town—Plymouth. To a running fire of his explanations we passed up the Sound to the Hamoaze. A tugboat, looking ridiculously small against the gigan-

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

tic liner ahead, now took us in tow, and the throbbing of the ship's screw stopped. The cessation of this pulse added a sombre touch to our voices; we were nearing the end of the voyage, and in another day would know the ship no more.

Thus we glided slowly past the old wooden cruisers now used as training ships, and from their crowded riggings came shrill treble cheers. To the piping of the young cadets' voices was added the screaming of sirens and the tooting of many whistles. Halyards on all sides of us broke out into brilliant bunting and semaphores wagged with a madness that even Lyte could not translate.

The clarion notes of the mess bugle called us from the decks to other duties, and there between the soup and the fish we heard the hoarse rattle of the anchor chain as we found our moorings.

Captain H—r, seizing the opportunity, rose, and in the capacity of an old Plymothian gave us greeting.

Such was our welcome to England.

In the morning we looked out and saw rows and rows of chimney pots, impressive in their similarity.

Then later we read an editorial in *The*

## THE CONVOY

*Times* describing us as pioneers and backwoodsmen. This provoked much comment, but the writer for one was not greatly distressed, for he had been born within sound of the shrill of a sawmill, and the perfume of cedar is still sweeter to his nostrils than the costly unguents of Araby.

## CHAPTER VI

### IN ENGLAND

OUR stay in England was marred by the heaviest rainfall of many years, and Salisbury Plain, where we were quartered all winter, had the reputation of being the muddiest spot in the world until we struck Flanders; and even now there are patriots who maintain that the "Plain" holds the championship.

But these were not our first impressions of the Downs. It is hard yet to reconcile the mud in which we lived for months with the velvety swards that first greeted our eyes.

We had detrained at Amesbury, bleary eyed and sleepless after a tedious night trip from Plymouth. This had followed a seemingly interminable march through Plymouth, during which our progress had been seriously delayed by women who broke into the ranks and kissed and wept over our dear boys. Officers escaped with mere handshakes, but still found the ordeal rather trying.



EASTERN ONTARIO REGIMENT, NEAR STONEHENGE.



## IN ENGLAND

However, a few minutes of standing around the platform munching sandwiches while the necessary mistakes were made and corrected wakened us thoroughly, and then to the crunch of our own footsteps we swung smartly down the village street.

Here we found we were in a new world, a world we had read of in books. The thatched cottages, the neatly-clipped hedges, the churchyard with its headstones and tumbling wall, all seemed to fit in with what we expected. When we passed a public-house with its wooden sign emblazoned with "The Three Feathers," or some such emblem, the picture was complete—it was the England of Jeffery Farnol!

Later we swung across the ample Downs, passing on our way Stonehenge. After having said "I don't know" to a few hundred questions from the men nearest you, it was a relief to be able to answer a few for a change. What memory failed to supply imagination furnished; but this is every guide's privilege. A momentary halt here—to give the men a rest—afforded a chance for cameras to click, and then we left the road and marched across the grassy Downs to the Bustard Inn. Here the rows of tents that were to be our

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

homes for the next few months had already been pitched.

Other brigades went to Lark Hill, to Pond Farm, to Sling Plantation, and to West Down, North and West Down, South . . . one could lose a whole army in this vast training ground.

Gone was the long main street of Val Cartier camp with its cinema shows and booths of tempting merchandise. Gone, too, was the little river with its gravelly shores for bathing.

But we were one step nearer our goal, and that was the one thought that consoled us during those trying winter months that followed.

From then on we saw little but our own brigade—the 1st Brigade—and the Princess Patricia's Light Infantry—who were also at Bustard Camp.

The latter held themselves rather aloof from the Canadian Division, counting themselves as superior troops—as indeed they were, being mostly veterans of one or two campaigns—and as they were not brigaded with us we saw little of them.

Early in November the King, accompanied by Lords Roberts and Kitchener, reviewed the Division. His Majesty took special

## IN ENGLAND

interest in the Patricias, so we were not surprised when in the early days of December the "Pats" left the Plain to join the 27th Division. Of their subsequent doings another book might be written, for no regular battalion of the British Army has proved itself steadier on the field than this magnificent corps—the gift to the Empire of a very gallant gentleman who has since succumbed to wounds received while serving with it in the field.<sup>1</sup>

Christmas brought with it leave and relaxation from the monotony of drilling, but with the New Year we started brigade and divisional manœuvres, and we knew our stay on the Plain was drawing to a close.

We were again reviewed—in a drizzling rain this time—by the King on February 4th, 1915, and on the following day—just six months after the declaration of war—the First Canadian Division, complete in every detail (horse, foot, and guns) entrained for France.

So secret had the departure been kept that people in the neighbouring town of Salisbury

<sup>1</sup> Major Hamilton Gault, referred to above, did not die of wounds as first reported, but suffered the loss of a leg by amputation.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

knew nothing of the review or the entraining of the troops till they were well on the high seas.

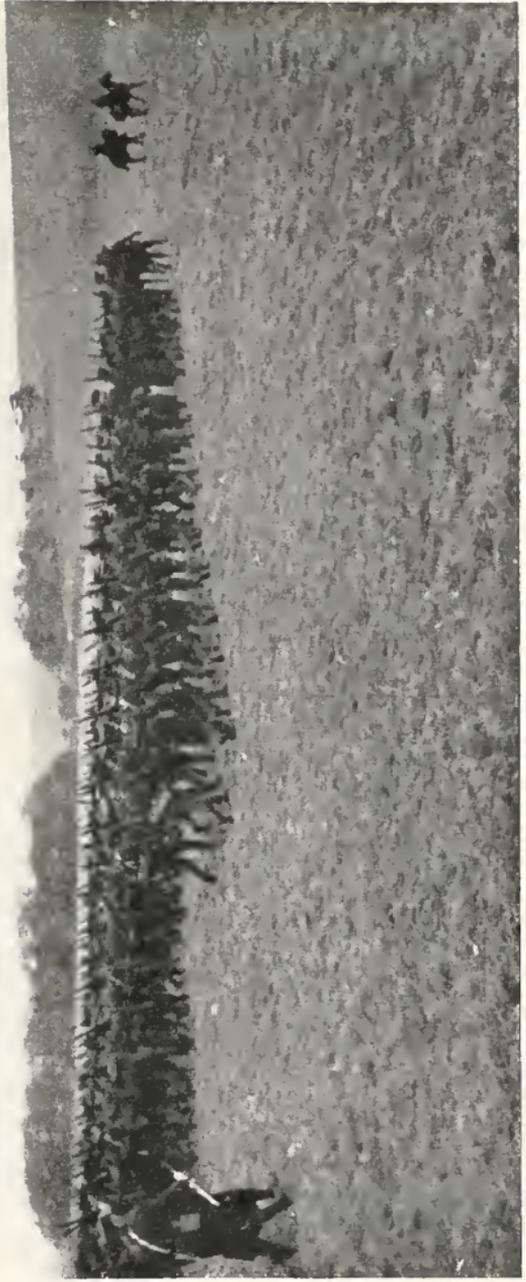
After a very rough passage from Avonmouth the Division landed at St. Nazaire in the Bay of Biscay, the last transport arriving some time in the second week of February.

From there they were taken in box cars to that mysterious region known as "the front," travelling forty men or eight horses to a car, a state of affairs that one man complained "showed undue regard for horses."

But five whole battalions and a number of surplus officers who had managed to get over to England supernumerary to their battalions were left behind on the Plain as a base depot.

Amongst the latter were the writer and Begbie Lyte, and when they rejoined a month or two later their battalion had been cut to pieces and some twenty-five of the officers with whom they had trained were casualties.

It is hard to imagine anything sadder than rejoining a battalion after fighting such as that unless it is the saying of good-bye.



MANOEUVRES ON SALISBURY PLAIN.



## CHAPTER VII

### INTERIM

FOR a time there was little news from the Canadians at the front, for they were not immediately placed in the trenches. Trench warfare was then still a novelty; its exact principles had not been developed, and all the training done on the Plain had been the ordinary open style of fighting—quite useless against the strongly entrenched positions the Germans had taken up.

So while lying in reserve behind the lines the First Division dug and manned trenches and practised themselves in the new warfare. Selected officers from each company spent days in the front line with other battalions and returned to their men bristling with information.

A little later selected platoons and companies took their turn in the front line, and before the end of February the Canadian Division was holding its own sector of the British line.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

Casualties began to drift back to the Canadian base, which had now become centred at Shorncliffe, and letters began to arrive with details of the new methods of fighting. There was other news, too, of a more cheerful sort that showed brighter glimpses of life that occurred when enjoying brief rests from the firing line.

“Don’t sympathise with us too much,” wrote one officer; “we would sooner be here than on the Plain. Last night we gave an oyster and champagne supper at — to three Ottawa ladies who are running a soup and coffee waggon for our battalion. We had a great time. D— Dang and the Cat (another subaltern) were in fine fettle.”

But more serious work was in view.

On March 10th the British commenced an offensive at Neuve Chapelle which, had it proved successful, would have involved the Canadians in the projected advance upon the Aubers Ridge, which formed the key to Lille.

But Neuve Chapelle, although a victory in one sense of the word, was a very costly lesson, but a lesson that showed that our artillery must be enormously increased if any further effort to break through the German line was to be made.

## INTERIM

For, having taken their objective, the British troops found not only a second but a third line of trenches protected by entanglements of a most formidable nature, and so situated as to render the ground recently won at such heavy cost almost untenable. To carry these lines would require another bombardment more intense even than that which had preceded the attack. Our line had advanced one mile and there it stayed.

So ended the first attempt on our part to renew the offensive after the stagnation of a winter of trench warfare. For years we had been taught that an army that relinquishes the offensive acknowledges itself as beaten. It now began to look as though military science had undergone a complete revolution and that trench warfare and the policy of attrition were to be the normal methods of the future.

But Neuve Chapelle showed something else—it showed that the indomitable spirit of our men had not been quenched by the misery and suffering of the winter months and that the British bayonet was as much to be feared as ever.

“We were kept pretty busy,” wrote a friend, “doing rapid fire, and lost quite a

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

few from shell fire. But our artillery had the time of their lives, and fired pretty steadily the whole three days of the show."

Later he wrote that they were moving northward—probably to Hill 60—and we could expect there would be something doing shortly.

It was not to Hill 60 that the Canadian Division went, but further northward in the Ypres salient to the left of the 27th Division, where the "Princess Pats" were winning immortality at St. Eloi.

So the days wore on, the surplus officers chafing at the monotony of drill on a barrack square, relieved as it was by "Thés Dansants" at the Metropole and promenades along the Leas at Folkestone.

Then one day a medical officer dropped a sure tip. He had been warned to prepare beds for a thousand casualties—the Canadians were in something big at last!

Just how big it was we realised a week later when the newspapers broke forth into flamboyant headlines, "CANADIANS SAVED SITUATION," "FOUR GUNS RE-CAPTURED," and other startling sentences that danced before the eyes.

Lyte and the writer were returning from

## INTERIM

some light festivities, when the hoarse cry "All about the Canadians" arrested their attention. Papers were hurriedly bought, and the brief vague lines of the official *communiqué* eagerly scanned. "By Jove!" was Lyte's exclamation; "but isn't that great!" The writer, however, hardly heard him; he was thinking of the many good friends who had taken part and the price they had to pay, and his answer was the monosyllabic "Huh!" of the aborigine.

That evening we packed our kits.

## CHAPTER VIII

YPRES, 1915

THE Second Battle for Ypres, as the fighting at Langemarck and St. Julien is officially designated, was largely a regimental and company officers' battle. This does not, however, reflect adversely on the brigade and other staffs, who did all that was humanly possible with the information that was at hand. Even at this date there are questions about the action that cannot be cleared up until it will be permissible to reproduce the whole of the war diaries of the various units that took part.

On the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Brigades fell the brunt of the fighting in which the Canadians took part, as the 1st Brigade was in rest billets in reserve.

But, without detracting from their work, it must be admitted that the account by the official "Eye Witness" does not give the 1st Brigade the credit it deserves. This, however, is inevitable. In a modern battle

one sees nothing but what happens in the immediate vicinity of the observer, and we must therefore depend largely on the accounts furnished by others of what occurred in other parts of the field.

It will do no harm, however, to quote from the description by an officer, since killed, of the action of one of the battalions of this brigade, which from respect for the censor must remain nameless.

It would, however, serve no purpose to conceal the true names of those officers and men whom he thought fit to mention, for the majority of them have also laid down their lives in the field.

“ During the latter part of the evening of April 22nd French and Algerian troops in large numbers began retreating through *Vlamertinghe* in the utmost confusion, throwing away their arms and crying ‘ Asphyxie ! Asphyxie !! ’ Empty limbers and gun teams without their guns dashed down the road, already thick with refugees and fugitive soldiers. Captain Culling therefore ordered the company to stand to arms and be ready to move off as soon as orders were received.

“ Orders came about 9 p.m., and we moved

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

off to the battalion rendezvous at the junction of the *Brielen* road, where we found the rest of the battalion formed up. From here we continued north easterly up the *Brielen* road, across the canal toward *St. Julien*.

“A short distance past the canal the battalion deployed from the road, No. 3 Company being on our (No. 2 Company’s) left and continued to advance.

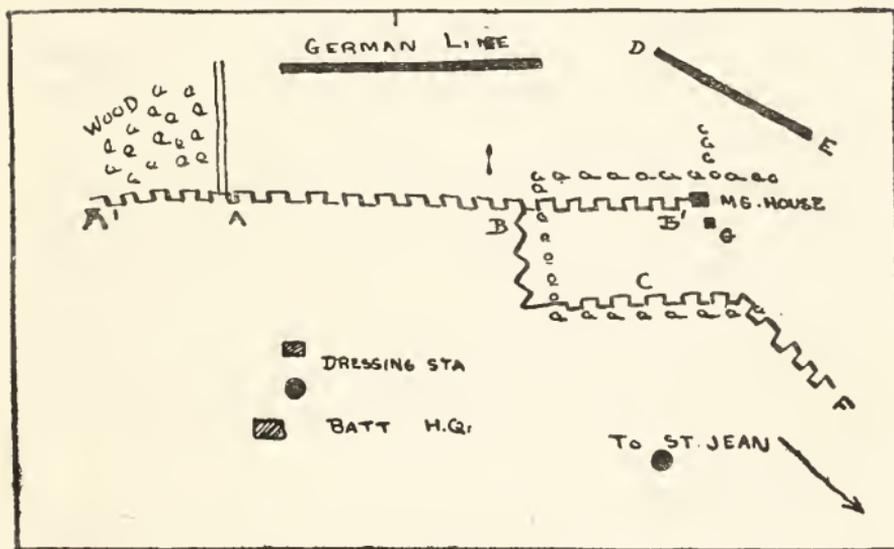
“Moving forward in this formation was very difficult owing to the thick darkness and the ground being so cut up by hedges, but Captain Culling got in touch with the battalion on our left, which turned out to be the *Canadian Scottish* under Lieutenant-Colonel Leskie, at about the farmhouse that afterwards became our dressing station. The advance continued slightly more to the north, and a few minutes later the company lay deployed about fifty yards in rear of a trench (A B) occupied by the 10th Canadian Battalion. They were enfiladed from a German trench to their right rear (C) and an adjoining farmhouse (M G).

“Wounded men, including their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Boyle, lay everywhere about the trench and parados, but they were too weak to attack this short

## YPRES, 1915

piece of trench, although it was rendering their position quite untenable.

“ One of our platoons successfully attacked this trench, while another under Mr. Doxsee attacked the neighbouring house and succeeded in driving the enemy from it with a



loss of only two men killed and another wounded.

“ Steps were then taken to improve the position by reversing the parapet of the captured trench (C) and extending the original trench to the right. The house (M G), too, was prepared for defence, and thus the night was passed and no man slept.

“ At dawn of the 23rd the enemy com-

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

menced shelling the house and trench, but the losses inflicted were slight owing to the two parallel hedges, which made both ranging and observing difficult. They then commenced an attack on the house supported by machine-gun fire, which proved a far more serious affair, as in the house itself we lost two men killed and some wounded, while in the trench we lost two valuable men, Platoon-Sergeant Abelarde and Lance-Corporal McGurk. The former had crawled out along the hedge to a dangerous and commanding knoll, and from there put eighteen of the enemy out of action before a sniper's bullet found him. The dead lay exposed where they fell, and could readily be counted from the house.

“About 9 o'clock, while Captain Culling was organising a counter-attack on a small portion of the German trench (D E), two companies of the Toronto Battalion under a major arrived as reinforcements, and took cover behind our parados as there was no room in the trench. Captain Culling asked that they take on the attack, and Mr. Doxsee volunteered to lead it. The response was feeble, and the attack petered out to nothing, Bugler Hunt and a man of the *Toronto*

Battalion being killed by the side of Doxsee, who, finding himself alone, returned to the trench unharmed.

“The *Toronto* men now tried a flanking movement on our immediate right, but lost eight men and had to abandon the attempt. However, coupled with our fire from the second story of the house, the effect was sufficient to cause the enemy to retire from this point, and the remainder of the day passed quietly, though the enemy's artillery continued to shell our position and a machine-gun played on the house at every sign of movement. By evening we had some seventeen casualties, a remarkably small number considering the shelling.

“As soon as darkness set in, under cover of a few skirmishers, two platoons continued our original trench (A B) along a line (B B 1) about fifteen feet in rear of the forward hedge surrounding the house and linked this trench to the position in our right rear with a communication trench, the majority of this work being done with the small entrenching tool.

“This enabled us to get the whole company under cover, and with a machine-gun of the 10th *Battalion* in the house we felt fairly secure. Captain Hooper held a house

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

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## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

immediately in front of our lines called *Hooper House*, and our original trench was held by a mixture of our own men and the Canadian Scottish under Mr. Hugill.

“Dawn on Saturday found our positions unaltered, but about 7 o'clock orders came from Lieutenant-Colonel Rodgers, our second in command, to take over all of the original trench and relieve the *Scottish*.

“Simultaneously Mr. Doxsee called for reinforcements to repel a direct frontal attack on our forward trench and machine-gun house.

“Reinforcements hurried up along the new communication trench, but were anticipated by Mr. Scott and a score or so of men, who dashed across the open and repelled the attack, Mr. Doxsee being unfortunately killed at this point.

“Captain Richardson now took over *machine-gun house*, and his company (No. 2) relieved us along our original trench. The two Toronto companies had entrenched to our right, forming a narrow and very dangerous salient (C F).

“All day this house was the target of the enemy's artillery and machine-guns, the latter sweeping the building so effectively that

## YPRES, 1915

the garrison was forced to lie flat on the floors.

“ Six attacks were made by their infantry and repulsed before they could get closer than two hundred yards, in spite of the fact that our only machine-gun jammed incessantly owing to the rapidity of its firing. About 2 p.m. one of our own guns came up, and from then on both guns remained in action.

“ About this time troops in French uniforms were seen moving down a road on our right toward *St. Julien*. At first no notice was taken of them, but presently it became apparent that these were Germans, who had adopted this ruse to get behind our flank.

“ Fire was immediately opened on them with what rifles could be spared from our front line, and one machine-gun was hastily posted in a barn (G), from which it did excellent work.

“ At 3.30 orders were received to retire in the direction of battalion headquarters. (These orders had originally been sent out at 2 o'clock, and when Lieutenant-Colonel Watson received no response he sent them again and again until he finally saw the last company passing the shattered house that

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

had served alike as dressing station and battalion headquarters, and not till then did he leave the field himself.)

“The retirement took place across open ground swept by both shrapnel and machine-guns, and the men just seemed to melt away.

“Men straggled in for hours, and when the battalion finally assembled at brigade headquarters at *St. Jean* the company had lost one hundred and thirty-nine of all ranks, of which four were officers.”

It was a black situation. No one knew how other parts of the field had fared or how much ground had been lost. British troops were being rushed up to relieve the 2nd and 3rd Brigades, who in some incredible manner still held on in spite of two attacks with the gas. But they had paid a terrible price. Of the former brigade there were scarcely a thousand men and of the latter not many more.

If this, then, is the account of what one battalion—nay, what one or two companies—accomplished, what must be the stories, as yet untold, of those other battalions of the First Canadian Division that filled the gap that led to Calais ?

## CHAPTER IX

### WITH THE DRAFT

ON returning to our barracks we found notices that "the following officers will hold themselves in readiness to proceed to their respective units with the next draft." Eagerly we scanned the list to make sure our names had not been omitted, and then transferred ourselves from the crowd that gathered in the ante-room to those who waited their turn outside the telephone cabinet. Letters and telegrams were being feverishly written in all parts of the building, and a hurly-burly of voices in the mess-room proclaimed the general opinion that we had been pretty badly cut up. A tailor's agent had somehow made his way into that sanctuary, and voices were demanding "Who can lend me a blank cheque?" in a wild endeavour to get him out again.

Telegrams were also arriving, one or two from the front. A subaltern spread the

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

again, and there were no further delays. The men were led below decks and packed as close as they could stand to one another, the officers having the privilege of being able to sit on their valises, which were piled unceremoniously on the deck.

Then when all were accounted for the mooring ropes were cast off, and with no more ceremony than the tinkle of the ship's telegraph we slid out of the harbour under cover of the scudding clouds.

But we were not alone. A long, lithe shape, strangely suggestive of a greyhound, crept out of the darkness around us and came up alongside, and a brief conversation, ending in "All right, full speed," was held.

The telegraph tinkled again and our ship bounded forward, leaving a long trail of phosphorescent foam in her wake.

The sighing of the rigging in the wind, the slap-slap of the Channel breakers at our sides, and the lashing "hish" of the spray across the decks blended with, but did not break, our thoughts.

And the dark shapes of the destroyers and the other transports momentarily revealed by gaps in the scudding clouds, the gleaming wake of the ship, and the faint white of the

## WITH THE DRAFT

life-belts, that showed dimly where little groups of two or three stood or sat together, made a fitting scene for such an orchestral accompaniment.

Thus we reached France.

There followed a long march through the darkened streets of Boulogne to a camp on the Plains of St. Martin, not far from the tall column that marks where Napoleon gathered his great army and waited for the time that never came, when he would be master of that little strip of water we had just crossed.

A drizzling rain had started, and the men had now been nearly eight hours without food and practically a whole day without a proper meal. We were able to draw bully beef and biscuit at once from the stores, but the situation was really saved by the ladies at the Y.M.C.A. tent, who supplied hot cocoa and cake to all who cared to apply. A nominal charge of one penny was made to those who wished to pay, but no man was refused because of his inability to find this sum, small as it was.

Only a small thing, you may think, but it is only the smallest part of what this wonderful organisation is doing for the soldier at the front.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

And a smile and a cup of coffee at 5 o'clock in the morning "look pretty good to me," as one recipient expressed it.

We were held in camp all the following day and then, carrying two days' rations, we entrained for the north. For a while we made vain attempts to find our destination from the French railway staff, but concluded they either did not understand our variation of their beautiful language or were sullen brutes knowing nothing.

As we continued northward the throbbing of distant gunfire became plainer, and a strange flickering could be seen in the morning sky. This strange light, caused by the flash of the guns and the flares or illuminating fuzees shot up by the infantry, resembled nothing so much as our own Aurora Borealis, and we were not surprised to find, a little later, that our men had already nicknamed them the "Northern Lights."

Dawn brought us to a halt by some little town where the engine-driver proceeded leisurely to fill his boiler. We availed ourselves of the chance to exercise our French on some Algerian troops who were lying wounded all over the platform. A rough tent had been made with waggon tarpaulins,

## WITH THE DRAFT

and under this lay the worst cases—ghastly wrecks of men with blood-soaked bandages and blood-encrusted clothing, face muscles twitching convulsively as masses of flies settled on them. One French medical orderly with a strip of silver on his sleeves and an assistant seemed to be the whole staff of the place.

One tall chap with a handsome beard showed us how a bullet had torn through his cap and grazed his head, while a rude sling and a crutch spoke of a more serious injury of which he said nothing. His white teeth and smiling face turned to a horrible scowl as he continued talking, and thinking we were over-exciting him, we moved away. Had we only known, he was trying to describe to us the terrible effect of the asphyxiating gas on his comrades who were less educated than he!

A few miles further on we detrained at Poperinghe and were soon marching along a beautiful avenue of poplars—now perhaps the most famous highway in Flanders, the Vlamertinghe road.

Refugees passed us with all their worldly effects piled on a waggon, the women and little children clattering along behind in their

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

wooden sabots. It seemed so unnecessary. The guns that had been pounding away all night were now strangely silent, and the fields on either side seemed peaceful enough. There was even a farmer plowing stoically in one.

A little further on we saw a horse that had been hurriedly cut out from a gun or waggon team. It needed but one glance to tell us that shrapnel had done its deadly work there, and we wondered vaguely what had become of its rider, for the saddlery and harness were still on it.

On entering Vlamertinghe we saw signs of shelling on most of the buildings, particularly around the church and the square, the steeple of the former forming, of course, the aiming mark for the German guns. Here, too, the body of a woman lay half in and half out of a doorway. The place seemed absolutely deserted. An aeroplane droned overhead, but whether our own or the enemy's we could not ascertain. However, we took no chances and marched on, hugging the shelter of the walls on either side of the street.

In this formation we were met by the gaunt figure of old Joey —, our quarter-

## WITH THE DRAFT

master. He fell in beside Major V—— and guided us to our transport lines, a farm a little on the Ypres side of the town. Here we lay for half an hour munching biscuits and bully beef and watching an anti-aircraft gun shelling the aeroplane we had noticed before, which was now low enough to distinguish the sinister black crosses painted on its wings.

This was the reason for the extraordinary silence on the part of the guns, so skilfully hidden all around us.

The “Archibalds,” as the anti-aircraft guns are popularly known, seemed to be making extraordinarily bad practice as the fleecy puffs of shrapnel burst all around the plane without apparent effect, and the machine, having spotted something, dropped a signal that burst into brilliant sparkles and turned for the enemy lines.

At this moment Joey returned from the outhouse concealing the telephonists with instructions that we were to proceed to the field, where the battalion was dug in at once.

## CHAPTER X

### THE BREAKING IN

“We take the old road we have taken for years ;  
For you cannot cut corners in war, it appears.”

THE truth of this old maxim was impressed on us by the roundabout route we took to reach the field only a few hundred yards away where the remainder of the battalion lay.

Actually about two companies strong, they looked a mere handful as they lay huddled close to the hedges in the shallowest of shelter pits scratched in the soil with the field entrenching tool.

The draft was immediately ordered to “dig in,” as the plane we had been watching a few minutes before had dropped its signal directly over this position.

We lost no time in digging more of these shallow pits, that reminded one rather gruesomely of graves, and had barely scraped them deep enough to roll into before a hail of small high-explosive shell fell all around us.

## THE BREAKING IN

For half an hour the whoop and crash of falling and bursting shells kept us alternately ducking our heads and raising them again to see "where that one went," for curiosity is many times a stronger impulse than fear.

Curious things happened. A tree was cut in half by a shell, and the plumed top, falling clear of the stump, planted itself like a dart in the ground a few feet away.

A pack horse suddenly bolted across the open field with a slight cut on one flank, and half a dozen men made wild grasp at its bridle before one succeeded in recapturing the brute. And here and there groups of men finding their corner of the field a bit too "hot" for comfort would just as suddenly bolt across to another part and start feverishly digging in anew.

The shelling ended with as little warning as it had begun. There came a pause, and we thought naturally, "Well, thank God that's over!"—and said so. "Just a minute," said my companion; "there are the Three Sisters to come yet!"

Before one could say "Here they are!" the rush of much larger projectiles was heard, and in quick succession three heavy shells crashed into the foot of the field,

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

throwing up black columns of smoke. "Those are coal-boxes," continued my tutor; "they used to have four guns in that battery, but they are only using three now."

The chuckle with which he added this last showed that he, at any rate, had no doubt as to the fate of the fourth gun.

This was evidently the end of the shelling, the enemy having, theoretically, made the field untenable. The actual casualties were, however, very slight, and the field entrenching tool, until now regarded as a toy, became a valued possession. We were already beginning to learn that the British infantry equipment is the finest in the world.

The shelling over, the draft was divided up amongst the remnants of the four companies, and Lyte and the writer had the good fortune to be placed with the same one.

Our company commander had been a lieutenant till a few days before, and was now a temporary captain. His senior subaltern was wearing a "British warm," the skirt of which had been riddled by machine-gun bullets, and a sergeant was to come out in orders that evening as an officer to take the remaining platoon.

A machine-gun duel in mid-air between

## THE BREAKING IN

one of our planes and an enemy machine that was eventually driven off and the dropping of some large shells into Ypres were the only other events of the day. Most of us slept, as there was work for us to do that night, until the joyful sound of "Tea up!" and the smell of hot "Maconachie" rations told us that supper was ready.

At 7 o'clock the battalion fell in to move up to the front line and dig some trenches. Hardly were we formed up when another violent shelling started, and we hurried back to the cover of our funk-holes.

Again the shelling was singularly ineffective, due, probably, to the fact that the enemy was using high explosive and not shrapnel. One shell by an unfortunate chance caught an artillery limber full of ammunition on the roadway, and it blew up with a sickening roar. The double report of this explosion evidently satisfied the German gunners, for a few minutes later the bombardment ceased and we again fell in.

The greatest secrecy was observed, and nobody but the guides knew our destination, and we followed them in silence up the shell-pitted road and across the pontoon bridge that spanned the Yser Canal. Various dark

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

forms hobbled past, their baggy trousers showing them to be Algerians. A French outpost challenged us, and a party of Ghurkas passed us leading pack horses with the bodies of their fallen officers lashed across the saddles. The Ghurkas never leave an officer's body on the field, so the sergeant in rear of the platoon ahead informed us.

On either side of the road was a ruined trench, and even in the weird half-light of the flares we could see what a shambles they had become. The road was well called "Suicide Alley!"

Then suddenly we left the road and took to the open fields on the left, passing a trench occupied by some Imperial troops—it was our own first line trench. Then we knew what our work was to be; we were to dig an advance trench to link up with the French on our left and the English on our right. The advance continued up a gentle slope across which—nearly a thousand yards of bare bullet-swept field—the Ghurkas had a day or so previously tried to charge. The bodies still lay there in rows just as they had fallen under the bursts of fire that mowed them down—pitiful huddled figures in the grass staring ahead into the great void. Few

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of the faces showed signs of suffering—such is the mercy of the rifle bullet ; and so great was the resemblance to sleep that later, when we came to retire, the writer and others shook the bodies mistaking them for our own men.

In the midst of this ghastly scene, lit up by fitful glances of moonlight as clouds scudded over the sky, two companies moved forward, a long line of shadowy forms, to act as a covering party while the remaining half-battalion dug the new trench.

As we moved forward and lay down we could hear the thudding of the picks as they were driven into the ground, and from somewhere in the darkness ahead the plick-plock of the sniper began. Captain H—, our new company commander, passed down the line to warn us to count our men and see that all bayonets were fixed and magazines loaded.

The sniping increased, and a farmhouse ahead of us that had been smouldering for some time burst into flame. Two colts that were evidently confined near the blaze started to whinny and neigh, and a man who had been hit began to curse vilely.

From somewhere in rear a battery of French “seventy-fives” opened up with their ear-

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

splitting reports, and we could see the outlines of the ruined farm ahead of us silhouetted against the crimson flashes of their bursting shrapnel. But of the enemy there was no sign—nothing but the arching trail of the flares that shot up and the steady plick-plock of the snipers. It was most trying.

It was nearly 2 o'clock before the trench was completed and we wakened our shivering men to retire, for so exhausted were they that, despite the cold and danger, many had dozed there on the body-strewn field with one hand firmly grasping the rifle.

By this time traces of dawn began to show themselves in the eastern sky, and the moon seemed to flood the whole country with light.

Platoon by platoon in Indian file we drew off the field, carefully checking the count of our men as they passed until all were accounted for. Then the march back to billets began. And such a march! Worn out by the week's hard fighting, the older men staggered all over the road, all but dropping out from sheer exhaustion. Nor were the new men in better condition. Unaccustomed as yet to the weight of their packs, shaken by shell fire, and in some cases still weak from the sickness of the rough Channel

## THE BREAKING IN

passage, it was only sheer pride and the cruel taunts of the older men that kept them in the ranks. And thus we straggled on past the French outposts and over the Yser again, and on, on past the field we had lain in all day, on through Brielen to Vlamertinghe, back to billets. But the draft was broken in.

## CHAPTER XI

### RESERVE BILLETS

IT was only the prospect of several days of comparative rest that held us together at all as we floundered over the slippery cobble stones into Vlamertinghe. At the cross-roads that formed the battalion rendezvous in case of alarm, we got into some kind of military formation, for we spied the gaunt figure of the colonel there sitting his horse like a centaur. A grim man he was, who never spared his horses, himself or his men, and his only comment as we hobbled past was, "Dress up those fours!"—and tired as we were, the fours dressed up. When, however, Captain H——, who had gone to the rear of the company to chase up stragglers, came by, his greeting was a little more personal. "All well, H——?" he asked, and our gallant skipper answered, "All present, sir." It showed rather plainly the difference in feeling that existed for some time between those who had been through the Second

## RESERVE BILLETS

Battle of Ypres and those who had not—a difference that it took much hard fighting to outweigh.

At last the company ahead turned down a side street, and we marched into our billet alone. It was a deserted warehouse with plenty of straw and quite comfortable, and, having got our men safely stowed away, the officers walked across the road to an empty house that formed our billets.

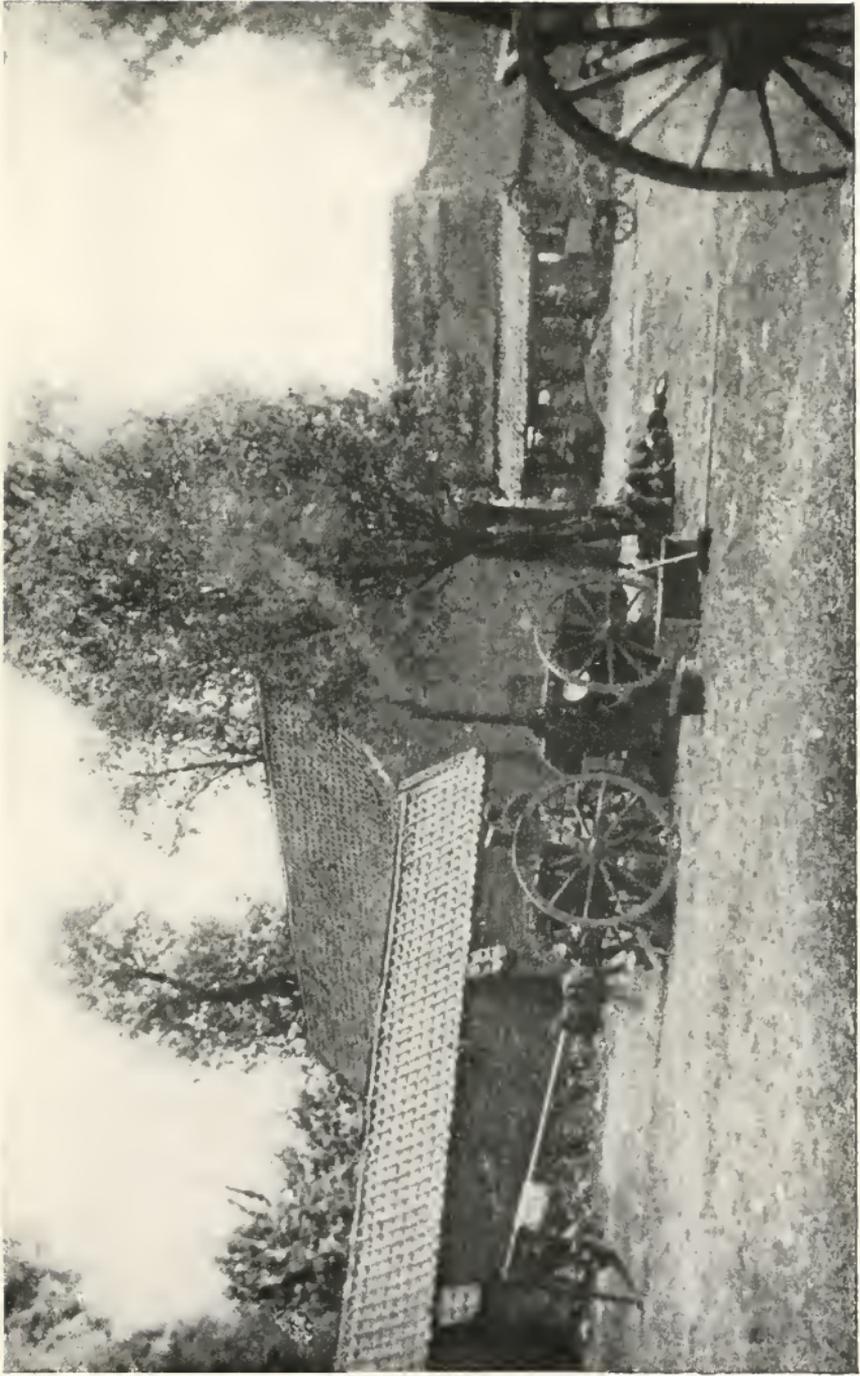
On the way H—— pointed out the coffee waggon of which mention has been made. A sad-looking wreck it was, too, as a result of a stray shell. The ladies who had been in charge of it had been swooped down upon and gathered in by an irate provost-marshal some days before the shelling, and were, I am told, sent back to England for venturing so near the front line. The loss to the battalion was, however, immeasurable, as the ladies had been most devoted, and no matter at what hour the troops came in there was always a cup of coffee or soup awaiting them, and a smile—a smile that means so much to men whose hearts are lonely. Truly Ræmaekers struck a key-note when, in his address in London, he asked England to “keep on smiling.”

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER.

Arriving at the house, we found coffee ready and breakfast in the process of preparation. Bacon, an omelette, toast and marmalade (plum jam being out of season), it was a feast for the gods, any minor deficiencies being overcome by the keenness of our appetites. Then, having satisfied the inner man, we climbed the crooked little stairs to the bedrooms, where we found our bedding rolls stretched out on some mattresses the owners had left in their haste, and in three minutes we were asleep. Never did any bed seem more welcome.

We did not stay long in this billet, however, as we shifted the following day to a farm on the Brielen road. It was well we did so, for the enemy bombarded the town again and dropped one shell in our old billet a few hours after we left.

The farm we moved into is worthy of a little description, as it was typical of any farm in Flanders. The three buildings that constituted the house, barn, and cowbyre were arranged in a hollow square around a brick courtyard, the centre of which was graced by a large pile of manure in an advanced stage of decomposition. Outside the square of buildings was a moat full of green



FIELD KITCHEN IN RESERVE BILLET.



## RESERVE BILLETS

slime and mosquito larvæ. Here the men washed, and here, too, our buckets were filled each morning for the "lick and a promise" that served as a substitute for a bath.

Yet in spite of its unsanitary surroundings the house itself was beautifully clean inside, and no one could be healthier than the two buxom girls who formed part of the family that lived within. An exact census of the family was never obtained, as they poured out from nooks and crannies into the living-room occupied by us as sleeping quarters, generally at such awkward moments as when we were dressing or undressing. This was a matter of constant annoyance to Lyte, as the people persisted in announcing themselves with a "Bon jour, monsieur," no matter what state of nudity they had caught you in.

We shared this room with an artillery officer, a young Irishman named Lee, who had a battery hidden somewhere near. We saw little of him, however, as we were generally falling in to move off when he came in for the evening, and when we returned after a night dug in in rear of some other troops, he was leaving to go up to his guns.

On some occasions we returned so late that the family were already up and at work, and

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instead of unrolling our valises we popped right into their beds. This was the subject of much joking of the simple peasant sort on the part of the young ladies, and consequent blushing on the part of poor Lyte. We all accused him of being their favourite, as he had nicknamed them "Ox-eye" and "Freckleface," names much more descriptive than the Marie and Jeanne their parents had chosen, and, having taken "Ox-eye" into our confidence, told her that poor Lyte was "*très timide.*" That was all she required, and from then on she directed all her charms toward him.

The next morning, his servant being as usual somewhere else, he ventured to ask for a little shaving water, in French of the first-steps variety. "Oh, monsieur speaks French," she answered, quite ignoring the mess-tin he held out. "Why did you not tell me?"—this last with an accusing glance at A—, the senior subaltern. Lyte began to deny all knowledge of the language, and she suddenly swung into English. "Nevair mind, I speak bloody good English," and then amidst our whoops of applause she demanded "It ees good? What!"

Lee came in one morning in a great state

## RESERVE BILLETTS

of excitement, his rich brogue being augmented with the news he brought. It seemed that on going up to his guns that morning he had found the farm there, till then occupied by a Belgian family, vacated and the white half-door—so familiar in all peasant countries where they keep pigs—placed lozenge-wise on the red roof. A hasty search revealed a partly burnt map and other papers of a military nature, and a German plane was already buzzing aloft. He had hurriedly withdrawn his guns; but siege guns take time to move, and before they could get away the shells were upon them and one gun crew had been practically wiped out. He was much excited, as became a man who had seen his first death.

We, too, had passed a very strenuous night. The Germans had commenced another attack on our line, using the gas again. We were wondering how much good the little respirators we were carrying would be, and the answer came soon enough.

As we moved forward we met men falling back gasping, coughing and sobbing, and the stink of their clothing was of hell's own reek, a choky mixture of chlorine and sulphur. "It's not war, mate; it's bloody murder!"

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was all one man gasped as he threw himself coughing on the ground, where he died before we moved on. It was not a pretty sight, and more than one rifle-butt was grasped the tighter and more than one oath sworn to get at the fiends who had let loose this vile poison, against which the only protection we had was a little pad of gauze to fasten over the mouth and nose after soaking in water from our water-bottles. These had been supplied by the thousand as soon as the authorities made known their wants by the women and children of England, and, feeble though this protection was, these simple little pads saved many lives that week.

But it was not our fate to meet the enemy again while in the salient. After continuing our march about another quarter-mile we lined a roadside and commenced digging another trench.

Here we lay and shivered all night, the men crouching in the trench, every fourth man alert and watching, the officers lying on the ground behind in shell holes or walking up and down swinging their arms and trying to keep warm. It was only one night of many.

The Germans continued to discharge gas against our line until May 15th, when they

## RESERVE BILLETS

retook Hill 60. The bitter struggle of the past three weeks had begun as a mere counter-attack to our capture of this small but important mound.

By this time, however, the Canadians had been withdrawn, and we left the salient with few regrets. But somewhere on the German side of our trench line there are thousands of graves of our fellow-countrymen, and when the time comes for the balancing of accounts we shall expect these to weigh heavy in the scales.

Our brigade was the first to be relieved, marching out on the night of May 3rd, wondering vaguely where we were going, and also, perhaps, what would become of our friends "Ox-eye" and "Freckleface," with their stolid faces, their ample bosoms, and their square hips.

## CHAPTER XII

### BAILLEUL

OUR next stop was Bailleul, a town of some fifteen thousand inhabitants just over the Franco-Belgian frontier. Possibly it was never known before the war, but it is now, for sooner or later everyone goes to Bailleul: it was, until the taking over of the line below Arras, the Mecca of the British Army.

But it was fifteen weary miles from Brielen, fifteen miles that we stumbled over in a drizzling rain on slippery cobblestones before turning up through an archway off the main street to our billets. Good billets they were, too—a loft with ample straw for one platoon, a school-house for the other three, and houses on another street for the officers.

In spite of the early hour, about 3 o'clock, Madame was up and around and soon made us fresh coffee and the inevitable omelette; then we clattered up the steep little stairs to bed. F——, the sergeant who had been promoted, joined us here and proved a jolly

## BAILLEUL

good sort. We went out to hunt up new billets the next day. He, being a Quebecker, acted as interpreter, as our room was too small and stuffy for two, and, moreover, looked into the operating-room of a hospital opposite.

We were fortunate in finding another billet quite close—an important point, as we were to mess together—and then took a stroll around the town.

Bailleul is, like most French provincial towns, arranged like a star, the Grande Place and Hotel de Ville forming the centre. We found our way to the cathedral, where a white-haired old *curé* showed us around, pointing out the door leading to the great square tower and the axe marks left by the German soldiers who burst it open. They had used the tower as an observing post during the week their cavalry had held the town the preceding October. The old man had been held as hostage by them, together with the mayor and some other notables, but when asked if he had been badly treated he was very non-committal. “Qu’est-ce que vous voulez ?” he answered. “C’est, la guerre !” That is the doctrine of humility taught France in 1870. “C’est la guerre !” It is

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used to explain anything from the shooting of civilians to the high cost of hand-made lace !

In a jeweller's on the Grande Place we obtained a little fuller information as to the Germans' actions. They had robbed Madame of all her rings, deliberately broken up all her watch glasses—there was not one to be obtained in the town—and smashed with their sword hilts the glass of her show-cases. And across the square they had confiscated all the champagne in a *café*, and when no more was forthcoming they piled the tables on the *pavé* and burnt them ; also she had heard—— ; but here F——'s patience had worn out, and as he said “ Hearsay evidence is not admitted,” so we said “ Bon jour ” and returned to billets.

Fortunately we did so, as we found we were slated to take a bathing parade at 1 o'clock and would barely have time to lunch. However, we caught the parade in time and marched the men to an old factory labelled “ Divisional Baths.” Here each man was supplied with a hot tub, soap and a clean towel, and was issued on stepping out from his tub with freshly-washed underwear, turning his soiled clothes in. This was a splendid

## BAILLEUL

system, and when later the clothes were not only washed but sterilised it ensured the men freedom for a short time at least from vermin.

It took some time running the whole company through in batches of forty, so we had a brief look around that part of the town. We also found that at the asylum officers could get a real bath—full length that one could stretch out in—at any time, but as it was late when our last man was ready to march off, we simply returned to billets.

We found the streets full of ambulances, most of them being gas cases from around Hill 60, and, in spite of the respirators, most of them pretty bad cases.

Being somewhat of a chemist, I managed to see some of these cases a few days later. The hospital was so crowded that many cases were lying on stretchers in the garden that lies at the back of all these hideous perpendicular French houses, shielded from the weather by an awning only. But the worst cases were upstairs in a long hall—some eighteen of them, none of which had any hope. Reeking with chlorine, their faces a livid purple or an even ghastlier green, they lay there on the stretchers, each with a little bowl beside him, coughing his life away. And

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gradually the body would become weaker, the poor tortured lungs fail to clear themselves of the secretion that poured from their outraged tissue, and the fluid would accumulate slowly—oh, so slowly!—and the agonised victim died, not with the merciful swiftness of a bullet, but by gradual drowning.

This was the death that the Germans—ashamed of their own brutality—afterwards described as painless and merciful!

They may find justification for their crimes in Belgium, they may even smooth over the sinking of the *Lusitania*, but it must always be remembered that they, and they alone, are responsible for introducing into warfare this most ghastly and hideous death. It is said that German scientists spent years in perfecting this horror, practising its powers on plant life in the desert parts of Australia.

And the neutral nations—what of them? Are they not after all “accessories after the fact” and equally guilty? For, having sworn in solemn convention at the Hague to abstain from the use of asphyxiating gases, they entered no definite protest, though public opinion ran high on the subject.

Silence gives consent, and the poisoning of your enemy by chemical gases has now

## BAILLEUL

become the proper and chivalrous thing to do, and warfare has an added horror.

But the Allied chemists were at work devising means of lessening and preventing this danger, and already success was crowning their efforts; a new pattern respirator was devised and being issued, and a solution for dipping it in was already available. Dr. G——, of Queen's University, then serving as a subaltern in No. 2 Company, had been experimenting in private and devised a solution which varied only in the proportion of one of its elements from that adopted by the British Army, so we were probably the first brigade in the B.E.F. to receive this protection. Bottles of this fluid were carried by that long-suffering man the platoon sergeant, and parades held showing the men how to adjust and use the respirators.

Later we received flannel hoods, with mica windows, that had been dipped in the same solution, and these gave place in turn to the present gas helmet—a fearsome-looking affair, which, however, gives almost complete protection.

Our stay in Bailleul was enlivened by the arrival of a draft and the posting up of a schedule of training. The draft, needless to

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say, was the more welcome of the two. With the draft—who were magnificently-built men from the Middle West—we received a major who took command of the company, Captain H—— dropping back as second in command. We thought this was rather hard lines, but H—— made no complaint, though he felt it rather keenly, but finding our new man had the South African ribbon, we were a bit mollified.

Here, too, we held a memorial service for our fallen comrades, a powerful address being delivered by Major the Rev. William Beatty, one of the brigade chaplains. The troops, both old and new, were addressed, too, by Major-General Alderson, the divisional commander, who spoke of what the old men had done that the new men might understand what was expected of them, and stated that from now on he would count on us all as old troops.

Then we marched away feeling we were now a definite part of the old regiment, and a few days later started our trek southward.

We had entered another epoch !

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE TREK SOUTH

UNTIL we left Bailleul the Canadian Division had been a part of the 2nd Army under Sir Herbert Plumer. We were now to go to the other end of the British line and become part of the 1st Army, then commanded by the present Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig.

The news of this change was greeted with little enthusiasm by the old soldiers in our midst, but old soldiers are invariably pessimists, and imagine that every inspection is the prelude to more "dirty work at the cross-roads" and that every change made in their dispositions is for the worst.

Still, we were all sorry to leave Bailleul, with its bright little shops, and to say good-bye to the *curé* and our other friends there.

We fell in at night in the Grande Place—the little square that has probably seen more British troops come and go than any other town in northern France—and waited there

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER.

for the battalion to form up. It was a beautiful summer night, the square tower of the cathedral and the Moorish spire of the Hôtel de Ville forming perfect silhouettes against the starlit sky.

We were not kept waiting long ; the shrill of a whistle from somewhere in the darkness put an end to all talking, and we hastily slung our packs on our shoulders again and started on our long tramp south to La Bassée.

For a while our route lay through country that some of us had traversed before, and Merville, Vieux Berquin, and other places were hailed with delight. There is a certain charm in returning to places that one has never expected to see again. Much speculation began as to whether we were going back to our old trenches at Bois Grenier and Fleurbaix or not, but all hopes of this happening were dashed to pieces when, after passing through Neuf Berquin, we turned sharply to the right.

After this disappointment our packs began to weigh more heavily ; the mouth organs and vocalists were less persistent in their efforts and gradually stopped in disgust, and only an accordion, wielded by a husky Scotchman at the rear of the company, strove to

## THE TREK SOUTH

cheer us up. It was probably "Lochaber no more" or some other dirge he was playing, as he always showed unnatural fondness for the weird and the sad—probably due to the difficulty of fingering lively airs while on the march.

Passing through Merville, A——, who was marching beside me, regained his spirits sufficiently to point out a shop where a pretty girl sold champagne, and then relapsed into silence again.

A little further along the road we saw the adjutant riding alongside the major, and we knew we were nearing our billets. We turned up a side-road through Calonne, and the companies again broke off in different directions to the various farms to which they had been allotted.

We were again fortunate in getting very good accommodation — good airy barns, a mill-pond for washing, and a well of no-worse-than-the-ordinary water. But imagine our surprise to find chalked on the gate of the largest and best farm a sign :—

"SMALL POX.  
BY ORDER."

Here we were in a fix, as the men would not enter the place till we hunted up that long-

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

suffering individual the interpreter. Then we found the placard to be only a ruse on the part of the unsophisticated peasantry to avoid having troops billeted there.

Having been found out and beaten at this game, Madame produced a sheet of paper she called a "reclamation," for some straw she claimed had been stolen by the preceding troops, and while she and the interpreter harangued over this we stowed our men away and sought our own billets a little distance up the lane.

At Calonne we received newspapers telling of the starting of the French offensive in the Artois district and prophesying an attack on our part to co-operate with them. We got out our maps and saw we were quite close to Neuve Chapelle, and as the Aubers Ridge—the great natural barrier to Lille—formed the obvious point to attack, we were not greatly surprised when a day or two after arriving at this peaceful little village we again took the route—this time toward Neuve Chapelle. We had heard the guns drumming along the Aubers Ridge all the day before during church parade service (May 9th), and were, on the whole, rather disappointed when after a few miles' march we turned off the road

## THE TREK SOUTH

into a farm near "le Cornet Malo" and lay there in the mud all day. Some of the Lahore Division passed us on their way into the affair, the Indian gunners sitting on their limbers like statues.

It was rather a wretched day we spent in this farm. A heavy rain had turned the orchard in which we lay into a "bit of a bog," and all the straw we could buy or steal from the inhabitants could not keep us out of the mud. Here, too, we found the first instance of friction between the troops and the civilian populace, and the old lady made no bones about telling us how unwelcome we were. She opened hostilities by taking the rod from the pump so that we could not fill our watercart, and the troops retaliated by stealing bundles of unthreshed wheat. This was speedily put a stop to (and paid for) by the officers, and, for a while, peace reigned supreme while a thriving trade was done in coffee at two sous a cup and beer at three sous a glass.

Then some of the officers, seeing a lot of freshly-baked bread in a room just off the kitchen, offered to buy some. To our surprise the old woman started to wave a knife around dangerously and screamed: "You

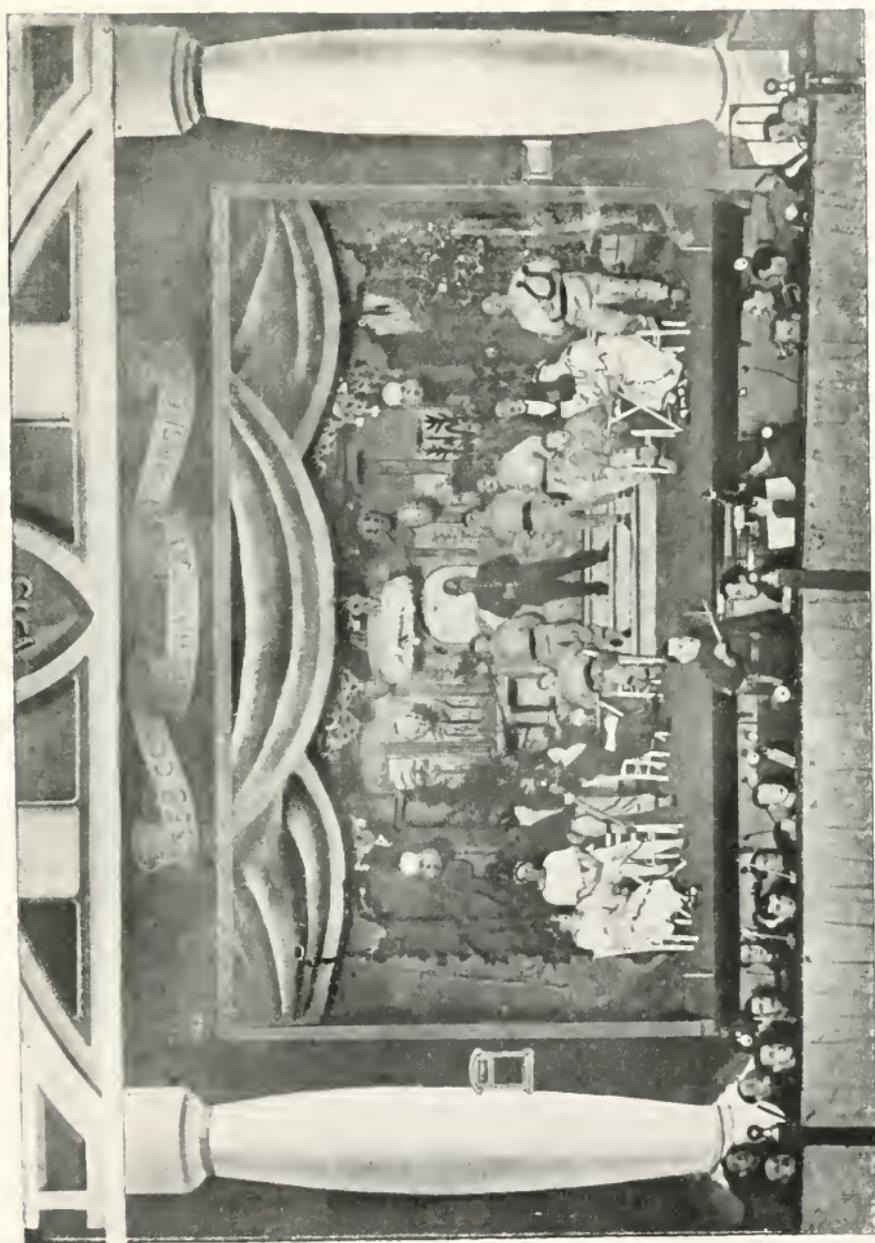
## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

take my wheat, you take my water, and now you won't even leave me my bread ! I would rather the Germans had come ; they at least pay for what they take ! ”

As we had just paid her for the straw we thought this was going a little too far, and F——, who had a fine taste for sarcasm, waved his coffee-cup eloquently in the direction of the two slatternly girls that were peddling the coffee to the soldiers through the window, and said “ What ? With all these beautiful daughters,” and then continued with a graphic description of the horrors in Belgium.

This quieted the old lady down, but we were not sorry to leave there and shift to billets further up the road that night. It was the only instance we encountered of our being unwelcome in France, and the billet we occupied that night, although one of the filthiest houses we came across, was marked by a much more cordial spirit.

We were fortunate to get into this farm, as two of the companies had to bivouac, there being only accommodation for the staff and two companies in the area. The matter was decided by lottery, the major being lucky enough to draw a long straw.



AMATEUR THEATRICALS BACK OF THE LINE



## THE TREK SOUTH

It was rather a squeeze getting the company stowed away that night, but we managed somehow, and then turned into the kitchen. Here we were entertained with a graphic description by an old hag of how she had been wounded. It seemed that in some of the preliminary fighting she had run across a field between our troops and the Germans and received three bullets. She was quite cheerful about it and showed us two wounds, and when A—— casually asked about the third she collapsed in a chair and went into spasms of laughter. All the rest of the evening she would point her finger at him and start again to tee-hee. A—— was much annoyed.

We stayed in that vicinity another day, as it was not certain whether we would be thrown into support in the attacks on the Aubers Ridge at Fromelles or the Bois de Biez, but it was eventually decided that the artillery preparation had been inadequate, and the following night we continued our march southward.

Near Locon we passed some of the Indian Cavalry, gigantic-looking men with their turbanned heads. They surveyed us gravely as we passed, one or two flashing brilliant

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

smiles in response to some friendly greeting. Then shortly afterwards we crossed the canal, and without further incident reached the outskirts of Bethune, where we went into bivouac in an open field, being favoured, most fortunately, with fine weather.

Our long trek had ended.

## CHAPTER XIV

### FESTUBERT, 1915

WHILE the 4th Army Corps were trying to gain a footing on the northern end of the Aubers Ridge near Fromelles the 1st Army was making an equally desperate attempt to the south in front of Festubert, a village already in our hands.

But here, as at Neuve Chapelle, we found that the enemy front line, once penetrated, brought us in front of a series of strong points bristling with machine-guns, with dug-outs of almost incredible strength, some of them twenty and thirty feet under ground and safe against anything but the heaviest of field-guns, weapons that we were lamentably short of.

We could batter their front line to bits, for, like our own, it was situated on lower ground, and consisted of breastwork parapets owing to the water-soaked state of the whole plain; but their infantry would retire to these deep dug-outs, only emerging when their sentries

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER.

warned them of the lifting of our fire to permit the attack.

We could, and did, drive the enemy from his front line, and once there we held on, but that was as far as we could go, for each of these strong points presented a new and entirely different problem to attack, and required a separate bombardment.

Our offensive had started on May 9th and reached its height about the 16th, by which time we had won ground to an average depth of six hundred yards on a front of four miles.

At daybreak on the 16th the 7th Division attacked in the direction of the Rue D'Ouvert and Canteleux, and by 7 o'clock had entrenched themselves in a line running roughly north and south, half-way between their original trenches and La Quinque Rue. The remainder of the day and the following night were spent in consolidating this position and trying to drive the enemy from some short trenches and posts that prevented this division from linking up with the 2nd Division on its left. This was accomplished by noon of the 17th, and by nightfall further ground had been gained to the right. Slight advances were also made on the 18th, but

bad weather had greatly hindered the operation of our artillery.

On the 19th, the 2nd and 7th Divisions, having suffered very severely, were withdrawn, the latter being relieved by the Canadians.

Part of the 3rd Canadian Brigade had already become involved and had taken part in an attack on La Quinque Rue, where they succeeded in advancing the line some five hundred yards and linking up this ground with the Wiltshires on their right and the Coldstreams on their left.

Further advance was held up by one of the enemy's strong points known as the "Orchard." This position was naturally strengthened by a deep ditch full of water on three sides, besides hedges and wire entanglements.

During the afternoon of the 19th the Orchard was heavily bombarded by our guns, the shelling continuing till 7.45 p.m., when the Canadian Scottish advanced to the assault, supported by the 13th Royal Highlanders of Canada. Simultaneously the 48th Toronto Highlanders attacked some hundred yards to the right of the Orchard.

These attacks were made in broad daylight,

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

and, despite the torrent of fire with which the enemy opposed them, the objectives were quickly gained, though the casualties were most severe, and by night the new line was consolidated.

Meanwhile the 2nd Brigade, which had been occupying trenches to the right of the Orchard, had attempted to take a position known as the "Bexhill Redoubt," but with less success, as the preliminary bombardment had been quite ineffectual.

Another bombardment of the position was made, and, supported by the Grenade Company of the 1st Brigade, a portion of the enemy's line to the right of the Bexhill Redoubt was gained and barricades erected and this portion held, in spite of a shelling that continued without ceasing the whole of the 22nd. The enemy attempted a counter-attack during the afternoon, but were repelled by our machine-gun and artillery fire. During the night the troops holding this line were relieved by Strathcona's and King Edward's Horse, then, of course, serving as infantry.

On the night of May 23rd the Bexhill Redoubt was taken by the 5th and 7th Battalions of the 2nd Brigade, reinforced by a squadron of the Strathcona's Horse.

## FESTUBERT, 1915

The captured positions were held all day, despite the enemy's bombardment — the heaviest shelling this brigade had yet experienced — and when they were relieved that night by the Royal Canadian Dragoons and the Eastern Ontario Battalion the brigade had lost 55 officers and 980 men.

The 1st Brigade, during these operations, had been occupying a portion of the line and suffering severely from shell fire. The writer's battalion, the Eastern Ontario, had relieved a battalion of the Black Watch on the night of the 19th near Indian Village. The Highlanders seemed glad to be leaving; one or two expressed their opinion that it was a "hell of a hole," a statement no one contradicted, as the place was vile with mud and stank from unburied corpses.

Between our line and the Western Ontario men, who held the old German trench ahead of us, lay hundreds of bodies that had been there since the last winter, for this narrow strip—not much more than a hundred yards in width—had been "No Man's Land." Attempts made by day and night to bury some of these bodies had to be given up, as the enemy swept the parapets of both trenches, on the least sign of movement, with

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

“whizz-bangs.” The Western Ontario Battalion suffered horribly, a constant stream of stretchers coming through our lines, starting with daybreak. These small shells were fired from light field-guns that had been brought up to the trenches, and were in consequence so close that the shell arrived and burst almost simultaneously with the report of the gun. Shells fired at the ordinary ranges announce their coming by a prolonged whirr, allowing a certain amount of time to get under cover before the burst comes.

We held this line till the night of the 24th, when we went forward to relieve the 3rd Brigade and consolidate the ground won by them. Each man carried two days' rations, a shovel, an extra bandolier of cartridges, and twelve sandbags, in addition to his ordinary fighting equipment.

Most of the companies had some kind of trench to start work on, but at our end there was nothing but a line marked out by the engineers. Listening posts and covering parties were sent out, and by morning we were occupying a ditch about three feet deep with a fairly good parapet in front. No fires were permitted, as we were hidden by grass

## FESTUBERT, 1915

from the enemy and the trench was not yet in shape to stand any bombardment.

The next night we were fortunate in obtaining more sandbags and some timber from a German trench we had passed on the way up. Some mail and parcels of food came up, and we managed to clear out our wounded. Most welcome was ammunition for the flare pistols the officers carried. We had come into the trench with six rounds for each pistol and had been carefully saving them in case the enemy attacked.

Our parapet was now high enough to be easily visible to the enemy, and we received considerable attention from his snipers and artillery the following day. No serious damage was done, however, and we were relieved the following night by a Territorial battalion of Highlanders.

On the 26th General French, having attained for the moment the immediate object in view, ordered a curtailment of the bombardment and a consolidation of all positions won, and the Battle of Festubert came to an end.

By the 31st of the month the whole Canadian Division had been withdrawn and lay in reserve billets around the outskirts of Bethune.

## CHAPTER XV

### CARPE DIEM

“HOME again!” said Begbie Lyte as he watched his servant unrolling his valise in the little field we had left a fortnight before, and the rest of us laughed, for he voiced the thoughts of all.

It required a bit of an optimist to see a home in that apparently comfortless situation, but men just relieved from the firing line are not over-critical, and the prospect of a night under the stars, but away from the crash of shell and the “phit” of striking bullets, was pleasant enough to satisfy the most chronic grouser.

We had, of course, only reached this billet about dawn, so without wasting any time over such niceties as washing we bundled our clothes into a sort of pillow in the head of our “Wolseleys” and drew from the depths of that wondrous combination of a valise and bed that luxury of luxuries on active service, a pair of pyjamas, and were soon dozing comfortably in dreamland.

## CARPE DIEM

Our men, lacking such comforts as Wolsley valises and pyjamas, merely denuded themselves of their equipment, and, with perhaps a preliminary search for "trench pets," slept in their greatcoats under shelters rigged up with waterproof sheets. They had no blankets, for it was summer, and blankets and rum issue are alike "Nah pooh" on the 1st of June. We had in fact turned in our blankets before starting southward from Bailleul.

Here and there bivouac fires had been lighted, and round them small groups sat and talked over our recent losses. In another day they would mention them no more, though they would never forget them.

Presently even these fell asleep, and when, a few hours later, the moon showed herself between the clouds she looked down on a still and silent camp, the only signs of life being the dying embers of the fires and the dark forms of the sentries moving slowly up and down the field.

Custom permitted us to sleep on till noon the next day, and then everybody had a grand clean up. A shower-bath was extemporised by the simple process of standing over a ditch naked and unashamed while a patient *bâtman*,

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

with the aid of what is called, in official language, "one pail, collapsible canvas," poured water over until, breathless but refreshed, the victim shouted to stop. Later on sundry private soldiers whom one had known in civil life would approach and ask for the loan of the pail. Such is democracy in the "Colonials."

Bath being over, the razor was vigorously applied and a week's growth scraped painfully from sunburnt chins, on which talcum powder was afterwards daubed in copious quantities till we smelt to heaven like a Gaiety chorus!

Then breakfast! Its fragrance had been tantalising our noses during all this gay preliminary, for dirty as we may get—and yet sit down to eat in the trenches—it was an unwritten law that no man who was not shaved, shorn, and washed after the manner of the Romans should sit down to mess when in reserve. Lyte one day in a burst of enthusiasm, while treasurer of the mess, decreed that the servants should also wash before starting to cook, but after one trial, dinner being thereby delayed a couple of hours, the mess rebelled and the cooks were allowed to revert to their former state of barbarism.

## CARPE DIEM

Breakfast over, there came the censoring of mail, so that it could be sent to battalion headquarters before 2 o'clock. This is supposed by some to furnish an endless amount of amusement to the officers, and often facetious remarks are introduced by the writer to this end, but to most of us censoring is a beastly bore, and one views with dismay the enormous pile of letters that your platoon sergeant dumps down on your bed each day at noon with the laconic announcement of "Mail, sir!"

One runs across people of many sorts while reading through this heap. The first and commonest is the married man who sticks strictly to private affairs and perhaps says to to his wife: "You remember Jimmy D—who used to work at So-and-so's. He was killed by a shell, but you can tell his wife he didn't suffer none, as he died quick." Not a word you will notice of his own escape or of anything that would tend to aggravate the sorrow of the stricken family. Of the same affair he would probably write to a chum: "You know poor old Jimmy D—. He was all blew to hell by a whizz-bang. A chunk of it just missed my napper by an inch. I come near going West that time, believe me!"

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

Then there is another type whose endless exaggerations make one wish to scribble the word "liar" at the end of each paragraph, but which you pass, after scratching out the numbers of our slain and some of the grosser statements.

Once in a while you may come across a guileless sort of man who, after extolling the virtues of his platoon commander, proceeds to tell his friend Bob: "No, I haven't been made a corporal yet, but our section has none now and I am the oldest soldier left." One feels great curiosity as to the state of this paragon's conduct sheet.

However, these are mere details. The great joy of being in reserve billets is the ability to go, after parades, of course, into the nearest town and spend the 125 francs that the paymaster exchanges once a month for a Bank of Montreal cheque. The private soldier, receiving a meagre 30 francs a month, has to content himself with simpler joys than champagne (vintage 1914) and hand-made lace. Instead he partakes of French beer at three sous a glass, and his friends overseas receive hand-embroidered postcards of brilliant but patriotic designs worked by the crippled children of Paris.

## CARPE DIEM

The greater part of the soldiers' money, however, is spent on food—dainties such as oatmeal, sardines, canned fruit, and so forth—and little shops close to the firing line welcome the twice-monthly visit of the paymaster.

Bethune, the town outside of which we were at this time billeted, was quite the gayest place we had visited since leaving Poperinghe.

“Business as usual” was its motto, in spite of the almost daily shelling it received by light guns, said to have been mounted on an armoured train.

This bombardment took place, as a rule, between 6 and 7 o'clock each evening, but the damage done was very slight, only one soldier being reported killed during our stay. There were civilians killed at various times, but from a military point of view the shelling was absolutely useless.

If, perchance, one was taking tea with Marie, or anyone else for that matter, and the shelling started, it was quite the thing to seek the shelter of the cellar and stay there “*en famille*” until the bombardment was over, when you would emerge, Mademoiselle perhaps pushing a loosened hairpin

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

back in place, and continue to enjoy your tea.

It was not everyone's fortune to have this happen, however.

The bank took a more serious view of the affair, and, having sandbagged the cellar windows, posted notices stating that, in the event of shelling, customers could continue business in the cellar. And this was in a nation that we have always looked upon as effeminate and excitable!

Under these pleasant circumstances, plus a little setting-up drill and "physical jerks," we passed a very pleasant fortnight before going into the trenches again—this time at Givenchy.

## CHAPTER XVI

GIVENCHY, 1915

It was now the turn of the 1st Brigade to emulate the gallant deeds of the 2nd and 3rd Brigades at Ypres and Festubert, and right gallantly they did so.

Givenchy, while receiving but slight mention in Sir John French's dispatches, was perhaps only a minor affair; but the fact that, owing largely to a shortage of bombs, we were unable to hold the ground we had gained does not in any way detract from the gallantry of the attack. Comparisons with Hulluch or Loos cannot be made, as we had nothing like the support of either infantry or guns that were available on those later occasions.

The Canadians relieved the Guards in the Givenchy trenches during the second week in June. Our brigade was still in reserve around Bethune when they passed us; the Prince of Wales, a slim, tired-looking boy in khaki, marched by with his regiment. It

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

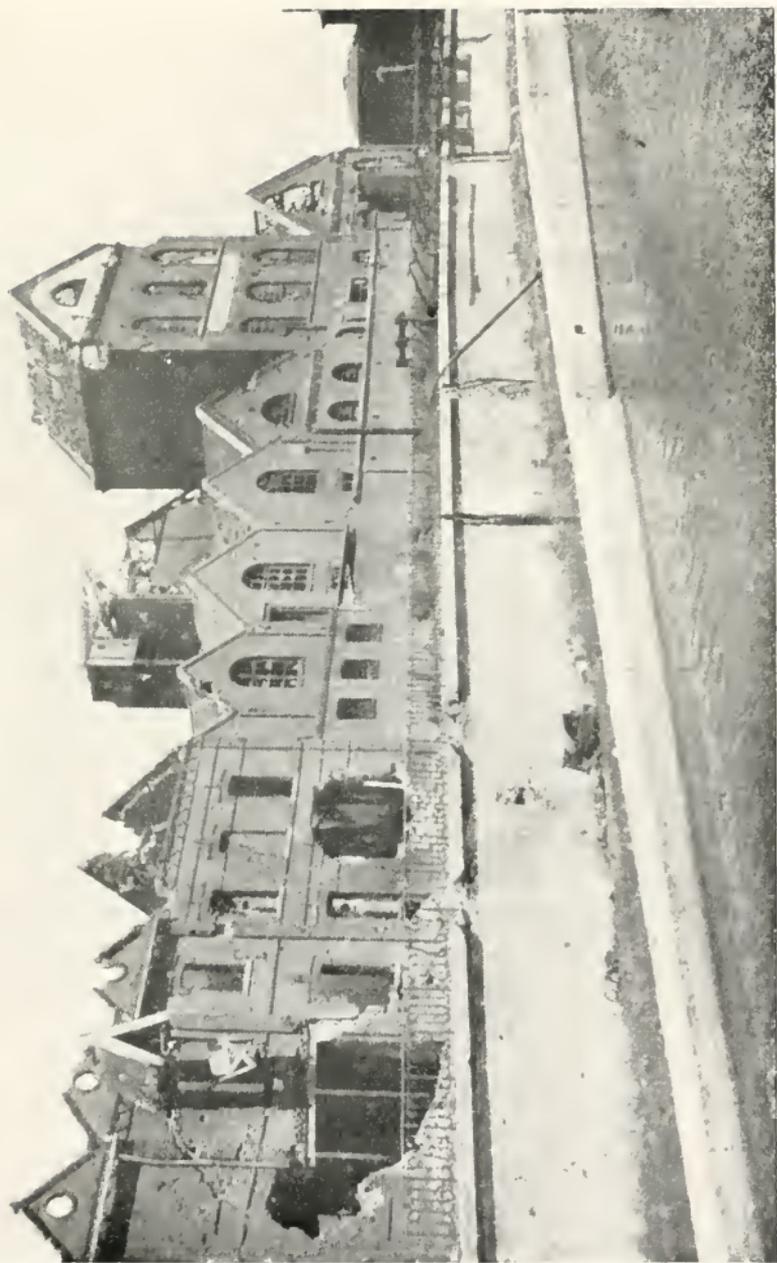
wasn't often we had any of the Royal Family march past us; generally the boot was on the other leg!

We entered the trenches at night and, as usual, in a drizzling rain. Except for the fact that it was miserable weather, that we had followed the La Bassée Canal in, and that he had a jumping toothache, the writer has no vivid impressions of that night.

We lay in some trenches just in front of the ruined distillery, dug in a commanding mound that had been thrown up in building the canal, and stayed there till next night, when we moved forward again, two companies going into the front line and two, one of them the writer's, occupying a support trench.

Here we learned what work was, every bit of food, bombs, and ammunition required for the front line being carried up these narrow twisted communication trenches by the support companies, for the proximity of our line to the enemy would not permit of taking a single man from the front line. It was the one time we cursed the heavy mailbags that arrived with unceasing regularity every night.

The right of our trenches here rested on the canal, and could go no further forward owing to a small marsh that lay in front.



THE DISTILLERY AT GIVENCHY.



## GIVENCHY, 1915

But about the centre of the position the line swooped forward into a small and dangerous salient known as the "Duck's Bill."

It was opposite here we proposed to attack, the actual objective being the high ground between points H2 and H3 on the map. If we and the 7th Division on our left could gain this high ground it would straighten out this dangerous salient and give us a footing on the Aubers Ridge.

Great preparation was made for this attack. A mine that had been under construction for months was to be sprung, and we were to give the Hun a bombardment such as he had never had before.

Two field-guns were brought up on the night of the 14th and placed in *épaulements* that had been dug in rear of the front-line trench to receive them. They were to be kept masked till the last moment before the attack, when they would cut wire and silence machine-guns along the front over which we were to attack.

The Central Ontario Battalion was to make the attack, supported by the Toronto Battalion, while the Eastern and Western Battalions were to man the captured trench, consolidate it, and provide for any counter-

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

attacks. On the left, the East Yorks and another battalion of that brigade were to co-operate.

Meanwhile the mine was being hastily completed, and by noon on the 15th it was ready for firing, the explosive being carried up by Lyte and his satellites from near the distillery. They had had rather a bad time of it crossing the Pont Fixe, a wrecked bridge that was under observation from the German position.

The Huns, seeing the first load of these white boxes being carried over the bridge, laid a gun on it and when the second party came across opened fire on them, wounding several men close to F—, the Quebecker, who as junior sub. was bringing up the rear. He, however, kept the men from dropping the explosive, and the party reached the mine shaft without any further casualties. -

Our three days' bombardment, which had started on the night of the 13th, now died down slightly, and the Germans, having had ample time to bring up their reinforcements, waited for the attack.

At 3 o'clock our two companies in the front line drew off to the right and the men of the Central Ontarios took their places,



OUR SUPPORT TRENCHES AT GIVENCHY.



while the communication trenches leading up were choked with the Toronto men who were to form their supports. Our artillery now tuned up again and caught the Germans by surprise. They, in turn, shelled us heavily, causing many casualties owing to the crowding of the trench.

A—— and the scout-corporal went up the trench and were caught by a shell and the corporal was killed, A—— being fortunate in escaping, though very severely wounded.

Another shell lit fairly on a bomb depôt about this time and destroyed one of our reserves of these weapons, and a third shell killed Lieutenant-Colonel Beecher, the second in command of the attacking battalion.

The two guns in the front line had been unmasked and were cutting wire with desperate rapidity, though their crews were practically wiped out a few moments later, and in the midst of this turmoil the mine went up.

It was quite the largest mine that had been exploded along the front, and the tremor of the earth could only be compared to an earthquake.

So eager was the engineer officer to reach the German trench, that, finding he was

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

striking water underground, he loaded in something like a ton and a half of explosive to make certain. Thus he achieved the double result of winning the Military Cross for his skill and blowing up a portion of our front line, from which fortunately our men had been withdrawn.

But a number of our own men were killed and wounded, and, what was far worse, another reserve depôt of bombs was buried under the *débris* of the explosion.

In the meantime, masked by the fountain of earth thrown up by the mine, the attack had been launched and was already in the first German line, the bombers were beginning to work along the trench to the right and left, and the little flags that marked their progress could be seen moving slowly to the left to link up with the East Yorks.

But the East Yorks had been unable to advance owing to the wire not having all been cut and the machine-gun fire that enfiladed them from their flanks.

Meanwhile the Canadians had gained the third German line, but already the shortage of bombs was beginning to be felt, and they were forced back to the second line, where they established blocks in the trench and



AFTER GIVENCHY.

Left to right: Capt. Birdsall, Winnipeg Brown, Ponton,  
Capt. Richardson, Guty.



## GIVENCHY, 1915

were able to hang on until the following day, when the German counter-attack forced them to fall back to our own front line.

The brigade had lost heavily. Of twenty-three officers of the Central Ontario Battalion who went over the parapet only three returned uninjured, the remainder being either killed, wounded, or missing!

Nor had the Yorks fared much better.

During the second day of the affair the writer was moving up a narrow communication trench with a platoon carrying ammunition to the front line when he encountered a party of about the same strength coming down the trench in defiance of a notice board marked "In only." After asking in vain for the officer in charge of the party he was told "For God's sake, sir, we aren't any party. We're all that's left of two companies!" There was nothing left to be said!

Once again it had been proved that attacks by daylight, unless supported by masses of supports, are bound to fail.

The 2nd Canadian Brigade relieved us, marching in by one side of the canal while we marched out along the other. We called across our best wishes to them as we passed. We had, it is true, been heavily pounded, but

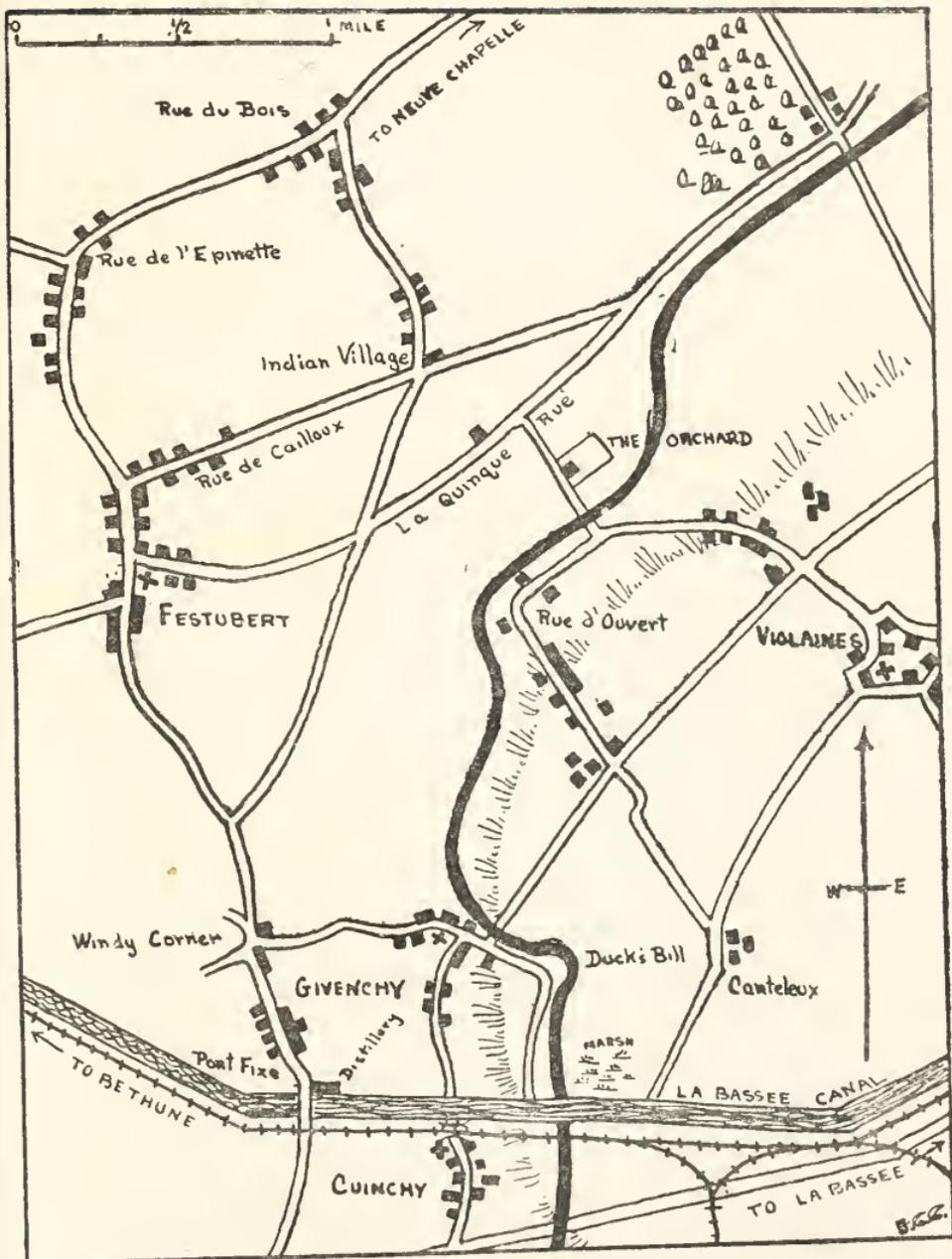
## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

we were far from being depressed, though we might well have been.

Instead, as we passed an electric towing machine lying neglected along the towpath, a man in the ranks behind asked his mate what they were used for.

“Don't you know?” was the reply as he glanced at the broad-tyred wheels; “why, they use them for rolling down the water in the canal after a storm!”

It was in this mood we returned to billets.



APPROXIMATE LINE AFTER FESTUBERT AND GIVENCHY, 1915.

## CHAPTER XVII

### NORTHWARD AGAIN

AFTER Givenchy the Canadian Division rested for another week around the outskirts of Bethune before starting its long tramp back to the northern end of the line again.

But it was far from being a week of idleness, and hard drilling was the order of the day. Great stress was laid on bomb-throwing, and, in spite of the heavy casualties the bombing sections had suffered, there was no dearth of volunteers for the "Suicide Club," as the bombers termed themselves. The men, as well as the officers, recognised the value of this weapon, old as the use of gunpowder itself, but now reinstated to greater importance than ever before.

So we started northward, a very uneventful and tiring march, our first stop being at Neuf Berquin, where we rested a day.

The march had been very fatiguing; it was the latter end of June, and "sunny

## NORTHWARD AGAIN

France" had been living up to her reputation, and even the nights, in which we marched for the sake of coolness and concealment, were most oppressive. And it was in weather like that that the famous "First Seven Divisions" fought and marched twenty-five or thirty miles, dug in and fought again, only to have again to retire!

And we were only averaging fifteen miles a march!

Our next halt was at Noot-Broome, a mere hamlet, where we held church service and then marched straight into the trenches.

This was a new area for us. We had grown so accustomed to shifting from one part of the line to another that we had already nicknamed ourselves the "Canadian Foot Cavalry."

However, we were fated to rest in that vicinity for several months, though our brigade shifted from one position to another along that line all summer.

We first relieved a battalion of the Middlesex on June 28th opposite a poisonous little spot known as "la Petite Douve." Here a small stream, dignified by the name of the Douve River, wandered lazily across the flat at the foot of the Messines Ridge and coiled

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

like a natural moat in front of the Petite Douve Farm.

This, like all farms in Flanders, was a square of strongly-built brick buildings. In it the enemy had established concrete machine-gun positions and converted the place into a veritable fort. It projected in a salient from their average line and enfiladed the main road running from our position to Messines.

The Middlesex, on our relieving them, had told us a weird tale of the number of rounds of rifle ammunition they expended in a single night. We discounted this by the usual 50 per cent., but our major had an extra supply brought up in case of emergencies.

An evening or two later we found the reason for the Middlesex's heavy expenditure of cartridges, for the enemy, on a three-mile front, suddenly opened up rapid fire, keeping up this fusillade for nearly half an hour.

This occurred at odd intervals for some time while we occupied that front, and was known as "the Germans (or the Fritzes) getting their wind up." The Middlesex had been trying to beat down this fire with their own rifle fire; we contented ourselves with sitting tight and, by careful patrolling, watch-

## NORTHWARD AGAIN

ing for the first signs of an attack. On such a night as this poor F—— was out on patrol when the rapid fire opened up, and we nearly struck him off the company strength. Much to our surprise he and his patrol came in later, quite unhurt, having discovered, and taken shelter in, an advanced German trench near some willows.

Later it became quite the thing to take a few men out with you and bomb this trench.

We only did two "tours" in this particular piece of trench, as the next time we came in that company frontage had been allotted to the battalion on our left and we moved just around the corner, the Petite Douve Farm being almost hidden from our view by trees but continuing to annoy us with its machine-guns.

It was here that we celebrated "Dominion Day" (July 1st), a Canadian ensign that had arrived a few days before in a parcel from "home" waving gaily behind our lines.

It was here, too, that Captain Frank Tidy, of the Toronto Battalion, astonished the brigade by making a sortie from the trench in daytime and bringing in two prisoners whom he had observed moving in the tall wheat that here and there shut off our view of the German line.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

Much courage is required to make a sortie of this sort, and one is not surprised that a third German had to be shot before the other two surrendered to Captain Tidy and his two comrades.

No information of importance was gained from these prisoners except that the enemy had sent them out to ascertain who the new troops occupying our line were.

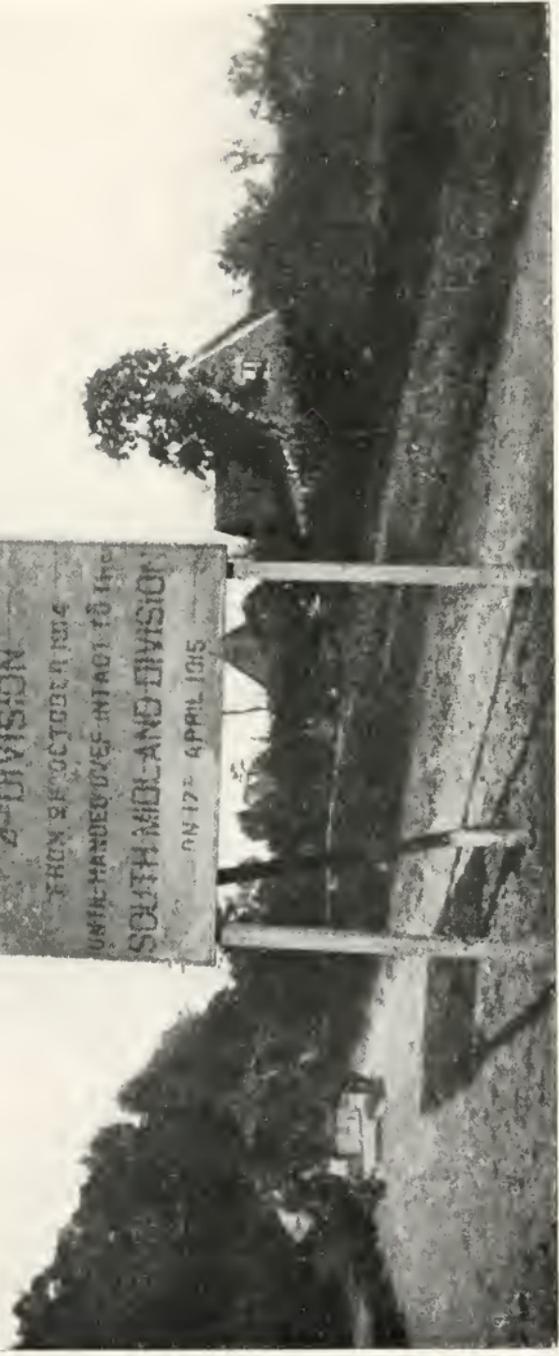
Summer was now well advanced, and it was doubtful if a further "push" would be attempted that season, and we gradually settled down to the routine of trench warfare.

During the middle of July we did one tour in the trenches in front of Wulverghem, relieving a battalion of Northumberland Fusiliers. We only stayed there a few days, but were greatly bothered with rifle-grenades, so, finding that our grenades fell short of the German line, the major and a small party took the grenade-gun out in the long grass until they were able to reach the enemy and thus secured a temporary peace.

The East Yorks then relieved us, and when next we entered the trenches it was a little to the right of our old position and in front of the celebrated Ploegsteert Wood.

Here the right battalions of the brigade

PLUGSTREET WOOD  
BUILT BY  
4<sup>th</sup> DIVISION  
FROM 28 OCTOBER 1916  
UNTIL HAND-OVER INTO ACT TO THE  
SOUTH MIDLAND DIVISION  
ON 17<sup>th</sup> APRIL 1915



ENTRANCE TO PLUGSTREET WOOD.



## NORTHWARD AGAIN

had rather a strenuous time, as some mines had been exploded and there was still a struggle going on around the craters.

But on the left, abutting our old position near the Douve Farm, we had rather an easy time of it, there being little shelling and the trenches nearly two hundred yards apart.

In fact our greatest activity was at night and at dawn, conditions at the latter time being well expressed in an anonymous sonnet we found pinned up in a dug-out entitled "Stand To" :—

“ Early every morning,  
As the stars begin to tire,  
Without the slightest warning,  
Our maxim opens fire ;  
A German gunner answers back,  
And one by one the rifles crack,  
All down the line you can hear the rattle,  
And then begins our morning battle ;  
And as the dawn creeps in the sky  
A couple of shells go whistling by.  
The bullets are flying in every direction  
Just as the larks begin to carol,  
And all because the machine-gun section  
Wanted to warm their hands on the barrel.”

## CHAPTER XVIII

### NIGHTS OF GLADNESS !

OUR nights around Ploegsteert fully made up for the peacefulness of the days, and "No Man's Land" between the two lines of trenches became the scene of many exciting adventures.

This was particularly true of the area directly in front of us, as a large beanfield extended from the German line nearly to ours. It was a dull night indeed that our listening post did not either bomb, or get bombed by, an enemy patrol. Casualties, though, were fewer than one would expect from such combats, as bombs are very local in their action, and it was not easy to locate the enemy's position exactly by ear as he rustled his way through the beans.

Behind the lines there was less romantic work ; for General Joffre, in an odd moment, had sent a circular letter to the various divisions calling attention to a new form of trench for protection against shell fire, and

## NIGHTS OF GLADNESS!

we dug these trenches till there was hardly a foot of Allied soil unturned. Later, during the rains, we drained our living trench into them on the principle that the uncomfortable sensation experienced during a heavy shelling would act as a distraction to the inconvenience of standing in several feet of water.

While we were in these trenches the enemy fired the dry yellow grass in "No Man's Land" a few nights after their capture of our line at Sanctuary Wood, near Hooge, with the flame projectors or "flammenwerfers." A hurried "stand-to" was ordered, as we thought a similar attack was about to be made.

But the fire died down and we saw no signs of the enemy coming over. It was, however, an anxious night, and great interest was taken in widening our wire entanglements as more and more details of the Hooge affair trickled down to us. How we longed for a supply of the iron stakers that our patrols brought in time after time from the German wire! We got them, too—later.

Later the Germans could not have burned down our wire, even had they tried, as a week of heavy rains came on, and, on such trifles

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

do the fates of nations hang, these had a most serious effect on the "Autumn Push"—it was already September—as our offensive around Hulluch and Loos was called.

We were in reserve during the first two days of the attack, and received with clock-like regularity the *communiqués* telling of our successful advances.

Our gunners were co-operating by the process known as "engaging the enemy's artillery," but we did not doubt that the Toronto Battalion, then occupying our trenches, were having rather a warm time of it, as the Hun, instead of being a sportsman and shelling our batteries, used to retaliate on our trenches.

We set off the following day for the trenches. It had started to rain about 4 o'clock, so that by 7, when we reached the head of Mud Lane, we had no reason to doubt the origin of this homely name.

In pleasing contrast to our growlings and grumblings as we took their places, the Toronto men filed out prophesying all sorts of cheerful things in store for us. All we could see ahead of us was plenty of work, for the shelling they had received had smashed down our bulwarks and annihilated the



OUR TRENCHES, PLUGSTREET WOOD.



## NIGHTS OF GLADNESS!

officers' kitchen—rather an elaborate structure, of which we were justly fond—and they, in the sure and certain knowledge of a relief, had only cleared away enough of the *débris* to make the trench passable.

Meanwhile our listening posts, soothed with a wee drappie o' rum, went over the parapet laden down with waterproof sheets fully determined to make the best of a bad job, our sentries were posted, and the welcome order to "Stand down" came along the trench. Those of us not otherwise occupied turned into our dug-outs and were soon asleep. After a certain stage one becomes unconscious to even a revolver-butt prodding one in the ribs.

It seemed only a few minutes before the sergeant thrust his head into my dug-out with a "Midnight, sir!" I groped around for my pocket lamp and looked at my watch—some way you always hope the sergeant is wrong, but he never is—and tumbled out to relieve poor Lyte, who had spent a miserable four hours.

A rift in the clouds showed our friends of the midnight watch—the Great Bear and Cassiopeia—twinkling merrily as though it had never rained for a fortnight.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

I sloshed my way down to the far end of the trench. Pools of water lay ankle deep here and there along its length. Already one or two men, who had just come off sentry, had started to drain these into little catch-pools. From here it was baled by means of the ever-useful Maconachie tin into an equally useful biscuit tin, which was afterwards dumped on the enemy's side of the parapet.

In other places the men had turned in and were already asleep, so they were promptly stirred up and told to "Get busy," and, for the night, the blosh of the baling tin took the place of the smack of a shovel on a freshly-placed sandbag.

At frequent intervals it was necessary to crawl out and visit the listening posts, who lay in the rank grass just beyond our own wire.

On returning, not only were one's feet wet, but knees and elbows as well. Then it was up and down the trench again for another hour or so.

A fine drizzle set in and the stars again disappeared, the drizzle turning to a steady shower.

I retired to company headquarters, only emerging when necessary to visit the sentries



OUR TRENCHES AT PLUGSTREET.



## NIGHTS OF GLADNESS!

and listening posts again. There, by the aid of a sputtering candle, I sought diversion in the shape of a sevenpenny novel that some kindly soul had forgotten in his haste to be relieved.

Just as I reached the stage where I could sort the various characters into their ultimate rôles of hero, villain, and heroine the sergeant again intruded with the news that one of the listening posts reported an enemy patrol approaching. A few flares were fired up, but revealed nothing except a white glare of grass field, the bean patch, and the inky black of a few willows with our listening posts huddled at their bases. These men were, of course, invisible to the enemy, as the flare had fallen between their line and the willows. A flare must fall behind the object aimed at to reveal anything with accuracy.

Even a couple of parachute lights fired from "Little Archibald," as we called the special gun used for these larger flares, revealed nothing, so I gave up in disgust, woke the only two men who had not been disturbed all night, tied a couple of sandbags around each knee, and once again disappeared over the parapet.

An hour later, on returning, the signaller

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

warned me it was time for the "situation" report. I scrawled out the usual formula, "Situation unchanged; enemy quiet; wind northerly," and handed him the form.

It was ten minutes late, and though the adjutant would not read it till morning I knew I was in for a wiggling. Wet and disgusted I turned to my dug-out.

A few minutes later traces of dawn showed themselves in the east. The rain ceased and a fine mist took its place. The men stumbled out to their rifles in response to the order "Stand to," and I made a final promenade of the trench, dragging out a man here and there who was tardy.

Then I stirred up the officer of the day and handed over my duties.

The mist cleared away, showing the German line, grim and formidable as ever!

Another day had dawned.

It was on such a dawn as this that poor Jack L—, my platoon-sergeant, was killed. The fog had lifted a little, revealing an enemy patrol to our listening post.

He, taking the nearest two men with him, went out in search of them, and a flare falling near the little party showed them up to the enemy snipers. He alone was hit.

## NIGHTS OF GLADNESS!

We buried him in the battalion cemetery the next day, the colonel reading the service over his body, and we thought as we lowered him into his grave what a very good friend he had been.

It was not very many days later that we changed from this brigade area to another, leaving Ploegsteert with its memories, sad and otherwise, behind us.

## CHAPTER XIX

### IN FRONT OF MESSINES

THE Second Canadian Division arrived in France during our stay in Ploegsteert, and after a short rest took over a sector on the right of St. Eloi and in front of Messines.

Here it was that we relieved them about a fortnight later—our third move while in front of this grim hill, the scene of such hard fighting in October of the year before.

The line at this point swung forward in a small salient to within fifty yards of the enemy—the only footing we now held on this famous ridge—and to the Toronto and Eastern Ontario Battalions fell the honour of guarding this point all winter.

Here, too, we were to learn something of grenade and mine warfare such as the other two battalions of our brigade had been waging all summer near Ploegsteert.

And the little graveyard in rear of the line was to receive the bodies of many of our comrades and hold them in common sanctity

## IN FRONT OF MESSINES

with those of other gallant men, British and French, Highlanders and Turcos, who had perished on the slopes of Messines.

For a week we systematically registered our guns on new points in the enemy's second and third lines—the usual preliminary to an offensive—and bombarded them severely.

This was done to prevent the enemy from moving any of his guns from this area to the southern end of the line, where, now that the weather was again favourable, the British were to make another thrust.

For this purpose, too, we were to make a "little demonstration" on our front, using smoke bombs to make the enemy believe we were going to use gas, and, to our great satisfaction, it was announced that in those areas where the real offensive was being made the Germans would be treated to a dose of their own poison. Too long we had waited and allowed the enemy to use this fearful weapon against us, thinking the neutral nations might intervene; but their interest in the cause of humanity was largely a financial one, and we determined to adopt a broader view, perhaps, of what justifiable weapons are, and make use of the advances of science. France was already using the gas,

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

but Britain hesitated at setting her hall-mark on such a usage, necessary as it had become.

The day, October 13th, was ideal for observation, beautifully clear, with a gentle breeze from our trench towards the enemy's. Nothing finer could be desired for our operations to the south.

About 2 o'clock our guns, along the whole British front, started to cut wire as though preparing for an attack.

The Germans in return sprinkled our lines vigorously with shrapnel, the fleecy white puffs of their shells showing up like clouds on the clear blue sky.

From our trench on the hill top we could see the long line of trenches, hidden here and there by trees, stretching southwards to Armentières, the tall chimneys of which were clearly discernible.

Anxiously we glanced from this view to our watches while the hands crept slowly around to the appointed moment. In the distance there suddenly appeared faint lines of whitish smoke among the trees; and we lit our smoke bombs and hurled them over the parapet. There was a moment's pause, and then they burst into clouds of yellow smoke, hiding the German trench from view.



THE START OF THE SMOKE CLOUDS.  
The Little Demonstration, October 13th, 1915.



## IN FRONT OF MESSINES

The tone of their bombardment changed immediately, and crashing salvoes of high explosive fell around us.

Our guns paused for a moment, and the crisp rattle of musketry, the droning of myriads of bees, and the bursts of machine-gun fire were heard alone as they ran through whole belts of cartridges; then all minor sounds were again drowned out by the clashes of our shells as they burst all along the German front line.

Gradually the smoke cleared away as the bombs burnt themselves out and showed that no attack was being attempted. The bombardment slackened, though the Germans continued to shell us heavily till almost dusk, but with little further effect except that they rendered the evacuation of our wounded more dangerous.

Our casualties had, however, been slight, but it was simply marvellous luck, for our parapets were ruined heaps and the trenches filled with *débris*.

We gazed sadly around, knowing it meant many nights of hard work to restore these, and mentally decided to join the artillery in the next war, as they alone had enjoyed the afternoon's work.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

The German guns had certainly been kept busy, and it was some consolation to read in their report of the affair that "an attack using gas on a thirty-mile front had been repulsed with heavy losses to the enemy."

We had produced the desired effect.

Below La Bassée the 46th Division had been equally successful and gained the Hohenzollern Redoubt, while on their right in the vicinity of Loos the 4th Corps were holding nearly twelve hundred yards of German front-line trench.

It had been a good day's work, but summer was now over and good weather could not be depended on, so no further offensive was made, though fighting of the most stubborn and desperate sort took place around the newly-gained ground, which was, however, successfully consolidated.

During the remainder of the month, except for the exploding of a mine and aerial activity, there was little that occurred on the Canadian front.

## CHAPTER XX

### MINE WARFARE

AMONG the other things we took over from the outgoing battalion when we first moved into this position was the care and continuance of a mine, and this mine was to form our chief worry as long as we held that line.

At first we were inclined to regard the mining officers—of which we had two—as a sort of nuisance like engineers, trench mortar men, and some others, who were always demanding men for carrying and working parties. But we were not long in finding that they were, like ourselves, necessary evils, and they became welcome guests at our little mess when in the trench.

Whenever the trenches approach as close as they did at this point mine warfare becomes inevitable, and it is a game at which it is best to be first.

To defend a position against this method of attack one commences a counter-mine at a depth sufficient to take the gallery or tunnel

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

underneath the enemy's one, which, once it is located, is blown in before they manage to get under the defenders' trench. The tunnel or gallery is barely large enough for a man to crawl along on his hands and knees, and must be boarded foot by foot as it progresses to prevent it from collapsing.

In this cramped position the sapper wields his pick, a peculiar affair not unlike a harpoon, and scrapes the loosened earth back with a short grubber to another man who removes the earth in sandbags.

Progress under such circumstances must be slow, but it is made slower by the necessity of running galleries at right angles to the main tunnel from time to time in an effort to locate the enemy.

Here men are posted, while all work is for a time stopped, to listen for the first sounds of the enemy's sappers—the thud-thud of the picks or the “cough” of the man whose lungs seek this relief in the stuffy air of the cramped tunnel.

If the enemy is not found, progress is continued forward from both ends of the cross-gallery and the game goes merrily on.

About this stage the mining officer will, if you happen to be holding the trench under

## MINE WARFARE

which he is grovelling, wax eloquent over a crumpled sheet of tracing linen that he presents to your view as a diagram of the workings. It looks like nothing so much as a drawing of the kith and kin of an old and prolific family; but you dare not tell him that, or he will be your enemy for life.

Instead you should say, "Ahem!" and "Oh, yes; how clever!"—then he will ask you for only ten instead of twelve men on the night's working party.

But once the enemy is located you begin to regard him more seriously, for on his skill depends the life of every man in the trench above, and a false change in direction may mean missing the enemy's tunnel altogether.

Sometimes, but not often, the mining is so quietly done that the first sign of the enemy is the sudden collapse of the wall of earth between the two galleries, leaving the rival workers face to face!

At other times, and this is a normal occurrence, the enemy are heard to one side or the other, and a small charge of powder is laid and his gallery is blown in, crushing his workers to death, or perhaps merely burying them to perish miserably by suffocation.

To prevent this occurring men are kept in

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

the ends of all the passages listening for the tap-tap of the picks that spells danger!

If the picks are heard for a while and then stop, there are anxious moments, for it may mean that the enemy has located our workers and decided to blow first and wreck our galleries, or it may mean the explosive is already in place and ready for firing, or perhaps only a change in the direction of the enemy's tunnel.

The situation is not a pleasant one for either the men in the trench above or the sappers in the galleries below, and on the mining officer's decision much depends.

It was while we were breakfasting one morning that the corporal in charge of the underground sentries reported that the enemy could be heard working in No. — gallery.

This was the third time since taking over the mine that tapping had been reported, and both the preceding times had proved to be the result of overstrained imaginations. Captain H——, our skipper, had on both occasions descended to the bowels of the earth and listened patiently for half an hour, emerging again disgusted with things in general.

This time he motioned to the writer to

## MINE WARFARE

accompany the corporal, and together we made our way to the mine, shedding our jackets and belts at the head of the shaft, and taking only our electric pocket lamps we crawled along the muddy galleries to No. —.

The noise had stopped, the listener whispered to us when we touched him gently on the leg, so we lay there all three listening for it to start again, the tick-ticking of our wrist-watches and the pulsing of our hearts sounding loud to our strained ears.

Three—five—seven minutes passed by without a sound, and then suddenly there came a slight thud.

The man in front of me stiffened slightly like a well-trained setter and the corporal behind me pinched my leg in the height of his exultation.

The thud-thud continued (there was no mistaking it now), then a pause—and a voice, distinctly guttural, was heard, and a sound, easily distinguishable from the muffled reports of the rifles some thirty feet overhead—the scraping of a shovel on the wooden floor of a gallery not more than eight feet away!

Passing the sentry a revolver and torch, we blew out his candle and crept away as noiselessly as we had come.

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

On reaching the head of the shaft we met the mining officer, who crawled down and returned to confirm our judgment.

Then followed some mysterious telephoning to the "higher authority" while a charge was hastily laid, and permission was at last secured to "blow" the mine.

No time was lost, and in half an hour all was ready, the mining officer returning from his final inspection with the news that the enemy was still digging blissfully away.

Remembering the mine at Givenchy, we cleared the trench in the danger zone and had this party "stand by to repel boarders" and, if necessary, man the crater.

At 2.30 the mine was fired.

A fountain of earth roared upwards from "No Man's Land," and, armed to the teeth with bombs, we rushed forward, losing a couple of men on the way who had been struck by the falling *débris*, and manned our trench while machine-guns raked the enemy's parapets.

However, he showed no inclination to man the crater—a yawning pit some forty feet in width half-way over to his trench—and contented himself with throwing a few bombs into it and covering it with machine-gun fire.

## MINE WARFARE

In spite of which Begbie Lyte, having now risen to the dizzy height of senior subaltern in the company, took out a small party and filled it with barbed wire.

The affair was only briefly mentioned in the *communiqués* : “ On the 22nd a mine was exploded under a German gallery on our front. An enemy mining party is believed to have been blown up.”

The mining officer was greatly pleased, however, as only some few yards of his own gallery had suffered.

## CHAPTER XXI

### MYTHS, FAIRIES, ETC.

IN every position you take over there are a certain number of myths which when you go out you carefully repeat to the incoming battalion; and the tale seldom loses in the telling. These are handed down to posterity in naming new field-works; hence the frequency of "Suicide Alley," "Sniper's Cross-roads," "Dead Man's Corner," &c., &c.

Some of these myths are worth repeating—all are worth noting, for they are in most cases founded on possibilities.

The most popular myth or fairy on the Messines front was undoubtedly the "Mad Major." This individual was supposed to be an artillery officer who spotted for his own battery—which incidentally always did the most marvellous shooting—from an aeroplane, in which he performed the most daring feats while dodging the "Archibalds" or anti-aircraft shells.

Whether there was any truth in this myth

## MYTHS, FAIRIES, ETC.

we never found out, but we did see an enemy aeroplane forced down behind our lines by Robert Lorraine, the actor aviator, on October 26th, after a very daring fight.

A large enemy aeroplane of the "Albatross" type had been making a reconnaissance somewhere northward in the Ypres salient with unusual boldness when Lorraine sighted the machine and gave chase. Instead of turning directly back to his own lines the German flew along the line of our trench at such a tempting range that machine-guns all along our line started to cough and spit in the air in an effort to wing him.

Meanwhile our own aeroplane was getting within range, and a pretty duel in mid-air commenced, the two machines circling and swooping like a pair of immense white gulls, while the "tut-tut" of their machine-guns was the only sound as both Germans and British watched this unique battle.

Suddenly the German machine showed signs of distress, pitched suddenly forward, and started a long glide for the German trenches, our aeroplane still pursuing and forcing the enemy even lower.

But the German had followed our trench line too far down, for at this point our trenches

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

ran forward nearly a quarter of a mile where a French cavalry brigade in a dismounted action the year before had made a last effort to retake Messines.

And now, when it became apparent their machine could not regain the German lines, their gunners began to shell their own plane, containing as it did two of their own men, in an effort to destroy the machine.

But, though they fired over a hundred shells into the little wood behind which the aeroplane landed, they were unable to prevent the men of our Royal Montreal Regiment, who occupied the trenches at this point, from capturing the observer and his papers, the pilot having been killed in mid-air at the time the machine made its fatal plunge.

Then occurred one of the strangest of coincidences, vouched for by the official Canadian Eye-witness, when, on examining the wrecked aeroplane, the Royal Montrealers found the machine-gun with which it had been armed to be one formerly the property of this same regiment, but lost during the fighting around St. Julien just six months before while loaned to another battalion.

The "Mad Major" may have been only a myth, but Lorraine certainly was not, and

## MYTHS, FAIRIES, ETC.

for this exploit both he and his pilot subsequently received the Military Cross.

But there were a lot of tales that had their origin in a desire to suit the "Cook's tourists." These individuals were officers sent over from the Canadian Training Base for short periods of one or two weeks to receive practical instruction in trench warfare. Incidentally they brought with them some wondrous ideas about the proper methods of doing things, gathered from some official publications known as "Notes from the Front," and were greatly surprised to find we were not in touch with this "trade" journal.

Like the "Daily Summary of Events," known to us as "Comic Cuts" or the "Daily Liar," these little handbooks are written by wise men wearing red tabs and living miles away from the front, where the continuity of their thoughts is only interrupted by the tea hour, and not by the "Jack Johnson" shells. Here they design "wire meat safes," patent refuse burners, mud scrapers, and other weird contrivances that can be fashioned from biscuit tins, ruined houses and other *débris*, and issue these sheets for the guidance of the poor, long-suffering infantry. Once in

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

a while they turn their attention to steel helmets, grenades, &c., so that their existence is almost justified.

The "Cook's tourist," however, is not a dangerous creature, taken in small quantities, and is a very handy man to send out on working parties when the company is supposed to be resting in reserve. So he is not without his uses.

For those who found the ordinary trench routine dull we had, however, several stock entertainments that never failed to satisfy.

The first and mildest was to take the victim through the "Catacombs," as we called the galleries and connecting passages of our mine. This had the advantage of rendering his cuffs and decorations less conspicuous and giving him in five minutes all the war-worn appearance of a veteran.

If, however, he still craved excitement, he would be allowed to put out some more wire in front of the parapet—always a delicate operation where the lines are close. Many were satisfied by this means.

The third degree was always administered by Captain H— himself. It was in the form of a little sortie from the trench to a stumpy willow in "No-Man's-Land," a willow





THE CACTUS TREES.

## MYTHS, FAIRIES, ETC.

that bore a striking resemblance to some giant cacti and was called by us the "Cactus Treen."

From this point it was possible to bomb the German trench, and a little excursion of this sort generally satiated the visitor's curiosity. Incidentally, it kept the Hun from coming out and bombing us. He did, however, treat us liberally to rifle grenades, and our casualties from these beastly contrivances were large.

On one morning we were most unfortunate, a grenade killing our bombing sergeant and two men, and we started to retaliate with every variety of grenade we had. At this moment the trench mortar officer came up the trench and volunteered to assist us. He had a new gun throwing thirty-pound bombs and was keen on displaying his skill; what was more important, he had twenty bombs available, and he started to fire these off with an alacrity that, under the circumstances, was most pleasing.

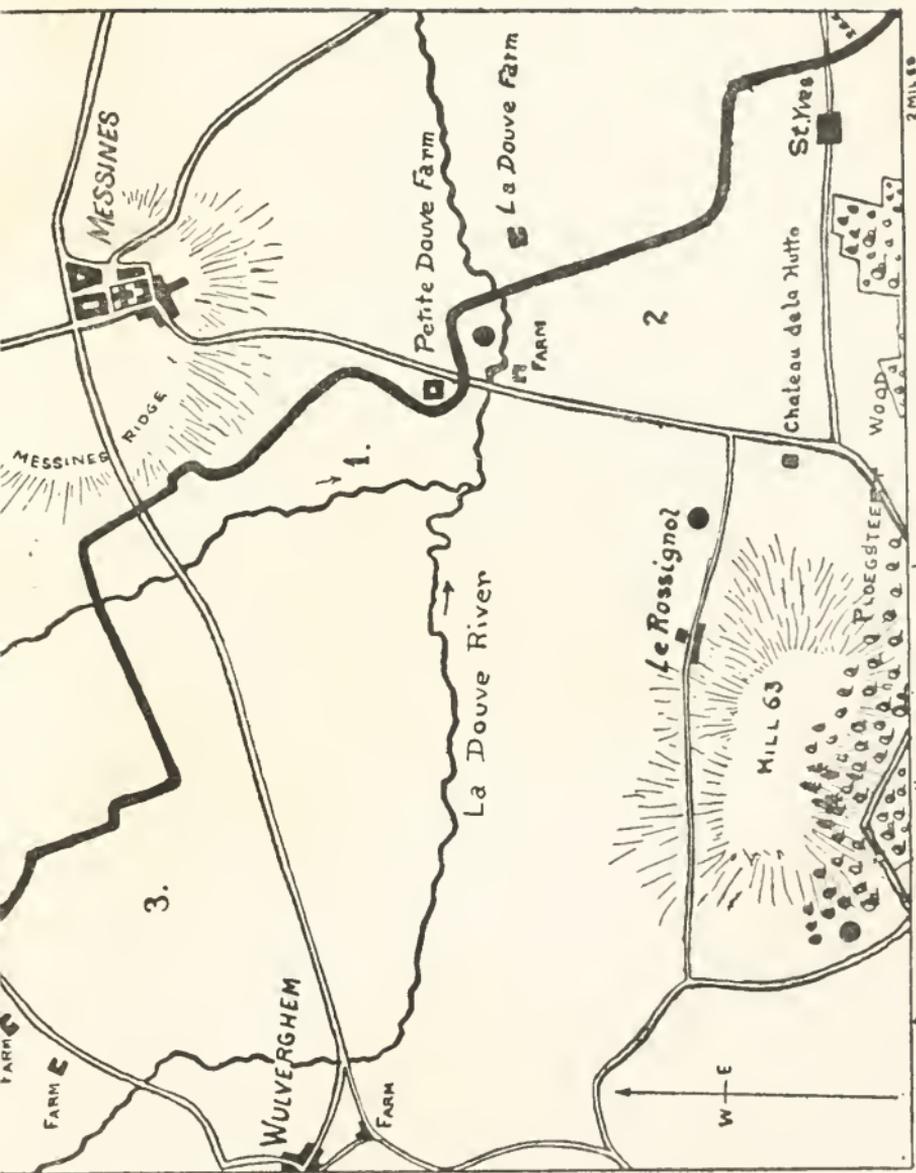
But we had reckoned without our host. Before half a dozen rounds had been fired an eight-inch gun back of Messines Hill started searching for the trench mortar man and his gun, and twenty-five high explosive shells

## FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE TO THE YSER

plunged around us and shook our trench out of existence. It was very fascinating to watch these shells coming. From the point, high in the air, when they started to drop on their target they could be clearly seen, first as a black ball, then gradually lengthening out till they plunged into the ground and flung up dense fountains of earth and fragments.

The nearest burst was within ten feet of the trench mortar position, and the officer withdrew his party, a sadder and a wiser man.

From the rifle grenades, too, we lost both of our mining officers, one, Lieutenant Alfred Evans, dying of wounds, the other being very severely wounded. So two merry souls who had shared the vicissitudes of our messing passed from our ken, and we could only wait our own fate and say, like the French, " C'est la guerre ! "



APPROXIMATE GERMAN LINE IN FRONT OF MESSINES DURING WINTER OF 1915—1916.  
 (Successive positions held by 1st Brigade shown 1, 2, 3.)

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE WINTER MONTHS

NOVEMBER brought with it a week of steady rain, and we knew the winter months were at hand. In less than two weeks our trenches, once the pride of the division, were a series of collapsed heaps where the sandbag walls had been undermined by the seepage of water.

But we suffered nothing like the discomforts endured by the British troops during the previous winter. Rubber boots reaching to the thigh were issued, sparingly at first, but gradually until every man had a pair, and whale oil and spare socks were available in large quantities to aid in the fight against trench-foot. Nothing, however, could prevent the mud, which lay a foot deep along the gangways of the trench. Pumps were issued, but the mud was too thick to pump; our only hope lay in drainage, and by the time proper drains were constructed the mud was too thick to run, even though we were on a hill top.



AFTER A FEW SHELLS AND A WEEK'S RAIN.



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So we pumped and drained and built new sandbag walls all winter, and as fast as one portion of our line was renewed another portion would collapse, or, more disheartening still, be shelled to bits by the big "minenwerfer."

This was a German gun brought up to this front to counteract our trench mortar. Throwing a shell about six inches in diameter of high explosive, it could in three bursts do more damage than a whole company could repair in a night. And regularly twice a week three shells were dropped along Delta Road, a communication trench forming the third side of the little salient.

The effect of the "minenwerfer" was very local, however, owing to the thinness of the shell wall, but such men as it killed were not a pretty sight. Fortunately, too, the shells could be seen both by day and night, and rose to such a height before dropping that men could scamper for shelter from the threatened spot. But no dug-out could withstand its explosion, and a series of craters, eight or ten feet in depth and twelve feet in diameter, marked the "minenwerfer's" work.

Every battery that covered our area had, by the time winter was over, reported they

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had silenced "Minnie," but when we left that area months later she was still doing business at the old stand.

To relieve the monotony of this sort of thing the Canadian Corps organised a series of night raids on the German trenches.

The first, and most brilliant, of these was conducted by the 5th and 7th Battalions of the 2nd Brigade on a barricade or forward trench that had been constructed by the enemy near our old position opposite the Petite Douve Farm.

This raid was made on a villainous night blacker than Egypt during the plagues and raining as only Flanders can.

With faces blackened with charcoal, the raiding parties crept out to the enemy wire and cut it strand by strand, a process lasting several hours. During this time the cooks of one of the battalions carried out pannikins of hot tea to the men who were lying in the mud hacking at the wire.

Finally the path was reported clear except at one point where a deep ditch full of water could not be crossed, and at the appointed moment the raiding parties swooped in on the enemy trench.

Secure, as they thought, on such a vile

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night, the enemy were completely surprised, but put up a stubborn resistance. An officer and about thirty men were secured as prisoners, and where resistance was more determined the enemy was driven from his trench with bombs. Then on a given signal the raiders returned to their own trenches, bringing helmets, saw-tooth bayonets, and Mauser rifles as souvenirs of their midnight call.

By this time the alarm had spread through the German lines, and his artillery, in response to red signals shot up by men very lately deceased, began to pound their own trench, thus catching their own bombing parties, who, now the trench was only occupied by dead and wounded, had regained the barricade.

But we had another surprise awaiting them. A field-gun had been man-handled up to our front line and at point-blank range proceeded to blow the barricade to bits. This was done and the gun successfully withdrawn by a car from a motor-machine-gun battery, in spite of the fact that the first car sent for this purpose had to be hauled from the ditch into which it had skidded.

So thorough had been the preparations, and

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so well organised the raid, that an account of it was published in the orders of the French Army as an example of efficient preparation.

The prisoners taken in the Petite Douve affair had boasted of the preparations they were making for a gas attack on a scale hitherto unknown, and on the Sunday before Christmas the enemy made another attempt to gain the Ypres salient by this means.

Early in the morning of the 20th the smell of gas was evident even down as far as our position a few miles south of the salient, and our guns began a desultory bombardment of the enemy lines. Thinking we were as deficient in artillery as in the previous April, the enemy infantry advanced in mass formation about 9 o'clock. Then our artillery did open fire. About noon another attack was made, and also failed without a yard of our line being lost.

There were no further attempts !

On Christmas Eve we were relieved by the Toronto Battalion and marched out to rest billets in divisional reserve.

It was a weird march out. Not a rifle was fired nor a single flare shot up from either trench as the two battalions interchanged.

We wondered if on the morrow there would

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be the handshaking and hymn-singing that had characterised the first Christmas of the war; a routine order had been published forbidding such demonstrations of good feeling, but it was hardly necessary—flame projectors and asphyxiating gas had attended to that!

Everything was very peaceful in the little hamlet when we arrived, however. It was a clear, starlit night, a little snow in the fields, and the dark silhouettes of the houses and church loomed up against the clear sky. The little church was in darkness—no midnight mass was being sung this year—and we slipped into our various billets in silence, very tired and not a little homesick.

Christmas Day the men were marched into Bailleul, where a big dinner was given them by the officers of the battalion. In the evening another dinner was held for the officers themselves. There were the usual toasts and speeches, and before the party broke up Captain George T. Richardson asked for a few minutes' silent prayer for those who would not be present at our next dinner. It was a wonderful tribute to his sincerity that this was granted, for the evening was well advanced, and soldiers, as

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a rule, dislike having their religion tampered with by anyone but chaplains and other authorised personages.

Poor George ! he was the first of us to go but a few weeks later !

We relieved the Toronto Battalion on the 29th, giving them a chance to celebrate the New Year in a similar fashion.

Then the second week in February we attempted a raid similar to those made on our right and left by other battalions. The most obvious point was selected for the attack, and, by an unfortunate chance, a night when the moon was nearly full.

As a result we were unable to get the wire cut, and the proposed raid was cancelled, the enemy having men dug in amongst their wire watching it.

For some reason or other Captain Richardson, who was in charge of the affair, again went over the parapet, possibly to see that all were safely in, and was discovered a little later fatally wounded in amongst our own wire. He passed away a few hours later in the little dressing station at the Support Farm.

So died a man who never gave a command he would not himself have executed willingly,

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and whose character and ideals were such that all who knew him envied him.

And on his grave his brother officers placed a wreath with these simple words: "He played the Game."

## EPILOGUE

OUR later experiences are too recent for publication to-day; here, then, this brief story of the Canadians must make an end.





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