

ENGLAND 1914

My first contact with the Great War of 1914-1918 came before England actually entered the War. I was friendly with a young Dutchman called Daamen and when towards the end of July Holland mobilised her Army as a precautionary measure, he, as a reservist, was recalled to his country. I remember going to see him off at Liverpool Street Station and the extraordinary air of tension which prevailed. Hundreds of European reservists were pouring back to the Continent and I remember wondering at the time what lay ahead of us. Right up to the end one seemed to imagine that War was impossible. Then came the violation of the neutrality of Belgium.

To the man in the street, at any rate in middle class suburbia, it seemed as though, if Sir Edward Grey kept us out of the War, we could never hold up our heads again and the shock of finding one's country at War was in my recollection, at any rate, tempered by a curious feeling of relief.

Actually on the 4th August we were preparing to go away for our Summer holiday at Cromer. My mother, ordinarily ultra cautious and pessimistic very surprisingly went forward with our arrangements. When we arrived at Cromer the long approach road to the station was thronged with holiday makers pouring away from the East Coast in alarm.

The same evening the 12th Infantry Brigade marched into Cromer. There is little doubt that a raid on the East Coast was well within the bounds of possibility.

Then in the papers one read of the rush to join the colours. In those early days Kitchener's Army was not formed and the Territorial Battalions quickly filled their ranks.

My own re-action was a curious one. I had always been a delicate boy with a physical dread of suffering and death, but oddly enough the Officers' Training Corps at Dulwich had been a fascinating hobby with me, although it was the technique of signalling and, I suppose a fairly boyish love of uniform and ceremonial, that had attracted me, and not the love of fighting. The idea of physical conflict was then, and remained throughout the War, my chief nightmare, so I think I can truthfully say my predominating feeling was that I should never be able to hold my head up in decent society unless I had tried to join up, and thus actuated, I was in a fever to get away and join up.

My Mother with rare common sense foretold the length of the War and begged me to finish out my holiday and gain strength for what lay ahead. I did so and on my return to Town immediately saw the partner of the firm of Chartered Accountants to whom I was articled and told him that I was going to join up.

I spent several heartbreaking days hanging round Recruiting Offices of the London Scottish, Civil Service Rifles and Artists Rifles who had all waiting lists of many hundreds. Then unexpectedly, my half-Uncle, Sir Ernest Clarke got wind of a Territorial Battalion that was forming a second line for Home Defence. As I was a

holder of what was known as Certificate "A" in the Officers Training corps my application for a commission in this Battalion was favourably received and by October 1914 I was duly appointed as a Second Lieutenant in this Battalion and to my great joy was given the job of Signalling Officer.

October and November were spent, men and officers living at home, training in Regents Park, under conditions of incredible difficulty. Uniforms at the time were non-existent. They made a gradual appearance and proved afterwards to be shoddy that had been rejected by wiser formations. Arms and equipment, however, had all been taken Overseas to Malta by the 1st Battalion and there was certainly nothing available for us. I remember well my Mother and Aunts stitching me Morse signalling flags. Message pads etc., came out of my own pocket and an electric Morse signalling lamp was improvised for me by a friendly electrical Engineer (of German-Swiss extraction).

In November it was decided to billet us in three empty houses at Beckenham, Kelsey Manor (long since pulled down); Oakwood House, now a private hotel, and a house in the main road (with a name I cannot recall) but now used as the Headquarters of the British Legion.

We had not been here long before we again moved to billets at Maidstone, the intention being that we should dig trenches for the defence of outer London.

We were the first troops to be billeted in Maidstone and I remember well the kindly reception afforded us by all. My men were billeted in the Knighttrider Street area and I, with one other officer upon two old ladies - the Misses Wigan at Ragstone House, College Road, Maidstone. They were ladies of the old school whose prim regime did not appeal to my companion Wrinch, who quickly cleared out to the Star Hotel. It suited me, however, very well and certainly later I was grateful of their kindness for they enabled my Mother to visit me.

The day after our arrival in Maidstone it was arranged for us to proceed by train in the early morning to the scene of our digging, but while actually waiting to entrain the order was countermanded and we were ordered back to billets to draw equipment and proceed Overseas.

I ought to have stated that our original enlistment for Home Service had long ago been questioned and we had been invited to volunteer for Overseas. The Adjutant, who shall be nameless, I remember well, was careful to point out to the Junior Officers that it was their duty to volunteer, which we did, but he himself, however, took good care to stay behind.

The ensuing week was a scene of great activity in the Quarter Master's Stores; boots and equipment poured in from Ordnance and we were fitted out. We were unarmed, the intention being that we should take over the rifles of our First Line Battalion whom we now were told we should relieve in Malta.

The more corporate life of billets had by now enabled me to form some opinion of the battalion of which I found myself a member.

They were naturally not in a full perspective and it is better to give the opinion of twenty years after than those which I formed at that day.

The men were magnificent, the cream of the 1914 voluntary recruiting. The Junior Officers were an average crowd of public school boys badly in need of a strong hand and expert guidance. The Senior Officers, with two exceptions, were deplorably inefficient and unsuitable.

Our Colonel was a school master who had never commanded anything bigger than some North country Grammar School contingent of the Officers Training Corps.

The Senior Major had been left behind by the First Battalion. The Adjutant, as I have already said, had no intention of proceeding Overseas.

Of the remaining two Company Commanders, one knew his job, gained distinction in the War and subsequently commanded the Battalion and the other was at least a man. The other two were dug-out Volunteers - and the best that can be said to their credit is perhaps that although married men they remained "Volunteers" and proceeded overseas instead of seeking shelter in some embusque job.

Forty eight hours leave of absence prior to proceeding on Foreign Service was granted but it was necessary first to undergo a medical examination for fitness to proceed overseas. This was hardly of a searching nature. It was conducted if I remember rightly in the bar of the Royal Star Hotel, Maidstone. It was a cold evening and I had on my thick military overcoat when I reported to the old Doctor. He looked at me and said "So you want to proceed on Foreign Service." I said "Yes, Sir", whereupon he solemnly laid his head affectionately on my bosom, listened through about five layers of winter clothing and said "Your heart's in the right place, you will do", and I was thus enabled to catch a train which was due to start in a very few minutes. I never had another medical examination until after my first taste of hospital life.

So, a few days before Christmas with an elderly subaltern, Howard, a member of some Overseas Civil Service promoted to Adjutant we entrained for Southampton and embarked at dead of night on the British India Liner "Neuralia".

Once before when a very little boy I had seen a troopship leave for South Africa and I always remembered the cheering, the band playing and the usual excitement of the scene. Anything more depressing than our departure it would be hard to imagine; except perhaps long years afterwards the final prosaic and uninspiring demobilisation.

The following morning was a typical cold Winter day and our escorting cruiser lay off our beam. I heard afterwards that certain of the ladies of the Battalion (my Mother included) were firmly of opinion that we should be torpedoed. The spy scare was at its height and our worthy ex-Adjutant had imported an unpleasant Jewish friend into the Star Hotel, Maidstone with a most appalling German name and had anything happened to us, he would rightly or wrongly have been denounced to the Authorities.

Actually nothing happened and very soon the majority of the ships Company would have welcomed a torpedo as an end to their sufferings. The boat was packed out with troops in very impromptu accommodation and most of them were appallingly ill on a very rough trip through the Bay.

I am afraid I formed an opinion, since derided by other travellers, that there were valuable anti-sickness properties in champagne, which was good and cheap and by the time Christmas night came, I and most of my fellow subalterns were pretty merry. We took years off the life of the boat with one or two rather rough parlour games but it was all decent horseplay and nobody really disgraced themselves.

My next most vivid recollection which will stay with me until I die is seeing Gibraltar by sunrise, glowing pink in the early morning light; a very beautiful sight and one which really made me feel that I was on my travels. Inside the Harbour I saw "Carmania" converted into an Armed Merchant Cruiser and I believe I am right in saying that she was in to make good damage after a scrap with a German Armed Merchant-man S.S. "Cap Trafalgar".

We did not stay at Gibraltar but pushed straight on through pleasant seas and under sunny skies to Malta where we arrived at Valetta Harbour on January 1st 1915.

MALTA EARLY 1915

Malta was our training ground and for the first time since formation we found ourselves free from distractions of home life or family life - face to face with the task of preparing for War.

We disembarked from our transport on 2nd January and started the long dusty march to Imtarfa Barracks. These Barracks are beautifully situated on high ground about 7 miles inland and we were always considered to be occupying some of the finest barracks in the Colonies. Certainly the Officers' Mess was a beautiful building. On the way up we passed our First Line Battalion who were marching down to embark for France and we were not to meet what was left of them until over a year later.

Once settled into Barracks, programmes of training were drawn up. The difficulties were prodigious as our Senior Officers, as I have said before, were, with one or two exceptions entirely useless. As to the Junior Officers, some of us knew the rudiments of soldiering from our Officers' Training Corps days, but little more. As is so often the case, the Regular Non-Commissioned Officer proved his worth. Sergeant Prescott of the Royal Marines and Sergeant Hill of the Royal Artillery who were attached to us as Instructors, achieved the miracle of turning raw material into something which ultimately brought credit to the Regiment. All honour to them both, for between January and the end of March these two Non-Commissioned Officers put the entire Battalion through musketry and bayonet fighting courses, to say nothing of improving the ordinary drill standard. The pressure was terrific. Subaltern Officers were often only half a day ahead of their platoon. The knowledge we acquired in intensive classes for subalterns before breakfast had to be passed on to the men before the same evening. The men sucked up the knowledge like thirsty ground sucks up

rain. The canteen was practically deserted in the evening, every barrack room being filled with men practising aiming drill, rapid loading with dummies and the other preliminary exercises before going down to the ranges. When we moved to the ranges the pressure was unabated. When one was not at the firing point one was marking at the butts.

As to my own signalling section, I had a free hand. The Brigade Signalling Officer approved my training scheme and the section grew steadily more proficient in spite of having to shoot their musketry courses in addition.

Social life, of course, had practically come to a standstill in the Island compared to pre-war days. One or two wives and Mothers of the Battalion came out and there was a certain amount of relaxation to be got in riding parties, picnics and the Opera, but generally speaking we were too busy for any extensive scheme of entertainment. One of the happiest evenings I recall in the Island, was when I first met Malcolm's Godfather, Michael Murray, who was then a Sub-Lieutenant on the "Indefatigable". Four Officers came up to guest night in the mess from this ship and then we afterwards were entertained aboard. Of those we met, I believe Michael Murray is the only one still alive, as this ship was sunk at Jutland with all hands. I also through going to the Opera with Michael saw a magnificent performance of "Samson & Delilah", but my diary which I kept while in Malta is really in the main a record of work and home-sickness.

MALTA - PORT SUDAN

On 5th April my own Company moved down for detachment duty and field exercises at Ghain Tuffieha and two days later we were aroused in the middle of the night with instructions to embark on a transport within 12 hours for an unknown destination. We naturally assumed we were bound for the Dardanelles, a campaign which was just opening up and I remember vividly the appalling shock of being woken up in the middle of the night, when courage is not at its highest, with this news.

Like a good many youngsters of my acquaintance my abiding fear was that I should show fear when I got on active service, now it seemed as if the test was drawing near, and it was sometime before I could pull myself together and get on with the very urgent job of getting back to railhead for Valetta, which is about 8 miles distant. However, there is nothing like hard work once one gets started, and as I was left with a small rear guard to clean up the camp while the rest of the Company proceeded by an ordinary route march, I had no more time for forebodings.

It was a grilling hot day and what with transport difficulties and the like I only just got my men back by forced march to railhead in time to get down to the Docks by the specified time. I remember very vividly the kindness and friendliness of a few Officers of the Malta Militia who gave me what help they could and I also remember that I was young enough to imagine that because I was told to be at a certain place at a certain time there was any real need for hurry! The ship did not leave until the following morning. She proved to be the "Suevic", an old steamer in the Cape Service which some years before had been wrecked on the Cornish Coast. Her wrecked fore-castle was cut away and the undamaged after part towed to Southampton and I

remembered having seen the after end waiting in Southampton Dock for the new fore part to be towed round from Belfast and riveted on. As a result of this piece of ship surgery she had a most extraordinary “wriggle” in a sea way, or so it seemed to me, and in addition was filthily dirty. She had been carrying Serbian refugees for a voyage or two and then had brought over a crowd of Australian Cavalry. These gentlemen esteemed themselves such fighters before the Lord that they quite despised the humble job of keeping stables and the ship generally clean, with a result that she smelt like a farm midden under the hot Mediterranean sun. The ship’s officers, a surly crowd, spotting a willing crowd aboard graciously permitted us to pump half the Mediterranean over her decks and the scuppers soon began to stream refuse as we toiled away to get some order out of chaos - the crew loafing round and watching us do their work.

We then learned we were bound for Port Sudan to relieve the 7th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment. This was indeed a stroke of luck.

At Alexandria I slipped ashore and saw the agents of the Union Castle Line and got them to telegraph Mr. Hunt, the then manager, that they had seen me, as I knew this would get through the censor.

The voyage through the Suez Canal was unique and fascinating, as the banks were lined with Indian Troops which, of course, I saw for the first time. The voyage down the Red Sea was uneventful and we finally (17th April) arrived at Port Sudan. Here a young regular subaltern, rejoicing in his new found authority as Military Landing Officer boarded the ship in company with the Advance Guard of the Manchester Regiment and I well remember him instructing them to refuse to take the ship over as she was dirty. He met his match in one of the Junior Company Commanders, an excellent fellow, called Christmas (later unfortunately killed) who asked to be supplied with a few cart loads of manure in order that he might reinstate the ship to the condition in which we took her over!! After that there was a little less said on the subject of cleanliness and we disembarked without further ado, bivouacking on the sand just outside the Harbour Buildings.

One evening I remember we bathed in the Red Sea. It was a queer experience for we had to station officers on two breakwaters with whistles to prevent any man swimming out of the general body of troops who had been instructed to enter the water as noisily as possible to scare away sharks. This was no idle precaution as some fishermen actually got a shark and towed it home through us while we were bathing. We were all pretty nervy and as one swimmer jostled another in the water it was very amusing to see the other fellow jump for his life and start for the shore. It was not so amusing to be jostled oneself!

SINKAT

On 21st April we entrained three companies for Khartum and one company, "B" Company (my own) for Sinkat, a hill station in the Red Sea hills just above Port Sudan where we were intended to constitute a garrison for Port Sudan should the Turks attack across the Red Sea.

I was very disheartened at being sent to Sinkat as it meant severance from my beloved signalling section and service under lonely desolate conditions under a Company Commander who disliked me as much as I disliked him. The heat was tremendous. We could not have arrived at the Sudan at a worse time for raw troops. It was actually the beginning of the hot weather. In spite of electric fans, sun shutters and ice we gasped with the heat in the train which crawled up the steep slopes towards Sinkat. Here in the late afternoon we arrived and detrained on a sandy siding. All round rose up barren hills, burning in the sunlight. The camp of big double Egyptian tents was in a sandy plateau within this ring of hills, the only vegetation being camel thorn.

We watched the train steam away to Khartum and then turned to make the best of our new surroundings.

Sinkat was one of my definite failures during the War as I was put on a job of which I knew absolutely nothing and the worry and responsibility weighed so heavily on me that I made a very poor showing. I was made responsible for the feeding arrangements of the camp and as we drew our rations part in kind and part by local purchase I had a good deal to plan out and unfortunately made a thorough mess of it. I was so obsessed with the idea of running into debt that I issued much less than I could have safely done, with the result that I found afterwards my successor had quite a nice little balance of money to play with. The men ultimately reaped some benefit as the money was issued for extra luxuries and the expenses of a concert party, but it did not make me very popular at the time.

The routine of the camp was dull and dreary in the extreme and my pleasantest recollection is a flying week-end visit to a kindly Eastern Telegraph Official, one Taylor at Suakin whom I met in rather humorous circumstances.

I had gone down to Fort Sudan to draw about £200 of pay, the first time I had ever handled so much money in my life and coming back I was very scared of being robbed in the train. A gentleman got into my compartment with rather a heavy stubble which did not improve his looks and seemed to me very eager to get into conversation. I am afraid I was young enough to slide my revolver across ostentatiously into view. That evening I met him as the honoured guest of the District Commissioner and got beautifully roasted for my pains. However, after being thoroughly teased, this offer of hospitality was extended. It was a fascinating experience for he took me across one evening to the Mudirieh, a Governor's House, where I sat on the very verandah where Harry Feversham makes Willoughby take back one of the white feathers in Mason's book "The Four Feathers". Indeed I was now right in the land of that book - even Sinkat is mentioned therein.

Another pleasant little memory is that of some Indian Jugglers who performed in the dry river bed for our benefit and sundry evening rides with Storrer the District Engineer of the Railway on his inspection Trolley, where I regret to state we traded British Government Ammunition for Sudan Government Railway Petrol (a most improper bargain on both sides).

All this time I was begging to be allowed to join my signallers again in Khartum and to my relief after about four weeks I was ordered to proceed there to draw up a signalling scheme for the defence of Khartum in the event of a rising.

KHARTUM

Once back on my job again I was much happier and life in Khartum was very pleasant.

I had realised in Sinkat that we were being watched for efficiency, prestige and conduct by the Arabs. At Khartum the silent criticism was infinitely keener and more merciless. The Egyptian Troops are some of the smartest in the world, the Sudanese Troops the smartest and bravest and it was a matter of paramount importance that we should not let down the prestige of the British Army.

This made the tragedy of our Senior Officers the greater, but the Junior Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and men mercifully pulled the situation through.

With such coaching as was available from the few regulars left in Khartum our Battalion had to supply men to form a Camel Corps, a Gunboat Crew and a Gun Team in the Fort, in addition to supplying odd officers for postal censorship and other duties.

The great responsibility, however, was the provision of the Palace Guard for the Sirdar and here our old drum major (an ex Guardee) took charge. From absolutely raw material he produced one of the smartest drum and fife bands I have ever seen and he received the personal congratulations of the Sirdar; - Sir Reginald Wingate, who said the Guard had never been so well mounted since the Guards were in Khartum.

The civilians were just kindness itself to us all, extending private hospitality and making us all members of the Sudan Club - and the months slipped by very quickly in spite of the intense heat.

At one time it looked as though we were to become a drafting unit for our first line, as a draft was actually warned to France, but this was cancelled and in August we heard that we were being relieved by a Garrison Battalion of the Royal Warwick Regiment to proceed to a destination unknown.

KHARTUM – MUDROS

The relief was planned in two halves, partly, I imagine owing to the arrangements of railway transport, and partly owing to the inadvisability of catching the white garrison unprepared and in the confusion of a 100% relief.

The Advance Guard of the Royal Warwick duly arrived on September 7th and we realised that it was actually possible to find a queerer lot of amateur soldiers than we were. The Officers were a mixed batch, comprising a middle aged sportsman, Sammy Woods the Gloucester Cricketer, young badly wounded officers and very

“temporary gentlemen”. The men were the sweepings of everything, including the worst type of old soldier. For instance they relieved our Quarter Guard and five minutes afterwards the entire guard forsook the guard house and adjourned to the canteen. On the outgoing guard expressing mild surprise, they only replied “Lord love you, it was so hot, we had to have a breather”. Long weeks afterwards we heard more and more hilarious tales of them from the amazed inhabitants of Khartum. The “temporary gentlemen” would insist on riding to the Sudan Club on camels, a social enormity which can only be compared to riding to a London Club in a top hat and morning coat on a bicycle. By an odd coincidence one of the officers whom actually I missed in the confusion of the change over was one Wigan, a badly wounded regular officer and a nephew of the old ladies of Maidstone. Life in the war, however, was full of the oddest coincidences of this kind.

Our journey to the coast was comparatively short, but full of incident. We ran into a blinding thunderstorm and haboob (sand storm) in the middle of which a railway truck blown out of a siding by the wind collided with us head on.

At Atbara we ran into floods. Further on we slew a donkey and finally at Mousmar the engine broke down completely - her cylinders choked with sand.

However, we finally reached Port Sudan - picking up "B" Company at Sinkat en route. Here we found our transport, the "Lake Michigan" waiting to take us to Alexandria.

We had not done so badly after all. Sir Reginald Wingate, fine soldier and administrator that he was, paid a special visit to Port Sudan to wish us well, nor do I think that the nice things he said about us were mere formal eye wash, because afterwards we had the nicest letters from people in the Sudan asking for news of us and saying we were missed. What was perhaps even more heartening was that the native Head Man of Sinkat, before "B" Company left, paid a special farewell visit with the District Commissioner and said how much the village appreciated the way the men had behaved and the respect they had paid to the privacy and sanctity of their womenfolk. Now the Hadendowa Arab is perhaps one of our most independent native subjects and although he would have quickly avenged any behaviour to the contrary - probably with a knife, it was an extraordinarily cheering tribute, but as I have said and want to convey throughout these memoirs, our men were superlative.

By this time the buzz was that we were to be garrison troops in Cairo and that the other three battalions of our brigade which we had left in Malta were to join us. We all felt very cheery as we all wanted a sight of Egypt, especially Cairo, so it was a very merry party going up the Red Sea, with a nice head wind to keep one cool aboard the “Lake Michigan”. She was old and none too luxuriously fitted but the Ship’s Company did all they could to make us happy and we had a very pleasant little voyage. I shall always remember the beautiful colour effect of the red mountains against the indigo sea and the cloudless blue sky overhead. I also remember our arrival at Suez very vividly, even the tune our band was playing as we steamed slowly into the harbour. However, our dreams of garrison life in Cairo were soon rudely shattered. A steam launch fussed alongside and a staff officer came aboard to inform us that we were to entrain at once for Alexandria, and thence proceed to the Peninsula. As the immortal Gilbert said “Although the compliment implied (of being

considered real soldiers) inflated us with legitimate pride, it nevertheless can't be denied it had its inconvenient side."

We were all exhausted with a tropical Summer (we had left five men behind us in Khartum Cemetery, dead of heat stroke), and were in very poor physical condition, (I weighed under 10 stone). Our old shoddy khaki uniforms with which we hastily replaced our drill kit was dropping to pieces on the men, while our rifles which had no doubt done excellent service in the Boer War were on their last legs. Our machine guns also were fit only for a museum.

We had a desperate time sorting surplus kit and hastily piling it into Thos. Cook & Son at Alexandria. I was very concerned to let my parents know something of my movements. I was still very young and held the oddest idea that the War Office would know our movements as well as anybody else. As, therefore, the only English regular soldier in our family had dug himself carefully in to a staff job in Whitehall (a German regular soldier in the family incidentally had found a job in the German War Office), I telegraphed him "Please give parents permissible information regarding movements. Graham". He was delighted to oblige and gave Mother positive assurance that we had gone to Cairo. Thus Mother was very happy and contented in mind until she got her first letter from her precious son marked "On Active Service." Later, of course, in the War I knew better and cherish a memory of visiting my cousin at the War Office to find a querulous old staff officer wandering about his room looking for an entire ambulance unit (which he had mislaid) much as the average man looks for a lost piece of blotting paper.

This time our transport was a Cunarder, the "Ausonia" - a comfortable ship with a nice personnel - but we had a nervy voyage, doubling and twisting on our tracks as submarines were about. We went through the solemn farce of forming a submarine guard with our antiquated old machine guns and rifles. We might as well have had pea shooters for all the good they would have done had we met a submarine. The ship itself was quite unarmed.

On board we met the Newfoundland Regiment, our first contact with overseas troops. They were grand fellows and Kitchener had seen to it that they were fitted out in style. We saw articles of kit and equipment we never dreamt of and realised how out of it we had been. In spite of the nervous strain of the voyage one could only admire the lovely scenery. A more glorious cruising ground in peace time than the Aegean I cannot imagine. One charming looking island after another, all dotted with quaint little windmills and inviting little harbours.

We arrived finally without incident at Mudros (September 18th) where we quickly got the measure of one of the greatest scandals of the War - Ian Hamilton's headquarters ship, the "Arragon". Here in a luxurious liner staff officers lived on the fat of the land, with nurses dying ashore in the hospital camps of dysentery and the like in the acutest discomfort and misery. Their comfort spread the grossest sloth and inefficiency imaginable. We lay there for days unheeded and unwanted. Periodically some gilded wastrel would come aboard. I heard two such talking: - one said to the other "What do I do old chap with these bally cigarettes Lady Hamilton says she is sending out?" The other replied, "Oh! Send them to me old boy addressed O. I/C Gifts". Imagine it - in the middle of a war - a young man wasting his time as Officer

in Charge of Gifts. Later in the War when I was with the French I found they were very bitter against the British Army for its number of embusque young men.

Finally we were informed that we were to join the famous 29th Division and replace a pioneer territorial battalion attached to the 86th Brigade which had been almost completely wiped out.

SUVLA BAY

Now we were very near our first taste of war. The average life of a subaltern was reckoned on the Peninsula at about 7 days. What lay ahead of us? We embarked upon the old Egyptian Khedivial Line Steamer "Abassieh" in a very excited frame of mind. It took us all different ways. Some of us were very quiet, others ultra boisterous. At heart I believe everybody had the same pre-occupation - would they show the white feather when it really came to it? I personally was not betting heavily on my own chances of keeping my end up.

We arrived at dead of night off the dreaded Peninsula. What seemed more ominous to us than the din and racket we had been expecting was the deadly menacing silence. We disembarked on to big lighters fitted with an engine and chugged our slow way to the beach. One of these lighters is still to be seen, as I write (1935), in the Medway used as a water lighter or something in connection with the Dockyard. Guides met us and led us a little way inland where in a small shallow nullah we were invited to make ourselves comfortable for the night. We were far too green to worry about making proper bivouacs but just laid down and slept in the sandy grass by the side of the track.

As a result I woke up the next morning to find my belt with all my money and two watches thieved during the night. As I had lost my field glasses in the confusion of disembarkation I felt I had made a bad start. I was able later, however, to replace all three - the money through the field cashier, a watch from a canteen which sprung up on the beach, and the field glasses through the Ordnance Officer. I am delighted to record that the voucher I signed authorising him to charge my account at Cox's with the cost of the field glasses never reached England, so that His Gracious majesty King George and my fellow income tax payers have, therefore, presented me with the glasses, which I have to this day. Nor do I intend to send any conscience money to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in this connection!

The next day dawned hot, sunny and still mysteriously quiet. Regular officers came, looked at us and our Commanding Officer, christened us "Bendall's Boy Scouts" and went away to make plans for the only job we were much good at - digging and general fatigues. These soon started and we got our first taste of the fact that 90% of warfare is sheer gruelling navvying.

It was decided, however, as a precaution that we should all do a bit of duty in the Front Line, one Company at a time. I remember my Company went into the line with the regular Munster Fusiliers. They were good to us, taught us the rudiments of our trade and took good care to steal our entire rum ration.

During my first night as Officer on duty General de Lisle came up and asked me who I was. I told him I was an officer of the Third Londons and he promptly asked me how many rounds of ammunition per man we had. I told him. Whereupon he snapped out "Don't you know where the reserve is" ? I said – "Yes, I did and it was of no interest to me or my men" (or words to that effect) "because it was Mark VII for the modern short rifle, whereas we wanted Mark VI for our old long-barrelled type." He made no comment but snorted and disappeared into the darkness; however, within 24 hours our interesting collection of Boer War relics were dumped on the beach and we took over modern rifles – "owners" as the advertisements any, "having no further use for same".

We were not many days in the Peninsula before we discovered what our true enemy was. It was not Johnny Turk. All he had to do was to sit tight, for the whole campaign had failed. For the matter of that unless a miracle happened (as it did) we were all dead men. You children, for whom I am writing these notes, have been brought up in the Medway Valley. I want you to imagine the Medway, as the shore of the sea. Now imagine Johnny Turk snugly sitting on Blue Bell Hill and so on. Cram a whole army corps into the land between the North Downs and the Medway at Aylesford and you have some idea of how much chance we had of doing anything except what Johnny Turk would let us. No, we had to fight disease and it soon started to take a heavy toll. Dysentery, paratyphoid and jaundice all raged in the Battalion.

The flies were the trouble. I have never seen anything so filthy before or since. To eat bread and jam it was necessary to take a deep breath and start to blow the bread, spread one's butter and jam hastily from covered tins, and have it in one's mouth before one's breath gave out.

A man asleep in the day time would have a little black cluster of flies at each eye, nostril and corner of the mouth. Small wonder that we were ravaged with sickness. I went down with paratyphoid and jaundice after about a month or five weeks. Here again my memories are of a musical nature. A Medical Orderly with a religious and musical turn of mind was deputed to help me to Field Hospital. I was able to take about one short step per second. Each step of mine meant one note of "Rock of Ages" for him. Try it for yourselves. It is not exactly a cheering Military March. I lay about a fortnight in a tent, as yellow as a guinea and as weak as a rat, but the medical officers, notably a cheery old Midlander called Stott, were kindness itself and by dint of decent feeding, cooking and medicine, they patched me up and I went back to my Battalion, who by now I found actually holding the Front Line in what was known as the Block House Sector. It was now getting towards the end of November, still hot and sunny, but a day or two after my return as I was building a new dug-out for myself with my batman, a mere flimsy affair of branches, old great coats and what not, for "R.E." material was practically non-existent in the Line – I saw a big thunder cloud come over the hills. That for me was the beginning of the end of my service in Gallipoli. That night the heavens opened and torrential rain fell amid a blinding thunder storm. Every little trickle from the hills became a torrent which poured down towards us - flooded out John Turk and then piled up against our parapet as a sort of lake. This finally gave under the strain and suddenly flooded our trenches, with the result that an entire Battalion on our right was drowned. We hopped out of the trenches and cowered in the open, wet to the skin, behind the parados. The rain turned to snow and next morning found us in a parlous mess. The Block House from

which the Sector took its name, stood on slightly rising ground and was tenable as a sort of island in the flood. It was decided to withdraw what was left of the Battalion and to hold this as a strong point. A Subaltern called Burge and I and a handful of men were left with such rations as we had in our haversack. I remember I had some cocoa tablets and compressed Bovril, as well as my own iron ration of bully beef and biscuits. We got a dixie full of absolutely green water and made some soup – why we did not all die of dysentery I don't know, but the odd part is that so far as I was concerned the cold cured me of my “tummy” troubles.

[NB: Burge – afterward a Magistrate at Midnapore and brutally murdered by natives in 1933.]

The sight around next day was horrible. In our old Cook House we found five men who had crept in there out of the wind, dead – frozen in their sleep. They looked like peaceful sleeping children. They were not much more, from an age point of view. In another place we found two men, tight in each other's arms. To get their identification papers I remember prising them apart with the helve of a pickaxe. In another place two were dead, one man actually trying to poke a piece of biscuit in the other man's mouth.

From a contemporary diary of one of my men (see appendix) I see we were five days in the Block House, but personally I began to lose count of time - in fact the last day we stayed I definitely became a bit light-headed, for I remember vividly deciding that I was tired of eating with my fingers and wandering all over the place accompanied by a terrified orderly in search of a knife, fork, spoon and plate. I got them, but my orderly only just pulled me to safety just as a sniper got our range. In this wandering I found poor old Howard, our Adjutant, who had died miserably of a bullet in the stomach. We got back to the Block House again where we were visited by General de Lisle. He was a good fellow and promised to relieve us that night, which he did and we crawled back somehow to where our Battalion lay.

A CASUALTY - SUVLA - MALTA – ENGLAND

I was in a bit of a fever by this time and the Doctor pronounced my feet, which had gone numb long since, as frost bitten and ordered my evacuation. After a night tormented with thirst and nightmares they put me on a stretcher and hauled me off to the beach. I was lucky to be carried; some of the frost bite cases did the journey on hands and knees. I was quite light headed when I started for I remember shouting out that I could see a Turk's hand sticking out of a bush. It proved to be an old sock hanging on a branch. I steadied down a bit during the long days wait - jammed in between two desperately wounded men - waiting to see what the evening would bring.

At last the orderlies came in with the news that the hospital lighters were alongside. We were loaded on in rows on the deck. Out we went into the bay towards the pretty twinkling lights of the hospital ship which so often we had enviously looked at from the shore. There she lay, a big green line picked out in electric bulbs and a great Red Cross also done in electric light. It was wonderful to be hauled up in a sling and dropped down through spotless white enamel paint after the filth and smother of the last few weeks. I was as black as a sweep, nothing on but my underclothes and shirt - my tunic was rolled up as a pillow and so I was hastily dumped in an alleyway.

Then one of the orderlies looked at my identity disc and discovered I was supposed to be an officer, so I was lugged off to the main saloon which had been turned into an officers' ward. I found myself then on an old acquaintance, the "Dunluce Castle".

I felt better but was pretty strung up still. I had a feeling at the back of my mind that those five dead men in the cook house were up against me, also I wanted to get some recognition of the wonderful way some of the men and N.C.O.s' had backed me up. So I wrote out some sort of report as best I could and recommended certain men for promotion. The Sergeant worried me a bit as the poor old man had been the completest wash-out, spending his entire time sitting over a brazier moaning. However, I did not like to be uncharitable, so I suggested his promotion along with the rest, although he had been no more good than a sick headache. I then decided if I was to be Court Martialled well so be it, but meantime I wanted some sleep and rest. This was not so easy as my frosted feet were beginning to come to life and were none too good. What brought me most mental relief was on the Sunday after I came aboard when the Padre had Communion Service in the Ward. They had a harmonium and they played the hymn "And now O Father mindful of the love", which I associated with St. Stephen's, Walbrook where Naomi and Malcolm were afterwards christened. We had had wonderful times as a family going to this church and the association was so powerful I remember something seemed to snap inside me and I cried my heart out for I should think a good half hour and then fell fast asleep. I woke up feeling much better: - it is extraordinary how that it is always the association of a tune or a smell which seems to move me most profoundly.

I knew the Purser on the "Dunluce Castle" who fixed me up with a little money and a few simple things. The money was stolen by the hospital orderly on the day we arrived at Malta, but otherwise everyone on the hospital ship was perfectly splendid. I adored the Sister; her name was Attenborough and here again was one of those odd coincidences that I referred to as always cropping up during the War. Her two cousins had travelled out with us to Malta in the "Neuralia" and her home was opposite "Oakwood", Beckenham - our first billet. Later I met another member of the same family in France. As a final coincidence when I was an articled clerk, before the War, I worked on the books of the Attenborough Syndicate at Lloyds.

On arrival at Malta the purser of the "Dunluce Castle" very kindly telegraphed Mr. Hunt as to my whereabouts and I found myself accommodated in the Blue Sisters Hospital at Sliema. This was really a civilian hospital but as Malta was crammed to overflowing with casualties they had evidently commandeered a ward or so for troops.

I had a funny old Irish Nun to look after me; she was a friendly old soul, but it was a dreary sort of ward. No windows to look out of and terrible salmon pink walls with a green serpentine pattern painted on it which was none too soothing to look at during a wakeful restless night.

Our Maltese Subaltern Agius had, needless to say, many friends and relations on the island and some of these made a point of watching for casualties from our regiment. As a result I was soon visited by them and as a further result I had the terrible experience of having to see Mrs. Howard, our Adjutant's wife, for, of course, I had actually found his dead body. I dreaded the interview most horribly, but she was

perfectly wonderful and arrived with an armful of flowers and started to pat my pillows up and make a fuss of me. There she sat quite dry eyed while I made up fairy tales of how painlessly poor old Howard had died. I hope I lied well for the poor old fellow had died in horrible agony. I never saw her again but heard of her once or twice afterwards in England.

As a result of wiring to Mr. Hunt I had later a much pleasanter and very unique experience, for I know now what Aladdin felt like with his wonderful lamp. One afternoon a funny nervous deferential little man was shown into the ward and he announced that he had telegraphic instructions from the Union Castle Line to buy me "anything I wanted." "What did I want"? Having a lively supposition that Mr. Hunt would never let me pay for my purchases I curbed my enthusiasm and ordered a safety razor, a few necessities and no more, which upset the poor little man terribly and on his own initiative he insisted on adding some luxuries, such as fruit etc. It was a wonderful sensation to feel that one had unlimited spending powers and the other men in the Ward were gnashing their teeth with envy.

There was also a good deal of leg pulling over all the beautiful Maltese ladies who came to see me on the introduction of the Agius family. One really was pretty but that particular afternoon my poor old frosted toes took up most of my attention and she wasted her Southern sweetness on very desert air.

I got more pleasure from the calls of a couple of kind hearted English girls who had known the Battalion when we were training in Malta, but any way I did not stay in Malta long, for to my great delight I was told I should leave for England on the "Braemar Castle" (again a ship I had helped many times to fill with passengers in the old days).

I left Malta just before Christmas and fell into the hands of a very capable and experienced nursing sister who was the first person I had met who knew the first thing about frost bite.

Much to my annoyance after having successfully resisted something like three weeks of wrong treatment, all bandages were taken off and I was not even allowed to have blankets for my toes - they had to stick outside the bed and be chilly. I was solemnly inoculated against lock-jaw - all very useful no doubt but a little late.

Christmas was spent uneventfully enough off the South Coast of Spain and indeed all I remember of the trip on the "Braemar Castle" was a singularly unpleasant scare of boat-stations. The siren suddenly blew, nurses all scampered about shutting port-holes and serving out lifebelts, and I remember betting on my chances of getting on deck on my hands and knees, as I did not intend to drown like a rat in a trap. It was all mere drill, but it would have been kinder to have passed a word quietly round among the helpless cases.

My little friend at Malta's last kindly action had been to let my faithful Mr. Hunt know I was leaving on the "Braemar Castle". As a result the Southampton Manager, Mr. Thomas, came aboard at Southampton to meet me and wired my people, who tore off to Waterloo Station and burned incense steadily for a space of one hour before the Lord High Panjandrum who decided where the casualties were to

be sent. As a result, to my unspeakable joy I found myself on New Year's Eve in the King's College Hospital only about 3 or 4 miles from my home with my dear Mother and Father greeting me, the Authorities having very kindly let them come into the Ward about ten o'clock at night as a special favour.

ENGLAND 1916

I was very lucky indeed for at King's College Hospital they had a surgeon – Jenkins by name, who had studied the subject of frost bite and I owe him my present freedom from permanent disability. How lucky I was I never realised until afterwards when I met my poor old servant, Scales, hopelessly flat footed and crippled for life. After frost bite one's foot goes just like a little child's, the muscles – tendons – everything – all relax. I was not allowed to put foot to the ground and I was massaged most assiduously. Later when the gangrene cleared off my toes I had electrical treatment and by the Spring I was able to go to Lady Dudley's Convalescent Hospital at Brighton.

Here I had a wonderful, happy month and then I was sent to my Battalion for two months light duty, having been told that I should never be fit for active service again.

At the end of the first month a local Medical Board presided over by some doddering old fossil (but really directed by a nasty little Jew called Silverman) passed me fit in their wisdom for Home Service, although I had still not walked more than three miles and that on the soft turf of the Downs: at Hurdcot neat Salisbury.

At the end of the second month they again sent for me and I remember well the Jew boy whispering in the President's ear and the President smilingly delivering himself of the ruling of the Board, somewhat as follows:- “Well Mr. Wallace, your Regiment is in France, you will find that you do not have to march very far in France and we will hope the War will be over before the Winter, so we pass you fit for General Service.” This was in 1916 and I often thought of this pleasing prophesy in the years that followed and in the circumstances which I found myself from time to time. Still, there it was, I was passed fit and within a very few days was warned for draft and went out to France via Southampton and Havre.

FRANCE 1916. BATTLE OF THE SOMME

I spent a short and extremely dreary few days in one of our depressing base camps at Harfleur. These were run on the basis of making life in the trenches pleasant by comparison. They were officered one felt by the lowest type of coward who having safeguarded his own skin took a savage and almost, one might say, devilish delight in driving forward the cattle to the shambles. I shook the dust of that camp off my feet with real thankfulness and found myself in my first troop train crawling along at a walking pace hour after hour slowly towards railhead. I had no map. I lost all count of distance and all I remember again was the uncanny quiet of the countryside. In spite of War everything was peaceful. At long last, on July 19th, we arrived at railhead, Warlencourt, where a guide took charge of me and led us to where the Battalion lay in rest billets at Souastre. Here to my great pleasure I found one or two familiar faces, notably Clark, the one Company Commander I respected in the 2/3rd Battalion and I

was posted to his Company. I am pleased and grateful to put on record the kindly welcome those who had never seen me before gave to me. I even found to my amazement that the Block House episode had been distorted from the mere sordid struggle against cold and hunger that it was, into something more approaching a military operation. This was doubtless because some hysterical individual had suggested that Burge and I should receive the Military Cross. The Authorities rightly rejected the suggestion, but rather spoiled the effect by decorating the Sergeant (who had sat moping like the sick man he was over the brazier) with a Distinguished Conduct Medal! He as a result had naturally become the complete War-hero among those who knew nothing of the incident, while those who knew something of the incident jumped to entirely false conclusions as to my military prowess! However, that is all very ancient history, but it did please me to be received as a friend among friends.

After the squalor and beastliness of the Peninsula the comparative comfort of billets in Souastre was a very agreeable surprise to me. This surprise and delight was intensified when I was taken to a performance by the Bow Bells 56th Divisional Concert Party. They had an old barn equipped for a theatre and as they had two professional music Hall Comedians, the first fiddle from Drury Lane Orchestra and one or two other first class amateurs among them, their show was superlatively good and I began to realise that there was quite definitely a good side to life in the British Expeditionary Force.

When we moved up into the trenches this impression continued, for the Battalion was in a sector which had originally been in French hands and like most French trench Sectors had been very peaceful. Everyone had made themselves extremely comfortable on both sides of the barbed wire. I who had never had anything but a few branches and dead man's overcoats with which to build a bivouac gazed with wonder at all the timber and corrugated iron used in the construction of Company Headquarters. All very nice.

On the Sunday after we got into line I had my first test of fairly intensive shell fire as the gentle Hun for some reason best known to himself shelled us fairly heavily. I imagined that he was going to attack but the older hands realised that this was merely an aimless strafe and retired into dug-outs until his bad temper evaporated. I on the contrary rushed about in a wild state of exhilaration. I felt absolutely no fear, only mad excitement. It was a common thing to be like this when first under fire, but as the years dragged by one's nerves slowly weakened. One often looked back with envy to one's "first baptism of fire". Indeed it was often said in France that if one was going to win the V.C. one had better do it in the first fortnight.

Very little happened in this Sector. We did tours in and out of the trenches, being relieved by 7th Middlesex. We had one abortive and valueless raid. I was not in it, but it sticks in my memory because a couple of very dashing officers who took the raid out, came back nervous wrecks, leaving some dead on the German wire. A subaltern, whom I afterwards got to know and love, by name Minshull went out and in a cool methodical way brought the bodies in the following night. It was an interesting study of different temperaments in War time. The first two fellows, gallant, magnificent looking fellows, highly strung and useless when things went

wrong, Minshull was the last type of man on earth in appearance to make a soldier, and yet he was absolutely sterling stuff to the day he died.

Finally in August we were taken out of the Sector and went back by long marches to the training area at Conteville near Abbeville. Here we were to train and fatten for the Battle of the Somme which was, or course, steadily raging and had been raging ever since I arrived in France.

I remember so well one day on a route march saying to Clark, "What a good idea it would be to fill up a Caterpillar Tractor with high explosives and let it waddle over 'No man's land' and blow a breach in the wire, prior to a raid." I had hardly said the words when we turned a corner and came on our first tank. My suggestion had come to life!

In early September we entrained for Corbie. From there we marched to rest billets at Bois de Tailles. After 24 hours we moved up again to Maricourt or rather what had once been Maricourt. From there one night we were taken forward to a support position in a quarry. Nobody knew where anybody was in the dark but when morning broke we found ourselves about a mile behind the Line near Leuze Wood. I kept no diary and so cannot give much more than a general impression of life in an Infantry Battalion on the Somme. Soon after we arrived there was the celebrated battle of 15th September when the tanks were used for the first time. The two allotted to our Sector were unfortunate, as both broke down without doing much good. We were not in action that day, but the same night had to relieve the London Rifle Brigade who had advanced the line until it ran through the far edge of Leuze Wood. They had done it at fearful cost and as we were taken in to the new line that night by guides we saw their Chaplain and special parties evacuating their wounded, with which the wood was choked.

By now I was Battalion Signalling Officer and as such went forward to Battalion Headquarters, which was established in an old German Observation Post on the South West corner of Leuze Wood. When we arrived it was a wood; when we left ten days or so later it was just a few stumps sticking up, from a jumbled mass of splinters, shell holes and all that they contained.

Signalling became a farce and degenerated into sending braver men than myself as runners across the shell swept inferno behind us. Casualties mounted up daily, officer after officer was evacuated.

Samuel, the Colonel got a bullet through the knee and was evacuated, old Colonel Howell (bless his gallant old soul) coming up at the age of something very near 60 from Divisional School to take over command. This he did until his gallant old heart gave out under the strain and he was evacuated with greatest difficulty. He was a heavily built man and it took 8 men to get his stretcher through the shell holes.

Finally, Clark sent word to say that he only had one officer left. I decided that anything was better than quaking in a dug out which was quite frequently receiving direct hits from the German Artillery (when every light would be blown out by the concussion) and which was generally full of odd wounded and the like. So gathering up the remnants of my pluck I went forward to find Clark or "Snotty" as we always

called him sitting cheerful and undaunted in a trench. There we sat in company with a cold leg of mutton wrapped up in a sandbag, for I suppose another 3 or 4 days. Then one afternoon a runner arrived with a message which we expected to be news of our relief. Not at all. It was orders for me to conduct a daylight reconnaissance to see if the Germans had occupied the sunken road through the wood. I crawled along a trench to get a few men together, but found it hard to tell the dead from the living, as the living were so numbed with shell fire that they were just huddling in holes with their eyes shut waiting for whatever might happen. I picked one man who I thought had a little more guts than the rest but his guts took the form of arguing the point that it was murder to go out. I was a little over-wrought myself and persuaded him with the aid of a revolver that the murder would be much sooner than expected, if he did not go out. Thereupon he saw my point and was a great comfort to me as we crawled through the mess of the sunken road. Fortunately the Hun was not there, as I don't think I could have thrown a stone at anybody, much less put up a fight, but I got a good view by the simple expedient of putting my head over a dead man's shoulder who was propped up against a tree trunk and we crawled back with our report.

Shortly after this we withdrew into support for a bit of a rest and then on the 26th September we were ordered forward again to attack the little town of Combles which lay just the other side of Leuze Wood. This was the second time I found myself due to go over the top. The first time had been cancelled in our first trip up through our numerical and physical weakness. This time we were "fresh" troops and for it, and very nervy I felt as I tried to get a bit of sleep in the open the night before. The next morning however, all was excitement. The French and Patrols of the First London had discovered that the Hun had evacuated Combles and we swept cheerfully right through the Town and on to the far slopes of Morval. Here we dug ourselves in and held the line without incident until relieved by the French. How I blessed old Michaelis of my preparatory school and Joerg of Dulwich. The Sous-Officier who relieved me could not speak a word of English and I with my school boy French had to do all the talking. We drank eternal confusion to the Hun in rum and water and parted good friends. By this time I might add through pressure of casualties I was actually Second-in-Command of a Battalion of the British Army in the Line during a pretty fair sized scrap. Needless to say this deplorable state of affairs was very quickly rectified when we came out! We came out of the Line feeling we had earned our rest and I think the Authorities meant to give it us, because we marched some miles to the rear to the nearest undamaged village, Morlancourt. We had had a nice rest in some disused trenches, but even so it was a pretty exhausting march in our worn out condition.

At the entrance to the village we were met with the cheering news that our rest was to be exactly of 24 hours duration and that we were to go back into the Somme show that day. Accordingly having got such relief as an uninterrupted night's rest, a wash and a change of underclothing afforded, we trudged back and this time found ourselves on September 30th in temporary quarters in some Gun Pits in Trones Wood. The one we were in had been hit by a shell and the roof had caved in - so standing upright was impossible. The Division we had relieved seemed completely done in by the strain of things generally and their dead were lying about all over the place.

Everything was getting worse and worse, roads and pathways were vanishing and I remember well one night taking from 7 pm to midnight to cover three miles with

a Lewis Gun Team. We simply climbed out of one shell hole into another, guided only by a piece of muddy tape.

We moved up here to the Support Line at Flers where I had quite an interesting little experience. I took up my quarters in an unfinished German dug-out; only the stairway had been constructed and, of course, faced the wrong way for hostile shell fire now that the trench had changed hands. I was asleep one night and I dreamt I was back on a troop-ship in the Mediterranean on submarine guard. All of a sudden I saw the track of a torpedo and watched it coming steadily nearer and nearer the ship. In my dream it hit the ship and exploded and I woke up to find dirt, bits of wood etc., pouring down on me. What had happened was that a German shell had pitched just one yard to the left of my staircase and exploded. One often hears that a long dream can be dreamt in a short space of time and I am quite certain this is a case in point, for I must have dreamt the happening of at least 3 minutes in the fraction of a second during which one hears the scream of the approaching shell.

We remained in support for a day or so. I remember well seeing the German prisoners straggling back after a big attack that was going on in an attempt to straddle the Bapaume Road. One German Officer rather excited my admiration and sympathy. He was a big handsome fellow with a shoulder badly shot about and he was nearly dropping with pain and exhaustion. I remember offering him my flask and suggesting that a few of his cheery grinning compatriots who had surrendered with their day's food in their hands should carry him. I shall never forget the look on his face when he said he would sooner die than be touched by such cowards. He was a bonny fighter.

In this desperate attack on the Bapaume Road, a village called Les Boeufs gave a lot of trouble. In the usual inimitable style of our fatuous High Command they first detailed a Platoon to attack it. The Platoon was wiped out. Next a Company was detailed and this is where my Company came in.

Orders were given that we were to attack the following morning (October 7th) at dawn. This looked like the real thing at last. I proceeded to get into fighting order and was preparing to go over as Second-in-Command to Clark once more, when I was sent for by the Adjutant. Our Battalion I should say, at this juncture was transgressing the Geneva Red Cross Convention by doubling the posts of medical officer and adjutant! As medical officer, the adjutant had been treating me during the show for a very bad poisoned hand, which probably explains why when he received orders to detach one officer and 40 ranks to proceed to 4th Army Rest Camp by the seaside, he thought of me. There was an additional reason also, namely, that I was actually the officer who had served longest without any break in the show, and he, therefore, solemnly detailed me for this duty. I demurred at first and said I was due to go over the top next morning. He said, "Don't be a damn fool, take luck as it comes and do as you're told". So next morning bright and early I and 40 bewildered and incredulous troops turned our back on this inferno and marched once again to railhead.

In fullness of time we boarded a goods train and within 24 hours of being near a violent and sticky finish found ourselves staring at the lovely blue waters of the English Channel. As one man wrote in a letter home, it was like coming out of hell into heaven. It certainly was. We had nothing to do except keep ourselves and our

arms clean. We loafed and lazed for ten happy days and then we re-joined the Battalion.

Of the Company which I was supposed to accompany into action that morning 13 men and no officers remained. A stretcher bearer had brought them back out of the shambles and I shrewdly suspect they were the 13 men who dropped into the first convenient shell hole and stayed there.

It is interesting to note that our gallant Generals smashed a Battalion, a Brigade and finally a Division on Les Boeufs. Obviously as each damp squib of an attack failed, the Hun held it firmer and firmer. As a crowning touch it was afterwards discovered that the defences had been laid out by a mere Engineer Lieutenant – rather a commentary on the relative efficiency as opposed to mere bravery of the two Armies.

Clark had been hit through the knee and all his officers wounded. Thus once again was greatness thrust upon me and I become a Company Commander with a nucleus of 23 men.

TRENCH WARFARE - 1916/1917

I found the Battalion out on rest and licking its wounds well behind the line. The day after I got back we marched 20 miles still further back to a little place called Picquigny. I finished this march carrying two rifles for men who were done in, as well as full marching outfit which all officers carried, and it was rather an interesting commentary on the inspired remarks of the doddering old Doctor at Salisbury, made in the wisdom of one who had never visited the Front, who had, of course, gaily assured me there was no marching to do in France.

We had a good loaf in Picquigny with concerts by the Divisional Band and the good old Bow Bells and then entrained for the Neuve Chapelle Sector. Our reinforcements had arrived and looked a pretty hairy lot. Late “Volunteers” under the Derby Scheme - poor devils - mostly married men and first sweepings of the gutter under the Conscription Scheme. The job was to try and lick them into shape and fortunately Neuve Chapelle was a very quiet Sector. I had a good Sergeant Major allotted to me and some exceptionally good subalterns. Two of them, Walkinshaw and Thomas, afterwards became Officers in the Regular Indian Army. The Command of a Company, however, I am afraid was the last thing in the world I wanted. It must be remembered all through my days in the Officers’ Training Corps and in the early years of the War I had never had half an hour’s practice in tactics, but had concentrated entirely on signalling. In addition I was painfully aware of the fact that my subalterns were very much better at the job than I was and that I held my job solely and simply through the seniority afforded by my promotion in 1915 to full Lieutenant as Battalion Signalling Officer. I, therefore, with the entire approval of the Colonel made the most determined efforts to get transferred to Signals. I successfully negotiated the Brigade and Corps. Signalling Officers, but the latter recommended that I took a proper Signals Course in England. On these grounds G.H.Q. turned it down as they were allowing no officers to leave the Front Line to return to England

for Courses. So there was nothing to do but settle down as best I could to make something of the job of Company Commander.

It was a bitter Winter with a hard frost which lasted, I think, for well over two months without a break. Actually this was an advantage as it froze the mud and our flimsy breastworks so hard that we knew until the thaw came they would require very little upkeep. Trenches were out of the question as one hit water 18" below ground. Indeed it was for that reason that the Sector was so quiet as both sides knew that any intensive bombardment would so blow the ground up as to bring an attack to a standstill, much as happened afterwards in the lunatic battle for the Passchendaele Ridge. Looking back on it it was really a lucky Winter as we did 7 days in the Line and 7 days out with great regularity. Rest billets quite close to the Line were watertight and one could remain reasonably snug and the little Towns of La Gorgue and Estaires were, although only 3 or 4 miles behind the line, undamaged. Laventie, even nearer the line was only partially knocked about and civilians still in residence. This meant hot baths in an old Brewery, nice little meals in simple restaurants and the good old Bow Bells who staged a prodigious Christmas Pantomime. Such were very real helps to get through a dreary Winter, which many poor devils, notably those down on the Ancre and in the worst parts of the Ypres Salient knew nothing of.

I attended a School of Gas Instruction that Winter which stood me in good stead later on, as I shall recount. It was most interesting and culminated in the singularly unpleasant ordeal of going into a hut chock full of chlorine gas and being compelled to remove one's gas mask and put on one spare mask. Lord! How frightened I was - later on, how thankful I was, that I had been through this course.

Just before Christmas I went on leave. I remember well I was in the Line expecting my leave Warrant to come through and after "Stand to" one morning was awaiting the customary one hours trench mortar bombardment, with which the Hun invariably greeted the day. It used to start sharp at 8 o'clock and my leave warrant arrived by runner at about quarter to eight ! I was out of my dug out and a mile down the communication trench before I heard the familiar slam of a big trench mortar bomb arriving! These trench mortar bombs were no fun, they weighed anything up to 100 lbs of practically neat high explosive, that is to say, no weight was wasted on the shell which was little more than a canister. I remember seeing one man dead of sheer concussion. There was not a wound on him. He had simply been, so to speak, clubbed to death by the sheer vibration of the explosion.

I was young in the art proceeding on leave and had all the average Infantry man's idea of how little distance we really were from the Coast. Thus the idea of cadging rides on lorries never entered my head, with the result I hung about all day long in La Gorgue waiting for the evening train. I passed the time very pleasantly, first having a hot bath and bribing the orderly with five francs to give me some brand new clean underwear, handing in some much worn private stuff in exchange. I lunched with dear old Brown, the Quartermaster, patronised the Bow Bells and towards midnight climbed into the inevitable dirty frowzy old first class carriage of about the 1860 vintage. The longest even of War-time train journeys (of say 50 miles in ten hours) must come to an end and the Channel Crossing was uneventful. I cannot possible describe in words the thrill which a real lovely Pullman car train with little

pink shaded lights gave me at Folkestone. It was England again, and it seemed too good to be true.

That leave I remember I was single and unattached and I spent it happily in my old home, but I managed to spend £50 in ten days and had nothing to show for it but the counterfoil of theatre tickets and memories of restaurants. I don't regret and never shall regret a penny of it and I would do it again.

Unfortunately I had to return just before Christmas, but with a comforting feeling that on the regular 7 day reliefs we were working I should spend Christmas in billets. I had reckoned without the staff. The Brigade Staff Captain was in the 7th Middlesex, our opposite number, and he determined that his Battalion should be the favoured one for Christmas. Reliefs were, therefore, changed round and I was greeted with the pleasing news that it was Christmas in the Line for us. Moreover the General Staff scandalised by the fraternisation which had taken place between the British and German troops on Christmas Day the year previously, decreed a 48 hour bombardment of the Germans to celebrate the Birth of our Lord! This was to start on Christmas Eve and finish on Boxing Day. I think this was the only time I ever had any very strong presentiment. I was quite certain this would be my last trip up the Line. Well, it was not and it cured me of having presentiments.

It was unspeakably foul weather, pouring with rain and the anticipated bombardment kept one in a state of nerves waiting for retaliation. Actually, however, the wily Hun withdrew all his men from the discomfort and squalor of the Front Line into the dryer higher ground of the Aubers Ridge and left us to it.

On Christmas morning I was charmed to receive a little card from the Divisional Chaplain wishing me and my men "A Bright and Happy Christmas". He had previously gladdened my heart by arranging a compulsory Church Parade on a Thursday because we were going back into the Line on the Sunday. God's good man no doubt, but a pretty dreadful wash-out I thought him. In passing, like all the rest of us, Padres were a mixed lot. I met two very gallant servants of God on the Somme, one, Bickersteth, of a very famous Church family. He was a brave longlegged sportsman who was always first out with the stretcher bearers after his wounded, and he earned undying fame in the Division by threatening to smash a cowardly R.A.M.C. Colonel who kept his ambulance too far back. Another fellow called Pin gave me Communion in his dug out and was kind and helpful to me, but I have never forgotten the spiritual desolation of my own 56th Division. We never saw our man in the Front Line. I don't know his name; perhaps it is just as well. Anyhow he counted for less than nothing in the lives of hundreds of men on the brink of a world he professed to know so much about.

To return to matters earthy - the one gleam of life on Christmas Day was a stiff tot of liqueur brandy from Rochford my flank Company Commander and the cheery smile that went with it was a good Christmas present.

We came out of the Line intact without casualty and went into billets at Laventie where we whacked up the most colossal Christmas orgy I have ever taken part in. I remember vividly my Company Cook, a very grubby uncouth Cockney publicly embracing me on both cheeks in front of a group of men, far too happy with

a big barrel of beer to remember it. This Company Cook I believe is now (1935) one of the biggest street bookies in London. He lives at Brighton and goes up to work in a Rolls Royce paying out in the street behind a North London Music Hall. Several of the old Battalion work for him as touts.

The Staff Captain had been a little too clever, as the Germans returned our Christmas Card on New Year's Day. I had just been up to spy out the land preparatory to moving up into a new Sector and had got back to the Support Line when several tons of assorted beastliness suddenly dropped on the Front Line. The 7th Middlesex got it in the neck, gas, high explosive, everything. They had plenty of casualties and for once poor old 3rd London were in the right place at the right time, for after this little interchange of compliments everything became quiet once again.

So the Winter wore on until in March we were taken out of the Line and sent down to train for the Show that was brewing at Arras. We marched the whole way billeting every night and if the weather had been a little better it would have been very pleasant relief from the eternal digging and wiring parties of trench life.

FAILURE – A CASUALTY AGAIN

I now come to that part of my personal narrative that shames me in the recollection. To put it bluntly my morale was at a very low ebb. The anxiety of feeling a square peg in a round hole, the strain of the Winter and the ever-increasing effect which shell fire seemed to have on one's nerves, culminated in an incident which happened during our period of training.

The Germans had retired to the Hindenburg Line leaving us their old trench system, perfect in its construction, as an ideal training ground for Field Exercises. One morning we were detailed to practice an attack on a certain fortified village. It was a horrible day, cold and sleeting, but I was very interested in the problem and worked terribly hard to make the exercise a success. We got back to our billets wet and tired and I, having nothing better to do, turned in. I was roused by a message that the Colonel wished to see me. I dressed and went to his hut where he informed me that he had instructions from Brigadier General Freeth to reprimand me for not taking the attack seriously. Then and there my spirit as an infantry soldier finished. I felt that although the accusation was unjust, underlying it was probably (or at any rate so I then felt) the incompetence I had felt in myself as a Company Commander. I immediately begged the Colonel to relieve me of my command, as I said the thought of taking men into Action after such a reproof would be a nightmare to me. He made light of it and told me not to take it too seriously. The mischief was done, however, and I felt a broken man. Two nights afterwards (April 2nd, 1917) that same Brigadier ordered us out to dig a new trench between the existing German and British Front Line. Always a hazardous undertaking this depended for success entirely on concealment. It was a bright moonlight night and snow had fallen heavily. Actually the ground consisted of a gently rising slope without even a hedge for a cover, the British Line being at the bottom of the valley, the German Line at the top. A more perfect field of fire cannot be imagined. They were on to us five minutes after we started. The Major was hit through the throat, not fatal - my dear pal Minshull got it slap between the eyes and died smiling. A little Canadian also got it in the head. The

men by this time were getting a fraction of cover as they were digging literally for dear life. The Officers, of course, had to walk up and down. All of a sudden about 300 yards away I saw a fellow sprawling on the snow, lift his rifle to his shoulder and take aim. I saw the flash and an instant later felt as if I had been violently punched on the arm. I spun round with the impact to find he had cleaned drilled a hole through my arm and that the same bullet had hit my orderly in the head and killed him. Then my nerve broke. I handed over Command to Gordon Page and went down the road to the Field Dressing Station. I ought to have stayed. I have often wished I had stayed, but there it is:- I don't gloss over it. I was shaken and seething with rage at the murder of my best pal and that night I forgot my duty as I might have remembered it earlier on.

When I got to the Dressing Station an orderly stared at me in amazement. "Good God", said he "Are you a walking case". I said "Yes, why not; I have got a 'blighty' right through the arm". "Have you", he said, "Well! Just look at the back of your raincoat". I turned round and there was a big triangular flap hanging down. A bullet had ploughed across my back, cutting through my trench coat, my tunic and just cutting my Chamois leather waist cost. I have the tear to this day unattended. It missed my spine, therefore, by the thickness of my underclothing.

ENGLAND 1917

My luck seemed to turn from that very moment. It was a wound that in a quiet time would never have got me further than the nearest Field Hospital, but wherever I went, Field Hospital and Base Hospital alike, the orders were the same - "All lightly wounded men to be evacuated at once to England to make room for the heavy casualties of the pending battle." Thus I came back to England and found myself in a V.A.D. Hospital in Park Lane. My luck still held, my wound clean-drilled as it was started to heal without any complications and I was soon out and about convalescent.

One day a friend whom we had met some years before in Scotland on a holiday happened to be in Town and I asked her to lunch with me. That friend is now your Mother and so you can understand why I say my luck had turned, because a week or two later she said she would marry me. In between these two dates, however, I had another very wonderful experience, as I got to know through a pal whom I met that wounded Officers could go up on a visit to the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow. I had a wonderful ten days aboard the battle cruiser "Orion", treated like a Prince and indeed I could I have stayed with them longer only I had arranged with my Mother that her friend should come and stay with us and it was then I meant to ask if she would marry me. I could not risk failure in that direction - it took precedence over everything.

Meantime, however, the worry of my failure was very urgently on my mind and bearing in mind that I had been recommended for signals I approached my cousin in the War Office and with his help was duly appointed to a six-month Signal Course at the R.E. Training Establishments grouped in and around Bedford.

I had a wonderful six months; the Course was splendidly conceived and laid out and embraced an immense range of fascinatingly interesting subjects. Visual signalling and simple telephony I knew already but wireless, heavy telegraph routes, light telegraph routes, cable wagon drill, horse management and signal office routine were all new ground. Heavens! How hard we used to work, out all day or else at

lectures and then in the evenings writing up notes, revising and cramming. I worked like a demon with the double incentive of my Fiancée and the thought of a new start to spur me on.

In the final phase of the Course was a gas test. Here again, my luck held good. I had my own box respirator which I insisted on wearing in the gas chamber. The other fellows were handed out old fashioned flannel-bag gas masks which turned out to be defective and one or two of them were gassed in the Heart of Merrie England. I passed out top of my class and I felt that I had the ball at my feet.

FRANCE 1918

I was destined, however, to receive yet another very nasty set back. I was warned for Overseas in the early part of 1918, I think towards the end of February, and left with a pal I had met, one Gilbert Day. After a day or two at Abbeville he went one way to the 19th Corps. where he had a friend who indented for him and I to the 9th Division at Maricourt sur Somme. This 9th Division was one of the crack Divisions of the Army. Actually it was first in the list of divisions which the Germans feared and respected. A further claim to fame was that it was Ian Hay's Division, described in his book "The First Hundred Thousand". Its badge was a thistle as it was a Highland Kitchener Division. Unfortunately, however, the Major in Command of Divisional Signals was an ex Guardee and a society man about Town. The Captain was a young regular Sapper straight from the shop at Woolwich, a good fellow, but they had no use for their new joined Supernumerary Officer. I got on well with: the Gunner Signalling Officer, Primrose, and a little South African called Verrall (the South African Brigade was in the Division) but after a curious period of feeling odd man out I committed a social indiscretion which sealed my fate, as far as the 9th Division Was concerned and which nearly spoilt my new career for good and all. I remember the incident well. The G.S.O. 3 was playing Bridge in our mess with the above two and I believe Verrall, and I was watching. It was a keen fought fight but our visitor finally finished the rubber game triumphantly with the odd trick in hand. He made some remark like, "Well, I have just got it", and I, like a fool said, "Yes, but you revoked." It happened to be true but I got and deserved a thorough choking off, and from that day on I was a pariah in the Mess.

However, it was not many days before there were other things to think about, for we were getting near to the 21st March, and we were moved in to the Gouzeaucourt Sector with Divisional Headquarters at Nurlu. We were a division of the ill-fated 5th Army and the sensation was exactly that of waiting for some bad thunderstorm to break. We all knew the big attack was coming off but nothing seemed to happen beforehand. The Germans never fired a shot. I remember one morning trying to dig a buried cable trench under cover of fog in full view of the Germans. The fog rolled away and then we were in full view. Normally we should have been shelled to blazes, but this time we were allowed to finish our trench in ominous peace and quiet. The nights were as quiet as the days, except where we chose ourselves to disturb them with odd raids and patrolling encounters. Then on the 21st March the storm broke, early in the morning. I have never heard such a sustained roar of artillery. I was at Divisional Headquarters which they started to shell methodically about once every half minute. Winston Churchill had spent the night there and I remember seeing him and a very frightened valet clear out with considerable speed

and celerity! I was detailed to be in charge of the transport and was ordered forward to the Wagon Lines which I found in a valley sodden with fog and a nasty feel of gas in the air. There were no gas masks out for the horses and I straightway fell foul of the old Sergeant Major (a pompous old gentleman) and the Quarter Master Sergeant, one of the smart semi-insolent breed. This was a bad start for a nightmare experience, for in the next seven days we fell back something like 50 miles, right over ground we had so triumphantly moved forward on during the attack at Combles. Actually the first day nothing much happened because the Hun attacked every other Division. Thus the 9th stood firm while the 47th on its left and the 21st on its right fell back smashed and broken. We fell back to conform in the evening and thereafter it was a night and day job. Tired men and horses, roads choked with transport and bombed every night; ammunition dumps blazing away as they were abandoned, rather than leave them for the enemy - piteous Hospital Nurses and Orderlies standing in the roads begging lorries to put a few wounded on board and always back, back, back, until at last even the Germans could not keep up the pace. Their artillery lagged behind - their infantry, exhausted, pressed their attacks less furiously and in fewer numbers, whereas they had swarmed like vermin in the early days.

Right back at railhead of Somme days (Morlancourt) the Australians came into the Line to relieve us and to their eternal credit stood firm as a rock. We were withdrawn and were sent North by road to the Scherpenberg Sector just South of Ypres. The Division was a wreck and settled down hastily to the task of assimilating reinforcements.

The South African Brigade had lost its entire brigade staff, including the Brigadier, who had been captured fighting. This was a fair measure of their general strength. They swept their reinforcement camp in England clean and sent out every last man they had. Forty eight hours after they arrived that Brigade was in action again and I was appointed Brigade Signalling Officer. The Hun attacked the Messines Ridge early one morning and caught the 19th Division napping. We were ordered to counter attack. I arrived to take over my Command just as they were moved up to the attack. I found that to organise communications between Brigade Headquarters and three Battalions I had six men, two telephones and half a mile of wire. Everything else had been captured. I could do nothing but commandeer some despatch runners and trust to luck. The Brigade made a forced march to Neuve Eglise and in a cold Spring twilight without artillery support, without bombs or reserve ammunition, in fact, nothing but the bayonet and what the men carried, that Brigade so raw that the Officers hardly knew the N.C.O.s' and their N.C.O.s' certainly could not know the men, were flung into a forlorn attack on the Messines Ridge which in the nature of things was doomed to undeserved failure. I saw them go over without faltering or wavering and then they disappeared into the mud and confusion. It was a gallant show but a futile waste of brave men. So far as I was concerned, by temporary co-operation with a Brigade Signalling Officer of the 19th Division, I kept some resemblance to communication going and later as we fell back to a defensive Line at Laclette just in front of the Cassel Poperinghe Road I sorted things out a bit and got genuinely to love my job and the men I was with. So much so that when orders came appointing me to be an "Area Officer", the lowest and most despised job in signals, reserved for men who were not considered gentlemen, I begged Major Alexander to keep me, but my number was up. I was a marked man and they were finished with me, so I retired very dispirited to IInd Army Headquarters.

Here, however, my luck turned again and this time for good. An “Area” consisted of a trench sector and all the buried cable routes therein contained. The Hun had obligingly captured the particular stretch of desolation to which I had been appointed and so I was out of a job.

For a time I commanded “N” cable section a regular pre-war crowd kept, so far as I could see, out of all earthly strife, because it boasted a wonderful team of bays that some old horse-coping senior officer loved like his children.

I used these celebrated quadrupeds to haul a convoy of pigeon wagons still further out of trouble to a G.H.Q. park at Desvres. It was a comic cavalcade, a cross between a travelling circus and an end of the season move of bathing machines from beach to Winter quarters. Desvres was swarming with Portuguese troops and a dirty frowsy looking lot they were. They had proved quite useless in defence at Neuve Chapelle and had lost us many miles of ground. All my pet haunts such as Lagorgue, Laventie were now in enemy hands and the front line was in Merville where we had had a glorious ten days real rest in 1916.

I spent most of my time learning to ride a motorbike and then one day was sent for to Headquarters. I saw a Major Floyd, a good chap whom I remembered from early Bedford days and he asked me if I could speak French. I said I could make myself understood, whereupon he informed me that I was to relieve a Jock Officer as British Signals Liaison Officer with the XIVth French Army Corps at Waton just behind Poperinghe.

The pressure on the British Army in the March and April fighting had been so terrific that the French had been compelled to provide reinforcements and take over sections of the line so as to shorten the front held by each British Division. One such section was around Mount Kemmel and the Scherpenberg - where three French Army Corps known as D.A.N. (Division d'Armee du Nord) found itself sandwiched between two British Corps and under the control of the British Second Army Commander Plumer.

It can be imagined that the curse of the Tower of Babel lay pretty heavily on such an arrangement - hence the creation of “Liaison” Officers.

The Major succinctly outlined my job as being nominally that of assisting the French but actually that of preserving British Signal Routes from pillage and ruin at the hands of our happy go luck Allies. He also added the cheering news that the Frogs were a sticky lot and that my predecessor had fallen foul of them and was being cleared out in a hurry.

In view of the opinion which the 9th Divisional Signals had formed of my powers of behaving myself in high society, I felt not a little dashed, and moved off to my new job with very mixed feelings. As might be expected the remarks of my worthy predecessor when I came to take over from him did nothing to dispel my alarm and despondency and I remember well my first action was to dash out and buy a notebook in which I intended to keep a diary, which might be used by the “Prisoners Friend” at any subsequent Court Martial proceedings!

However, as is often the case what looked a sticky business turned out a very happy time for me. I received from the outset an extraordinarily warm welcome from the French XIVth Corps. Signals Mess. The Corps. Signalling Officer was a charming Captain called Clement. The Lines Officer was a cheerful rascal - Denert and the Wireless Officer a most amazing little Gascon called Penard. As the Mess Cook had been a Chef at the Ritz in pre-war days there was nothing to complain of in the cookery. All that defeated me was the necessity of doing a full morning's work on the regulation French breakfast - a roll-and-butter and coffee. I also found having the main meal of the day at 12 noon very difficult to get used to. The whole French Army used to go into a sort of sacred trance about 12 noon, from which they resolutely refused to emerge until about 2 p.m. Nothing short of a mass attack by the Germans would be allowed to interfere with the regime which made liaison between an energetic British Officer eating bread and cheese out of his haversack and a well-wined and fed Frenchman a little difficult.

As to the work side of things, I was under the Command of old Colonel Waley Cohen and in these days in which I write of Hitlerism and persecution of the Jews, it is interesting to put on record that the only two Jews I have ever served under were both extraordinarily kind-hearted and just men.

I had a little British Telephone Exchange under my command which was an interesting commentary on the difference between French and English Army methods. I had two 50-Line Switchboards full of such subscribers as Delousing Stations, Laundry Officers and, of course, the more usual "Q" Staff Offices, such as railheads - provision and ammunition dumps etc. The French on the other hand for all the communications of an Army Corps had one ancient "Hughes" Telegraphic Writer working to Army H.Q. and one 50-Line Switchboard. Any English Corps had at least one and probably two "Wheatstone" high speed machines working Duplex to Army H.Q., Duplex Morse Sounders to all divisions and artillery and anything up to 200 lines on the switchboard.

Other comparisons outside the Signal Office were equally interesting. One would see a British battery of artillery horses beautifully supplied, [?] with lambs wool wherever there was chafing, metal work burnished, drivers all riding to attention and every animal with an obvious full day's ration in his tummy. Against this you would see a French battery, slovenly-looking drivers lolling in their saddle, harness patched with rope, horses with every rib in their body showing, galled and rusty chain work and the famous "V5" looking about as half as efficient as our 15 pndr.

The same with the lorries - and yet it was nothing for a whole divisional relief to take place in a night and for me to be quite ignorant of any abnormal movement of troops. They were in their queer way amazingly efficient. Instead I often wondered whether the very simplicity of their methods made them more truly efficient than our super-elaboration of organisation.

Several weeks passed very happily and then the inevitable happened. With the re-organisation and reinforcement of the British Army, it was decided to terminate the anomaly of a French Division of an Army functioning in a British Area under British Second Army control and accordingly I was told to assist in handing over the area to the 19th British Corps. To my surprise and delight the Junior officer who turned up

with his A.D. Signals was my pal Gilbert Day. I begged him to try and get me a job with his old man. By a very fortunate chance they were short of a Cable Section Officer. I suppose old Waley Cohen must have given me a good enough chit to blot out the 9th Division and to my delight I found myself posted to command A.R. Cable Section XIX Corps. Signals.

Then started another phase of the most gruelling hard work but of solid good fun. Stratton the A.D. Signals was, like all British Signalling Officers, a firm believer in buried cable, whereas the French had run all their communications overground. For the next few weeks I was a night bird, working all night and sleeping all day. It was nothing to have enormous working parties up to 500 men who had to be strung out along the line of the proposed "bury" in the pitch dark and given their task - one pace per man 6 ft. deep and as narrow as he could conveniently work in. While the trench was being dug cables would be run in ¼ mile lengths, perhaps 6 or 8 of them each containing 7 - 10 pairs of wires, taped together and then in due course dropped in and buried with the ends sticking up each ¼ mile ready for joining next day by a solitary sapper.

My men were a magnificent crowd:- pre-war Territorials from Leeds. They had lost their Sergeant in the March push but were otherwise intact and I never wish to command a finer working gang. Hard working, utterly reliable, highly intelligent, one had only to lay out a work programme and it was carried out without regard for personal comfort or safety and without a hitch. For instance I remember well on a bitterly cold early Autumn evening we were burying a cable across a roadway. A tunnel had been cut under the roadway for it by day - and a pipe pushed through with a piece of rope threaded through, the intention being to drag the bundle of cable through the pipe. It poured with rain and the excavations both side of the road filled up. I should think there was 3 or 4 ft of muddy water, and, of course, at the critical moment the cables fouled the mouth of the pipe. A little Lance Corporal by name Dixon stripped naked and went right under to guide the cables through. He came out blue with the cold and it took us all our time to get him warm again.

The working parties, however, were a very different pair of shoes as they brought me into contact with the Americans; the 27th New York Division to be precise. As troops they were contemptible, inefficient and ill-disciplined and as ordinary human beings to associate with – terrible. They were the sweepings of the City of New York which appeared to me to mean (from the names written in indelible pencil on their gas masks) the sweepings of middle Europe and Russia. The sacred flame of democracy burned high in every breast and manifested itself in the grossest contempt of orders and the filthiest abuse in audible tones if one tried to enforce a necessary military order. I had Officers who hunted out safe dug-outs and sat in them all the evening, leaving men in charge of the N.C.O.s' and N.C.O.s' who curled themselves up and went to sleep, but what amazed me most was that this great nation of business experts failed in the simple essential of feeding their own men in the field. I had one working party who assured me they had had nothing to eat for 24 hours except a slice of bread and a third of a tin of pork and beans. Moreover, I heard afterwards from a very well informed source that I struck about the worst division in the whole American Army and that their other troops were a very different proposition. I certainly struck one decent, modest, friendly American later, but only one.

The finest working party was a group of Durham Miners. Little bandy-legged men, all crippled with rheumatism who could not walk to the job; they had to be taken up on the trench Light Railways. Once on the job, however, with their specially shortened pick helves and spades they sank out of sight, like so many goblins in a pantomime. It was all my men could do to get the cables stretched out and tested in time for them. The language, if we kept them waiting – in broad Tyneside – was lurid.

Gradually the “buries” started to look something like a Signal system and I went off for ten days welcome leave, which I spent part at home and part at Aldbourne.

On my return I found signs of mysterious activity and I was detached for temporary duty with an Army Cable Section to supply “Q” communications to a Brigade of British Artillery sent up to support the Belgian Army on the Boesinghe Sector. I took up quarters in the ruins of a Chateau at Woesten on a little island in the middle of a small pond which seemed very feudal and amusing.

Once the Show started the Huns fairly ran for it. Luckily for me the British Artillery were withdrawn from the Belgian Sector and I was free to go back to my own beloved cable section. I found them limbering up to move forward. From Café Belgs near Vlamertiaghe we moved to the south outskirts of Ypres on the Menin Road and later right in to the mud belt at Clapham Junction near Gheluvelt. We had one miserable night here among a crowd of ruined tanks and then moved forward again clear of the battlefield to Dadizeelhoek. Here we were worked off our legs, laying out field cable. On one occasion I had both cable wagons out, two other parties working with hand barrows and finally I and the wheeler and farrier laid the last line ourselves leaving one man in charge of what remained of our camp.

The advance continued and we moved by steady stages through Moorseele and Gulleghem to Courtrai. Here I found the most delightful and comfy billet on the outskirts of the town towards Sweveghem at the Chateau Capel Ter Biede.

The British Army advanced to the Line of the River Scheldt and steadied down to make preparation for forcing its passage, which if German resistance had continued would have been a costly and arduous job. The pressure on the cable sections slackened off very much and was restricted to temporary cable lines which were quickly supplanted by the repair work of the Air Line Sections under Gilbert Day and another fellow. They re-conditioned and adapted the civilian and German routes which had been left almost intact. One way and another a few days slipped by very pleasantly. My host and hostess and their crippled brother were ardent bridge enthusiasts and roped me in as a very indifferent fourth. They had lots of interesting tales to tell of German occupation. I remember seeing a curious saucepan-shaped ingot of metal. On enquiring what it was I was told that hungry German linesmen would trade off telegraph wire for slices of bread and butter and that they used to melt the wire down and throw it into the pond outside the Chateau so as to deprive Germany of just a little more metal. I also heard an amusing story based on restrictions which the Germans put on country produce coming into the Towns. On one occasion the Germans stopped a christening party and found the supposed baby was a little sucking pig which some country cousin was trying to smuggle in to his friends in town.

While in Courtrai I saw the only piece of real pageantry that ever come my way in the whole of the dullness of modern warfare. It was decided that General Watts, 19th Corps. Commander should make a triumphal entry into Courtrai and be received with due pomp and circumstance by the City Fathers. This was done and it was really very impressive. There was a guard of honour of all Arms and the reception took place in the Square with the bells of the carillon playing. The Burgo-Master formally received the red flag with a white cross mounted on a lance which was, of course, the distinguishing emblem of the British Corps. Commander and subsequently there was a reception in the Town Hall. Altogether the whole affair reached great heights of splendour and Anglo-Belgian Entente. Some weeks later, after Armistice was signed, we found the party might have reached even greater heights as two German officers motored specially down to Courtrai to disconnect a large mine with a time fuse which had been ticking merrily under the Town Hall the whole time! I remember seeing them arrive and very windy they looked too, as to what reception they would receive.

In the early days of November, the Hun withdrew from the Line of the Scheldt, - his rear guards, composed chiefly of machine gunners, putting up a very determined show, the more remarkable because (as we learnt afterwards) most of them had not seen their officers for a very long period and had been kept to their job entirely by the N.C.O.s'.

On the 10th November I moved up to a village right on the banks of the Scheldt called Berchem. Rumours of the Armistice were just starting to reach our ears and seemed almost too good to be true. The following morning at dawn I received orders to push forward with my section to Renaix and from there to lay a cable line forward with all speed to Nederbrakel. I shall never as long as I live forget that morning - the memorable November 11th, 1918. We met as we moved up the road to Renaix a steady stream of returning refugees. Pathetic little groups they looked with their sick and aged being trundled along in wheel barrows. Belgian flags were mysteriously appearing by the dozen from every window and in every group. We were told afterwards that the German Army had made an honest penny prior to withdrawing by selling these to the Belgians.

By the time I reached Renaix excitement was reaching fever pitch. Deafening cheers greeted the arrival of any British Troops and although the Infantry must have taken as they deserved the cream of the welcome, there was plenty left for us.

I had no time to waste, however, and after selecting horse lines and billets, quickly moved forward a cable wagon to Nederbrakel along the road to Brussels. I followed in my motor bike arriving there about mid-day, actually after the Armistice. A woman invited me into her house for a drink and I started to admire some very nice water colour pictures all round the walls. She told me they had been painted by a German Officer billeted on her. On seeing me lose interest she said that "Germans were not all bad", and when I told this story later to some Belgians they tried to get her name and address from me, so that they could give her a free hair cut. Any women who had anything good to say for a German or who had hob-nobbed with them too much had their hair cropped prior to being kicked out of the country. I remember seeing a lorry load of them being shipped off.

I finished my job in Nederbrakel and started back in the failing afternoon light carrying by the same token a letter from this good lady for a friend in Renaix. I delivered this and got a bottle of excellent wine for my pains, dug out of the bottom of the garden where it had lain hidden during the war.

My clearest recollection of Armistice Evening, which I suppose was a time of junketing and excitement for a good many people, was sitting by myself in some little estaminet or other with a jolly little Belgian kiddie sitting on my lap, hardly able to believe the whole show was over, that I was alive and had got to pick up the threads of my old life again.

There is very little more now to be told. We had good fun and earned plenty of popularity by lending horses, men and limber to local farmers who were at their wits ends to know how to get in their beet crops etc., all horses having been commandeered by the retreating Hun. On one occasion we even rigged a deck chair in a limber and carted a poor old refugee to his people. He was quite helpless weighed every ounce of 15 stone and his poor old Dutch had rather wearied of pushing him in a barrow! The Corporal in charge was received - I gathered - with very open arms by the pretty granddaughter at the far end. All I got was a drink of filthy white brandy at the point of despatch.

After about a week of this I went sick with a boil that was troubling me and was sent off for a week or so to Wimereux near Boulogne. From here I ought to have been drafted back to some dreary base camp, but I put a wire through to the Corps. Signals and they very sportingly sent a car all the way from Courtrai and fetched me back. It was a toss up whether the 2nd or 19th Corps. should go forward as Army of Occupation. We lost and we, therefore, withdrew to Cassel. I had a short spell in Ypres with a Chinese Labour Battalion salvaging cable. A dreary job, only enlivened by the Chinese who would insist on kindling large bon-fires of waste wood and toasting ammunition and Very-Light cartridges in the blaze until they went off. They were very good fire-works as far as the Chinese were concerned but a nuisance to peace-loving folk and I very nearly stopped a ricochet bullet one night just when I was tenderly thinking about your Mother under the stars.

The Headquarters had compassion on me and drew me into Cassel for Christmas. Just before Christmas I was sitting at tea in the Mess when the Colonel suddenly said to me, "Wallace, you're improperly dressed." I hastily ran my fingers over all my shoulder strap buttons etc., which generally had a knack of being undone when they ought to be done up and I stammered out something silly wondering what on earth he was driving at. He then took from his pocket a grubby little service envelope, threw it across the table and said "Put that on." "That" turned out to be the French Croix de Guerre. There was a contemptuous army phrase about decorations not actually won in the heat of battle. They were described as having been "brought up with the rations", a painfully apt description of my own decoration.

We had a very cheery Happy Christmas, which included a most amusing trip to Calais to buy wines. We went and had lunch at a decent restaurant and asked the proprietor to help us. He directed us to "Une Mason Serieuse" and we went into the queerest little place where with great solemnity and ritual, with high glasses and the like, we were given samples to taste. We looked very wise over them. No doubt the

Frenchman remembers to this day the prices he was able to sell these wines at to Englishmen who knew nothing about them.

Soon after Christmas I went on leave and while on leave heard to my joy that I could apply for demobilisation to ease the strain on shipping. I did so at once and thereby actually forestalled my appointment as Instructor at the Bedford Training Depot. They ordered me to report. I refused and said I was awaiting my demobilisation papers and I so successfully withstood them that finally I found myself waiting to become a civilian once again.

I think my demobilisation was the last but one of my boyish dreams blown sky high, - the last being the receipt of my War Medals.

When I was a little chap I remember so well the homecoming of the "C.I.V.s" (City Imperial Volunteers from the Boer War) and seeing pictures of cheering ceremonial parades, presentation of medals and all the traditional return of the warrior. Secretly I had hoped all through the War to live for that thrill of being a "soldier returning from the Wars" with just a bit of pomp and circumstance to make up for all the dreary years. Well, my demobilisation took place in a dingy Pimlico house commandeered for the purpose. My paper was made out by an illiterate stripling of about 16 who could hardly write and certainly could not spell. I was given a ration book and a species of discharge papers called a "Protection Certificate". The Army had lost all interest in me and so had a grateful nation. I was a civilian once again.

I only got my medals some years afterwards by sheer chance. I happened to see in the "Daily Mail" if one wrote to an address in Ludgate Hill one would get them. Along they came in due course by registered post. We were even cheated of clasps. In all previous wars the fighting men could be distinguished from the mere base wallah by the fact that each battle in which they took part entitled them to a clasp.

At the time, however, I had something much better to think about and did not worry unduly, for as you know on the 27th February I was married to your Mother in mufti, and the only touch of War and sentiment connected with it was that your Mother had pinned the Croix de Guerre on underneath her Wedding Gown.

So ends a very unheroic tale of a civilian soldier, and the most I can say is that with one exception I did my best.

I am quite sure if you have to race up to a similar experience you will, with your Mother's training behind you, make a much better showing, but I do sincerely trust that you will be spared for you and your children the horrors of a modern War. It was dreadful enough in my young days. The progress of aviation alone, to say nothing of mechanised land warfare, have rendered the next War of terrible potentialities.