From Notes and Well Remembered Incidences

World War I from the journal of Captain Fred G. Coxen RFA (Royal Field Artillery)

Fred L. Coxen

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Captain Fred G. Coxen's compelling journal entries recreate the early battles of the Great War and transport one into the realities of war through the experiences of one Royal Field Artillery signaller who survived while millions of others perished.

LETTER FROM THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM
CONCERNING THE JOURNAL

The following is an e-mail received from the Imperial War Museum after evaluating a digital copy of the journal.

‘ I have now had the opportunity to read through the journal entries in some detail. I found your grandfather’s wartime account to be full of interest, as his descriptions of serving with the Royal Field Artillery contain many excellent details which researchers will undoubtedly find of historical value. His accounts of involvement in the early battles of the war, when both sides were more mobile and trench warfare had not yet set in, are particularly interesting. I am sure that our visitors will find the document of definite value and should therefore be pleased to accept this copy as a donation to our archive, where a hard copy will be preserved under your grandfather’s name and made available for study.’

Anthony Richards
Imperial War Museum
Documents and Sound Section

FOREWORD

All wars are terrible, but the Great War seems particularly so. In 1914 almost a whole generation of very young men were thrown into a conflict for which they were ill-prepared. Romantic tales of daring cavalry charges and valorous knightly combats on the field of battle were scant preparation for a war where death was on an industrial scale and came from the unseen sniper, the howitzer miles away, or a creeping cloud of poison gas. Yet men endured in the squalor of the trenches, and some survived; survived to come home to the 'Land fit for Heroes' of the politicians promised. But those that came home came with the unending memories of what they had seen and suffered. Many could not even tell their closest loved ones of what they had endured and took their memories to the grave. Now their lived memory of the Great War is no more, the last veterans have passed on and we are left with only the flimsy evidence of their passing. That is why now, almost a hundred years after the event it is so pleasing to have found an unpublished account of one man's experience of that most terrible war.

Frederick Coxen was a professional soldier, enlisting in 1905 and serving until 1911 in the Royal Field Artillery. But being in the Army Reserves he was recalled in 1914, and went on to serve until his final discharge in 1920. His war service makes for interesting reading – serving through the early battles of Mons, First Ypres and Neuve Chapelle, he saw a war of movement stagnate into a status as trenches and barbed wire brought all movement to an end. Commissioned in the field, Coxen also served in home defence with an anti-aircraft battery, and later back in France, as one of the defenders of Paris. At war's end he was attached to the Royal Air Force, and ended his military career as a captain in February 1920. To have survived the war might well be considered lucky, but that sort of luck comes at a price, and for Fred it was to see the horrors of war close-up, his friends killed and injured and all the suffering that battle brings. Fred lived a long and full life but as the memoir he wrote in …… demonstrates, his Great War experience

never left him. Like so many veterans of 1914 -1918 war was a constant presence.

These valuable memories might never have seen the light of day had it not been for Fred's grandson and name sake, Frederick L. Coxen, it is through his tenacity and commitment that his grandfather speaks to us today.

Michael Paris

Emeritus Professor of Modern History at Central Lancashire and a Fellow of the RHS and British Commission for Military History

PROLOGUE

The pages of his book of life were blank except for a few photographs without supportive stories. So much of who we are relates back to those who came before us, and yet only fragments of family history ever trickle down to the next generation.

I cannot exclaim that I really knew my grandfather. He and my grandmother never lived close-by therefore interaction was limited to brief visits. However, even if they did live within proximity I doubt it would have made a difference. My grandfather did not interact with children and therefore our relationship was distant. The result was a limited amount of knowledge regarding their lives, who they were and where they came from. Actually I did know they came from England and immigrated to the United States in 1922. I also knew my grandfather served in the British Army and he started a business in 1930, which my father and uncle operated after World War II.

On occasion my father shared bits of information, a story now and then about his childhood and his father. My grandmother told a few tales about the man she loved, but overall he remained a mystery.

This all changed the day my uncle gave my sister a worn tattered box containing memorabilia which once belonged to our paternal grandparents. I was unaware of this event until one of my trips to Michigan when I stayed with her and she revealed the story.

Perhaps she was given the box because she is the oldest sibling within my family. However, I do not understand my uncle's rational of giving her the box instead of his only son. Whatever motivated him will remain an unknown, for it was lost when he died in 2013.

According to my sister the box held many of my grandparent's documents, including my grandfather's World War One journal, which immediately caught my interest. Together we rummaged through the contents; a couple of my grandmother's recipe books, my grandfather's childhood bible and eventually we uncovered a reddish brown book titled 'Army Book 152, Field Correspondence'.

I recall extracting it from its hiding place and held it in my hands. For a few minutes my eyes were content to just gawk at the manuscript while my mind tried to comprehend what the six-by-nine inch book represented. Eventually curiosity forced me to gently open the book's cover to revile graph paper like pages yellowing with age. Faded pencil sentences written by my grandfather in his cursive style were wedged between quarter-inch horizontal lines; making it difficult to read.

Entries were dated and as expected the sentences were often incomplete – they were brief records of an experience or observation. But grammatical errors were not important because once engaged individual notes blended, thus offering insight into events of a war that occurred a century ago.

After reading a few entries, my sister and I revisited the journey of the box of documents and how it found its way to our uncle. When our grandmother died in 1965 it was the same year I graduated from high school. I recall hearing some discussions between my parents regarding the distribution of my grandparents' property. Neither my sister nor I recall the exact exchange, but it had to do with my aunt's claim on the house in Pompano and its contents.

I do know that very few personal items were passed onto my father or uncle; my aunt did obtain the house and its contents. She had one son, Chuck, who was married and he had two sons. Chuck was not the sharpest knife in the family drawer but he managed to become an aircraft mechanic.

My aunt lived in the house for a few years until her health forced her to sell it and purchased a condo near her son. How she dealt with my grandparent's belongings is unknown. Although it can be assumed that several items were placed in her condo, while others were given to my cousin.

Her health faded and she eventually died. I do not remember my father attending her funeral so whatever transpired between them after my grandmother died must have been unforgiveable, at least within my father's value system.

My cousin must have inherited his mother's belongings but it is unknown what he kept and to make matters worse, he divorced his wife and moved from Florida to

Kansas City. Again no one knows what happened to what remained of my grandparent's belongings.

The story of how the box of documents made its way to my uncle is unknown. It may have been my cousin's ex-wife or it could have been my cousin who passed on the small remainder of my grandparent's life. I do believe somewhere along the way my grandfather's uniform and war medals were lost.

In 2008 I was working in the IT department of a company located in Sanford North Carolina. I was technologically knowledgeable so before I left my sister I convinced her to let me take the box so I could scan the documents and turn them into digital images. She was hesitant but saw the logic in my proposal but made me promise to return them when I finished – they are still in my possession. Little did I know how the contents of the box would forever alter my life.

DEDICATION

To my grandfather, Captain Frederick George Coxen, who served in the British Royal Field Artillery and the Royal Air Force during World War 1. I also dedicate this story to the living relatives of George / Percy Bramwell, Pudgie Taylor, and Bobby Glue, as well as the millions of soldiers who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

PREFACE

My purpose for writing this book was to honor my grandfather by telling his story. In addition I wanted to impart to the reader the experiences, as well as the conditions of war, and what it was like trying to survive each day.

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The story is based on the World War 1 journal written by Captain Frederick G. Coxen, who served in the Royal Field Artillery (RFA) and the Royal Air Force (RAF) from 1905 to 1919.

On August 5, 1914, he was called into active duty when the British Parliament passed the General Mobilization Decree. He reported for duty at Newcastle upon the Tyne located in northern England, where he was assigned to the newly created 40th Battery of the 43rd Brigade. The Brigade was assigned to I Corps, which was under the command of General Haig. By August 16, I Corps had been sent over to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

'Notes and Well Remembered Incidences' is a historical account of the following: the first battle of Mons, the first battle of Marne, the first Battle of The Aisne, the first and second battles of Ypres, and the battle of Neuve Chapelle. Each battle is represented as a chapter in the book and begins with a brief overview of the battle, intermingled with dramatic journal entries. This format helps establish a foundation for understanding the relationship between the journal entries and the battles they describe. Journal excerpts and other supportive documents are italicized and indented to assist with identification and clarity.

Although the BEF consisted of both I and II Corps, the book's primary focus will be on the events which impacted I Corps.

NOTE: All journal entries are quoted as they were written; some expressions, used one-hundred years ago, were in common usage, which would be deemed offensive in today's society.

INTRODUCTION

The date was 1887. Richard and Alice Coxen were adding a son, Frederick George, to the four children that already filled their house. Living in Battersea, Richard was a sail-maker whose trade was vanishing due to Britain's Industrial Revolution. By the late 1800's modern vessels were propelled by coal-fired steam engines that bellowed out dark black smoke.

Little is known about Fred's childhood, until he turned eighteen in 1905. That is when he enlisted in the Royal Field Artillery (RFA), assigned to the 55th Battery. His reasons for enlisting are unknown, but it could be argued that he did so in order to further his education. Even though the law of 1870 provided schooling for all children, it was common that children of working class parents were given only a rudimentary education at best; many never had an opportunity to attend school beyond the age of 12.

When children turned the age of eighteen, the British military offered soldiers a basic education in return for six years of active and six years of reserve duty. In 1907 Fred earned both his third and second class education certificates in composition – leading one to believe that his desire to obtain an education may have been a major inducement in his decision to enlist.

Along with a classroom education, he was also trained in all aspects of operating artillery, yet he selected Signalling as his specialty. He and George Millington graduated together in the 168th Class, School of Signaling, at Aldershot. When new field telephones were introduced, Fred was sent to Ireland in 1909 for training. Communications between the artillery batteries and the forward observation post were extremely vital for shelling accuracy and target selection.

In 1911 he was awarded the 'Assistant Signal Instructor' certificate, just prior to his departure from active duty to begin his RFA reserve obligation.

Serving in the RFA Reserves allowed Fred more time to pursue his training as an electrician. During this period of time he lived in Westminster, at 28 Berkeley Street, an address which proved to be romantically significant. The attractive Lillian Turner, who lived with her parents at 32 Berkley Street, provided an alluring and convenient dating arrangement. It did not take long for Lillian to put a twinkle in Fred's eyes. After a brief courtship, they were married on October 12th, 1912, at the Parish Church, in the Parish of St. Mary, Lambeth. By 1913 the young couple moved to 93 Rectory Lane, Tooting Bec Common, where Lillian gave birth to a baby girl they named Doris. It could be assumed that Fred would have kept abreast of what was happening in Europe, after years of escalating turmoil.

Rising political strife between Germany, France, and Russia, fueled by the escalating tensions between Austria– Hungary and Serbia produced whispers of war.

Otto von Bismarck, a German ambassador, predicted that 'some damn foolish thing in the Balkans,' would ignite the next war. On June 28, 1914, the assassination of the Austrian heir apparent, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by Serbian nationals, brought his prediction to fruition. The house of cards, constructed of alliances between key countries in Europe, was beginning to collapse.

This descent into the abyss of war resembled the tumbling of a row of dominoes, when one falls the rest will follow.

This chain reaction commenced when Austria–Hungary attacked Serbia in response to the assassination of the Archduke. Russia had an alliance with Serbia; therefore Russia declared war on Austria-Hungary. As Austria-Hungary had a partnership with Germany, Germany declared war on both Serbia and Russia. Russia and France had an agreement, so France slid into the abyss alongside the others. This cascading effect would continue as other countries entered the war, with the exception of Great Britten.

Since Great Britten was not involved in alliances with other countries; however, she did have a loose agreement with France, although not politically binding. It was an agreement that they would openly discuss providing mutual aid

should either country be attacked. However, under the existing circumstances, this agreement took on deeper meaning and greater importance to Britain once she considered the consequences if France should lose the war. Parliament was debating this issue when the game changed.

Germany declared that they were going to use Belgium, a neutral country, as an avenue for attacking France. Belgium's neutrality was part of the 1839 Treaty of London.3 Under that treaty the European powers would recognize and guarantee the independence and neutrality of Belgium. The significant part of the treaty was in Article VII, which required Belgium to remain perpetually neutral and the signatory powers would be committed to guard that neutrality in the event of invasion. The cosigners of the treaty were Great Britten, Austria, France, the German Confederation (Prussia), Russia, and the Netherlands. Since Germany's intention was to break the treaty, Britain felt that under Article VII it was their responsibility to come to Belgium's defense. Therefore they sent an ultimatum to Germany; if they invaded Belgium, Britain would enter the war.4

German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg could not believe that Britain would go to war against Germany over a mere 'scrap of paper'. Kaiser Wilhelm was unconcerned by the threat, and ordered his army to invade Belgium on August 4, 1914. When the German Army crossed over the Belgian border, the British Parliament signed the General Mobilization Decree; Britain was officially at war with Germany.

At the age of 26 working as an electrician and still committed to the RFA Reserve, it can be assumed that he was very aware of the escalating tensions in Europe and the possibility of war. He would have had mixed emotions between serving his country and taking care of his family.

Within a few hours after the decree was posted, Fred received orders to report for duty on August 5th at Newcastle upon the Tyne. The forces that had been put in motion prior to this date would forever alter Fred's life.

His journal begins with 'My Diary from notes and well remembered incidences' and proceeds with a nearly daily account of his experiences from August 4th 1914 to May of 1915.

First journal entry:

August 4th

' General Mobilization, will it be declared?' was the thought with me all day. My dear wife first gave me the news, but then I could not believe it, until we walked to the post office and saw the Official Declaration.

And then I knew that, I should have to leave my home and dear ones — for ' Where?' that was my one great thought. And until then I never realized what it all meant; with the conflicting thoughts of my dear ones, and the fascination that I was going to participate in a real scrap. My mind was in a real whirl, and was so until I left home next day, for Newcastle-on-Tyne.[i] And then — 'Where?'

August 5th

I do not dwell on the thought of leaving my dear little wife, my mother, and baby — the journey up north was one of[ii] enthusiasm, for the train was packed with reservists, rejoining the Colours, as I, and all, seemed absolutely mad to go and obliterate Germany!

August 6–7th

Drawing kit, passing Doctors, etc: - was detailed to join the 39th Bde R.F.A Surplus Details, as acting Q. M Sergt, at Borden Camp, [I] was very disappointed, for this meant that I should not go to the front yet.

As I was informed that we should form the nucleus of a Reserve Brigade at Shorncliffe.[iii]

August 8th – 14th

Arrived at Borden, gave great satisfaction to C.O. - and volunteered for immediate Service.

After a little trouble and help of Brigadier Clark, I was detailed to join 43rd Bde RFA. At Deepcut[iv] *– I joined them late on night of 14th, and was glad to meet a couple of chums in the Battery. I joined – 40th Btty RFA.*

August 15th

Getting ready to embark – 'Where?' that was the burning question for all orders were secret.

August 16th

Embarked at Southampton on the SS City of Chester - uneventful trip – disembarked at Boulogne next morning - I knew well that I was in France, grand reception.[v]

Chapter 1

THE BUILD-UP

When war was declared, the Regular Army comprised 247,432 men (all ranks), of which 79,000 were in India. The 'Special Reserve' and the Territorial Force totaled 270,859 men. It was intended that the defence of the homeland would be carried out by the fourteen divisions of the Territorial Force, which was created in 1908 by then Secretary of State for War, Richard Haldane.

County Associations were established, to organise and administer the Territorial Force, the infantry battalions being established at 29 officers and 980 non-commissioned officers and men. The Force establishment was 312,000 men, but this target was never reached and recruitment peaked, probably in June 1909 at 270,000. By the beginning of that year, each Territorial unit had been assigned a specific role, either in coastal defence or as part of a central force. Much of the Territorial Force's equipment was obsolete and the Force never fulfilled Richard Haldane's intention of being immediately available for service overseas. In 1910, members of it had been invited to accept a liability to serve abroad in the event of mobilisation, but barely seven per cent had made the 'Imperial Service' pledge, by September 1913.12

Prior to Britain declaring war, her small, all-regular, professional army was designed to police the Empire, therefore at the outset only capable of fielding, in Europe, only six infantry and one cavalry divisions, totaling 162,000 men. Virtually all of the Regular Army available in Britain, in 1914, numbered about 160,000 men, of whom a little over 100,000 were front-line troops.

Each infantry division numbered three brigades of four infantry battalions with supporting artillery formations. The entire British Army, worldwide, did not amount to more than eleven Regular divisions.

There was an ongoing debate around the decision to send all six divisions to France and Belgium, or hold back one or more to protect the homeland until the

Territorials had additional time to train. In attendance at the August 5th meeting of the War Council was Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith, Sir Edward Grey, who served as Foreign Secretary from 1905-1916; Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty; and Lord Richard Haldane, War Minister, who also served as Lord Chancellor from 1912 until he left office in 1915.

Also present were eleven Army general officers, including Field Marshal Sir John French and two of his corps commanders, Sir Douglas Haig and Sir James Grierson, among others.

At the last minute there was an invasion scare that altered the War Council's decision to send only four of the six divisions, along with one cavalry division. This was slated to take place immediately – embarkation was to begin August 9.

Field Marshall Lord Kitchener had reluctantly accepted his appointment as Secretary of State for War. He passionately wanted to protect Britain's Regular Army. He believed that Britain's professional army, especially the officers, should be used for training new recruits instead of being wasted fighting battles.

He was not involved in the original planning process for fighting a war in Europe, which offered him a different perspective on the impact six divisions of the Expeditionary Force would have on the outcome of the war, especially in contrast to Germany and France's seventy divisions each.

Lord Kitchener disapproved of the French offensive strategy. Therefore prior to British participation in any ' forward movements' in which the French army was not present in large numbers, and in which the British might be 'unduly exposed to attack,' Sir John French was ordered to consult his government first14.

Sir John must 'distinctly understand that his command would be an entirely independent one and that he will in no case be under the orders of any Allied general.'

In this one stroke, Kitchener negated the principle of unity of command. His motive was the preservation of the British Army, and given Sir John's personal aloof temperament, Kitchener practically nullified the order to 'support' and 'cooperate' with the French.

This was to haunt the Allied war effort long after Sir John was replaced and Kitchener himself was dead.

Lord Kitchener wanted the BEF's staging area to be Amiens, which offered a safe distance from the advancing German Army. However, at the last minute it was changed to Maubeuge, where the BEF would experience the full weight of the German forces.

On August 6-10, 80,000 troops of the BEF with 30,000 horses, 315 field guns, and 125 machine guns, were gathered at the Southampton and Portsmouth embarkation ports.

BRITISH COMMANDERS

Field Marshal John Denton Pinkstone French, 1st Earl of Ypres
(28 September 1885 – 22 May 1925)

Sir John French distinguished himself by commanding the Cavalry Division during the Second Bore War. He became Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) in 1912, before serving for two years as the first Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force during World War I.

Even thought promoted to field marshal on 3 June, 1913, French had neither staff experience nor had studied at Staff College in order to excel in his position. As CIGS he forced through some controversial changes to infantry battalions, first changing the composition of a battalion from eight small companies commanded by captains, to four large companies commanded by majors.

He also ensured that cavalry would continue to be trained to fight with sword and lance rather than fight dismounted with firearms. These changes caused concerns regarding French's lack of intellect and knowledge for the position he held.

Field Marshal Douglas Haig, 1st Earl Haig
(19 June 1861 – 29 January 1928)

Douglas Haig was a British senior officer during World War I, commanding the 1st Corps, until he replaced Sir John French as commander-in-chief of the BEF.

Some have criticized him for the number of British casualties that occurred during his command, and regarded him as representing class-based incompetent commanders unable to grasp modern tactics and technologies.

General Sir Horace Lockwood Smith-Dorrien
(26 May 1858 – 12 August 1930)

Smith-Dorrien commanded the British II Corps during World War I and is best known for his successful defensive action in the Battle of Le Cateau. He commanded the British Second Army at the Second Battle of Ypres before being relieved of command by Sir John French.

FRENCH GENERALS

Marshal Joseph Jacques Cesaire Joffre
(12 January 1852 – 3 January 1931)

Joseph Joffre was the French general and commander-in-chief of the Allied army during World War I, best known for regrouping the retreating allied armies in order to defeat the Germans at First Battle of the Marne in 1914.

Joffre was a career officer who saw active service in different theaters. While serving in the colonies he was asked to return to France to be appointed commander-in-chief of the French Army in 1911.

He purged French officers who were ‘defensive-minded’ and replaced them with those believing in the offensive ‘Plan XVII’.

Like French, Joffre was selected to command despite the fact he never commanded an Army, and was labeled as ‘having no knowledge what so ever of how a General Staff works.’

Charles Lanrezac

(July 31, 1852 – January 18, 1925)

Lanrezac was a French general, formerly a distinguished staff college lecturer, who commanded the French Fifth Army at the outbreak of World War I.

At the Battle of Charleroi he intended to strike the Germans on their western flank, but before he could act, the German 2nd Army struck first. After experiencing heavy casualties, he ordered the French Army to retreat. He recovered from his embarrassment at Charleroi by launching a successful counterattack at the Battle of Guise. He was relieved of his command by Joffre before the Battle of the Marne.

Ferdinand Foch

Was born in 1851 and fought in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. He became an artillery specialist in 1907. When war broke out in 1914, Foch commanded the French Second Army until the Battle on the Marne, after which he headed the French Ninth Army.

GERMAN GENERALS

Alexander Heinrich Rudolph von Kluck

(1846-1934)

Von Kluck was born in Munster on 20 May 1846. During the First World War he commanded the German First Army. He was known as an aggressive commander and grew impatient with his counterpart, Second Army commander von Bulow, who was unwilling to allow gaps between the two armies. This eventually led to failure of the infamous ‘Schlieffen Plan’ when von Kluck advanced his army south and east of Paris instead of north and west as planned.

FIELD MARSHAL KARL von BULOW

(1846-1921)

Karl von Bulow was born on 24 April, 1846. At the start of the First World War von Bulow was given the command of the German Second Army and to ensure that the German invasion of Belgium went according to the Schlieffen Plan, he was also given control over both the First and Third Armies. However, his control was rescinded when he and, the aggressive, von Kluck clashed over Bulow's cautious nature.

Bulow's greatest success was capturing the Belgian fortress of Namur and defeating the French General Lanrezac's Firth Army at the Battle of Charleroi on 23-24 August, 1914.23

Chapter 2

ROYAL FIELD ARTILLERY

During World War One the British Army used two mobile artillery units, The Royal Field Artillery (RFA) and the Royal Horse Artillery (RHA). Both units used horse-drawn gun limbers; however, the RHA limbers were navigated by two drivers, each riding one of the six light-draughts horses, whereas the RFA drivers sat on the limber while handling the horses.

Since the RHA used smaller caliber guns they were mobile and served with Cavalry brigades, whereas the RFA used heavier calibre weapons and served with Infantry Divisions.

When supporting infantry divisions, the RFA batteries would position their guns behind the infantry to support either their advancement or protection if under attack. If the infantry were attacked, the guns would continue their support until the very last minute, before being withdrawn.

Fred was assigned to the RFA 43rd Brigade, which was formed prior to the British Expeditionary Force's deployment to France. The 43rd included the 30th, 40th and 57th (Howitzer) Batteries, which were equipped with 4.5 inch Howitzers1. Upon formation, it was attached to the 1st Infantry Division, I Corps, commanded by General Haig.

The 1st Infantry Division was under the command of Major-General S.H. Lomax, and comprised of a number of brigades, each containing multiple infantry regiments.24

The following list displays the brigade's number, then the battalion number followed by the name of the regiments, such as, 2nd Brigade: 2/Royal Sussex

Regiment denotes that the 2nd battalion of Royal Sussex Regiment served in the 2nd Brigade:

1st (Guards) Brigade: 1/Coldstream Guards; 1/Scots Guards; 1/Black Watch; 2/Royal Munster Fusiliers

2nd Brigade: 2/Royal Sussex Regiment; 1/Loyal North Lancashire Regiment; 1/Northamptonshire Regiment; 2/King Rifle Corps

3rd Brigade: 1/Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment); 1/South Wales Borderers; 1/Gloucester Regiment; ' A' Squadron, 15th Hussars

5th Brigade: 2/Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry; 2/Worcester Regiment; 2/Highland Light Infantry; 2/Connaught Rangers

6th Brigade: 1/King's (Liverpool Regiment); 2/South Staffordshire Regiment; 1/Royal Berkshire Regiment; 1/King's Royal Rifle Corps; 'B' Squadron, 15th Hussars.

In 1914 each RFA brigade contained three artillery batteries. Each battery included two sections and each section managed three guns, for a total of six field guns per battery. There were a total of 198 men, including a battery commander, who held the rank of Major (or Captain), along with a second-in-command with a rank of Captain. Others who served within a battery included: a Battery Sergeant-Major, Battery Quartermaster, who held the rank of Sergeant, a Farrier-Sergeant, 4 Shoeing Smiths, 2 Saddlers, 2 Wheelers, 2 Trumpeters, 7 Sergeants, 7 Corporals, 11 Bombardiers, 75 Gunners, 70 Drivers and 10 Gunners acting as Batmen2. Each battery section had 3 Lieutenants (or 2nd Lieutenants) in charge.

A battery also had a small contingent of men trained as signalers / telephonists, who were responsible for maintaining open phone lines between forward observation posts and the battery, which was critical for reporting fire accuracy or target locations.

Lines were repeatedly severed by shellfire, forcing signallers to crawl along the wire in order to locate and repair the break, usually while under shell and/or rifle fire. Their lives were often placed in jeopardy in order to ensure the battery's

ability to continue firing. As a signaler, Fred's journal accurately describes the hazards faced by this small contingent of men.

Howitzer brigades used a 4.5 inch gun, which was manned by a six man crew, capable of firing 4 rounds per minute, with a maximum range of around 7,000 yards.

Loading a shell required the shell to be loaded first and rammed home with a short wooden rammer. Then a cartridge case was placed into the chamber and the breech closed before the gun was fired.

Mounted on the inside of the gun shield, near the top, was a slide-rule- like fuse indicator. The indicator was used for setting the time on shrapnel shell fuses, causing them to burst at the ideal point for greatest effect. Each shell contained 480 lead alloy balls, which would be released when the shell exploded.

SIGNALLERS

When a battery arrived at a battle position, signallers were responsible for immediately running wire to a forward observation post, to each battery section, and to headquarters. When messages from the forward post were received at headquarters, assessments were made before sending firing instructions to the gun batteries.

Two signallers were always on duty serving as operators inside the battery telephone dug-out. 28

The most commonly used field phone was the Fullerphone called the D3 (pronounced Don 3) telephone. Also in use was the Fuller Four-plus-three exchange3. Both of these phones were invented by Captain Fuller.

The lines to each station would be tested by sending a Morse code 'OK'; if a station did not respond it meant that the line was broken – termed 'Dis'. A break in a line required two signallers to be sent out immediately to find and repair the break. During a battle this task was extremely dangerous, exposing signallers to both artillery and rifle fire.

During a battle, and contrary to their training, signallers were forced run phone lines over open ground, hang them in trees or bury them.

Because weather impacted the flight of shells, weather reports would be sent to each battery twice daily, and when received, artillery officers would use various calculations and make necessary adjustments before ordering the guns to fire.

When the batteries were firing, observers in forward observation post would watch where the shells landed and report back to the Battery the range, and degrees left or right of the intended target. 29

In his book 'Plough & Scatter', Iver Hanson writes about one of his experiences as a RFA Signaller the night he had to leave the dugout to repair a broken wire. The passage illustrates the courage and dangers signallers like Fred experienced almost on a daily basis.

' 20 August (Tuesday)

Tonight our position was heavily shelled and about midnight the wires to the four guns of our Battery position in our rear were ' dis' . I tried the receiver again, examined the terminals, but could not alter that hollow sound in the receiver. At some place the wires must have been blown up. At this station there is another Signaller and myself and it was my turn to go out, and after informing the officer, Shaw, who has relieved Cook. I donned on my steel hat and respirator, slung over my shoulder a portable telephone and set out. It was pitch dark, but luckily the shelling had lessened and I trailed through my hand the twin wires, hoping the break was near, not because I had the 'wind-up', but because I was tired and yearned for sleep. At last I came to the break, which must have been midway between us and the Battery. The lines had been blown sky high and the other ends were missing, so I tied my white handkerchief to the ends of the line I had found, so as to find them again and walked around searching for the others. I found them

without much trouble, but after pulling hard I failed to make them meet. The shell must have blown yards out of them. I followed the lines in the direction of the Battery, came to a trench where some ‘slack’ wire had been prudently coiled and which I quickly loosened and then returned to the break. With my jackknife I scraped off insulation from the four ends, joined them with reef knots and bound them with insulation tape. From my telephone two safety-pins dangled on leads. With them I pierced the wires and as soon as the receiver touched my ear I knew by the ‘warm’ sensation that the lines were now OK. However, to be doubly sure, I tapped OK? On the buzzer and immediately received OK in reply.

On returning to ‘B.C.’ I found that the line had been blown up again, my only relief being to mutter a long string of picturesque curses. This second time there was some consolation in finding the break nearer home, and in the inky blackness of the night I repeated the performance, except that this time there was sufficient wire. I crept back to ‘B.C.’, wondering how long the wires would now last. I sank down on my rough bed, glanced at my wrist-watch to find it was 3 am and before I knew it I was fast asleep.

Chapter 3

THE FIRST BATTLE OF MONS

23rd – 24th August, 1914

Ships carrying the BEF arriving at Boulogne were greeted by an enthusiastic French population. Upon disembarking the ships, the troops marched through town to a camp located outside of town.

Fred's Journal:

August 17–19th

In rest camp outside Boulogne we thought it very tame for Active Service30

The French Commander in Chief, Joseph Joffre, requested Sir John French to move his army towards the Belgian town of Soignies. There he would cover the left flank of the French Fifth Army commanded by General Lanrezac. Sir John calculated that his army would arrive in Soignies on August 23.

When the British troops detrained, they advanced north towards Le Cateau and Maubeuge. All along their march the BEF were greeted enthusiastically by the French population, whose crowd seemed to swell the further north they traveled. In some villages soldiers were kissed and decked with flowers. Tables of food and drink were set out; soldiers tossed their regimental badges, caps, and belts to smiling girls and other admirers who begged for souvenirs.32

August 20th

Entrained for unknown destination, passed – through AVIAS, AMIENS, and numerous places - everywhere the stations were crowded by people, who showered flowers, chocolate, smokes, and drinks of all kinds on the troops. And many Tommies4 had their first kiss from a French Lady – we de-trained that night at MASSIGNY.

August 21st

Started our march to the Belgian Frontier, [and] at every village we had a splendid reception, especially, the fortified town of MAUBEUGE. Everywhere the French people gave us hearty welcome; perhaps they realized more than us what events were impending.

While halted outside MAUBEUGE, the French caught a woman say [sic] with two pigeons concealed in her basket, one she had already dispatched without ceremony. The French shot her in a field just on our left.

The German First Army, commanded by General von Kluck, along with the Second Army commanded by General Bulow, had been fighting their way through Belgium. Von Kluck's First Army was marching towards Soignies, expecting to arrive on August 23.

On 21 August 1914, a squadron of the 4th Dragoon Guards was reconnoitering the terrain ahead of the BEF. Among the squadron was a 16 year-old boy, Benjamin Clouting, who was a son of a groom man in Sussex. He was underage when the war broke out, but as a trained cavalryman he was allowed to accompany the BEF when they went to France.

The night of the 21st Benjamin was spending a quiet night with the Dragoons near the main road running through the village of Casteau, which was just north east of the city of Mons.

At 6:30am the Dragoons stopped to water their horses' when a farm worker reported seeing four German cavalrymen coming down the road. A plan was hatched to capture them as they passed. Benjamin was out of sight, along with the rest of 4th troop, who were mounted with swards drawn.

However, a movement of a horse alerted the Germans who turned around. The 1st Troop headed by Captain Hornby pursued the fleeing Ulhans. The rest of the squadron followed the Germans into the village where they joined a larger group of cavalrymen. A skirmish ensued with swards clashing with lances and several of the enemy was downed before they scattered. The Dragoons continued the chase for perhaps a mile until the Germans reached the crest of the road where they turned and began firing. Benjamin saw several of the enemy on the road and witnessed Thomas, a bandsman in the regiment, shot one of the German's from his horse. The whole confrontation could not have lasted more than three minutes before the order to cease fire and withdraw; Benjamin fought in every battle, was wounded twice but survived the war.34

When the British patrol reported their encounter, Sir John surmised that he was facing the German First Army. He was reluctant to attack without knowing the enemy's strength, so he decided instead to take defensive positions along the Mons Canal.

He ordered General Haig's I Corps to form a defensive line east of the city, while General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien's II Corps secured positions to the west.

The British landing sites were kept secret so Von Kluck was surprised to hear that he was facing the British BEF. He knew the British would be landing in France but he did not know when or where until that moment.

His battle plan was to attack the British west flank, but this would require him to move his army a short distance to the west, away from the German Second Army. To proceed with this plan would require permission from General Bulow.

Upon receiving von Kluck's request, Bulow was fearful that a gap might develop between their two armies, offering the enemy an opportunity to flank them. Consequently he denied the request, thus forcing von Kluck to attack the British head-on.

On August 23, 1914, at 9:00 a.m., the German artillery opened fire on the British II Corps. Although the I Corps was not directly involved in the fight, its artillery helped support the II Corps' success in repelling the first German attack.

The British forces, numbering 70,000 men and 300 pieces of artillery, were engaging an enemy with 160,000 men and 600 guns. When the battle commenced, the British found themselves heavily outnumbered in both men and artillery. Nevertheless, they were able to repel von Kluck's first attack by inflicting heavy casualties, forcing von Kluck to wait for his reserves to arrive before launching a second attack. By the time the battle ended the British suffered 1,600 casualties, while the Germans exceeded 5,000.

August 23rd

We dropped into action, at what I know after to be Mons. We could hear very heavy gun firing, and knew ' something' was doing, we remained in action.

It was a beautiful day and towards evening advanced a little on to a ridge, from where I had a decent view of the battle. It was thrilling, and I was enchanted, I think watching the German shell[s] bursting. We only fired a couple of rounds, and returned to our previous night's bivouac, which was in an orchard.

The Battle of Charleroi was fought from August 21-24, where the Rivers Sambre and Meuse converge at Charleroi. It pitted 15 divisions of the French Fifth Army, under the leadership of General Lanrezac, against 38 divisions of the German Second Army.

Lanrezac was order by his Commander in Chief, General Joffre, to cross the Sambre and attack the enemy; but before he had a chance to carry out the order, the German 2nd Army crossed the River Sambre on August 21st. They attacked the French 5th Army inflecting extremely heavy casualties. With a fear of encirclement, Lanrezac ordered his troops to retreat without notifying Sir John French of his decision, thus exposing both flanks of the BEF.

French sensed that his flanks were exposed and facing an enemy much larger than his own; he ordered a strategic and orderly retirement from the battlefield, south towards Le Cateau. There was a flaw in the plan; the retirement strategy of heading south was compromised by the Mormal Forest, which was located between Mons and Le Cateau. The forest was roughly ten miles long and four miles wide. It was traversed by two roads constructed east to west through the woods, but there were mere tracks running from north to south.

French knew that it would be impossible for the two corps to squeeze through the woods, so he ordered II Corps to take the cumbersome route north to south on a road that ran along the western side of the forest, while I Corps would use a road that snaked its way around the eastern side. They were to rally at Le Cateau, which was 25 miles south of Mons.

Aug 24th

The battle still in progress [and] at dawn a section of our guns went to shell a village just by the town of Mons.

They all but got captured, or ' put out.' A large force of German Uhlans, came to within a couple of hundred yards, but owing to a rise in the ground, they fortunately got safely away, and rejoined us about noon.

Then came the order ' General Retirement' , our small army was hopelessly outnumbered in every detail. It was due to the splendid arial [sic] reconnaissance of our aviators, that saved our army, but for that, we would have been outflanked and the result too awful to imagine – the troops on a whole were greatly against the idea of running away. – How much we had to thank our splendid leaders for the way the gigantic thing was carried out, was indeed marvelous – we were running away – we incurred very heavy losses, but the Germans did not have it all their own way, for they paid dearly for every mile of ground.40

As a result of communications problems and forces spread out over a large area, General Haig's I Corps received the order to retire 45 minutes before General Smith-Dorrien's II Corps. This gave Haig a head start before the Germans engaged in pursuit. With II Corps heading towards Le Cateau, and I Corps to Landrecies, each experienced different encounters with the Germans.41

I Corps saw very little action during the Battle of Mons and therefore casualties were few compared to II Corps. The lack of I Corps involvement is reflected in just a few journal entries regarding the Battle of Mons.

Chapter 4

BATTLE OF Le CATEAU

26th August, 1914

The soldiers of II Corps were exhausted from fighting and marching without food or water in the intense August heat. To add to their problems, they were constantly being battered by von Kluck's right wing, as they worked their way down the western side of the forest.

On several occasions the British had to perform rearguard actions in response to increased artillery bombardment. As the day wore on, the remains of II Corps made their way towards Le Cateau. The day had been packed with difficulties, including a late afternoon thunderstorm. With the setting of the sun, II Corps's grueling experience came to a close, as the exhausted troops labored into Le Cateau, sodden and worn out.

Smith-Dorrien had received orders from Sir John French to continue his retreat southwest. However, considering the overall condition of his weary men, it was feared that the heightened level of exhaustion would likely result in the enemy overtaking his troops. He believed their best chance for survival would be to take an immediate defensive stand, a tactic in direct disobedience of his most recent order. Gathering his commanders, he informed them of his decision. Although they understood the consequences, they all offered their support.

He was soon compelled to approach the newly-arrived commander of IV Corps, General Snow. The two discussed the situation, resulting in Smith-Dorrien soliciting Snow to consign IV Corps under his command. He acquiesced, allowing the defense preparations to proceed.

On the morning of August 26, the sun had not yet burned off the light fog blanketing the valley. German artillery opened and maintained fire for several hours on British positions.43

When the bombardment ceased, a wave of grey-uniformed German infantry, in tight formation, marched towards the British lines.

The British responded with rapid and accurate rifle fire, inflicting heavy casualties on the advancing enemy. By afternoon the enemy eventually breached sections of the British line. In one incident, the Germans were in the process of outflanking the British, when a French Cavalry unit, who happened to be in the area, charged and drove them back.

With dusk approaching, Smith-Dorrien decided that it was time to order his commanders to disengage the enemy in order to continue their retirement.

Even though the battle cost an estimated 7,800 British of all ranks killed, wounded or missing and 38 field guns, the German casualties amounted to an estimated 5,000. The battle resulted in the British Army experiencing five days of unmolested retirement.

Chapter 5

I CORPS - SKIRMISH AT LANDRECIES

August 25th, 1914

I Corps's retirement route consisted of a meandering road, which crossed the River Sambre several times. It was jammed with a mass of humanity trying to escape the advancing Germans, including the tail end of French General Sordet's cavalry, as well as remains of Lanrezac's 5th army. The stifling August heat added to the problem causing tempers to flair, but overall the German cavalry and jaegers applied very little pressure. By evening I Corps reached their billets with sustaining only thirty-two casualties

The British troops did their best to constrict their movement on the single lane road, while dealing with the unrelenting August heat. At best, the Corps could only maintain a two mile an hour pace, eliminating any chance of meeting up with II Corps at Le Cateau.

By evening, the fatigued troops reached their billet area outside Landrecies, while General Haig established his headquarters in the town. The VI Brigade billeted in Maroilles, a town just a few miles away.

Refugees arriving in Landrecies reported seeing advance portions of the German III and IV Corps heading towards both Landrecies and Maroilles. A single German regiment of three battalions, with artillery support, had maneuvered through the Mormal Forest and attacked the outposts of the British 4th (Guards) Brigade. When the Germans secretly approached the British line at Landrecies, they received a verbal challenge. By replying in French, the Germans were able to slyly proceed close to the British lines before the British could respond. The two armies clashed, and at times there was savage hand-to-hand fighting. Finally the Germans retreated to the southern edge of the Mormal Forest.46

Rumours that I Corps was heavily engaged reach Smith-Dorrien, which added to his worries. If the reports of hearing firing coming from the direction of Landrecies were true, it meant that there was an eight mile gap between I and II Corps.

Uncharacteristically, Haig lost his composure thinking I Corps was in trouble and requested support, which unraveled French for he did not know if the real threat to the BEF was on the right rather than the left at Le Cateau.

French's concern that both I and II Corps could be enveloped, he ordered Haig to direct his retirement to Guise, due south, instead of south-west towards Busigny where they would reunite with II Corps.47

From the Journal:

August 25th

Rear guard action at FUGNIES5; Battery stampeded enemies' Supply Column – day of alarms—bivouacked.

August 26th

Marching from early morn to late at night through [the towns of MARBAIX, GOHELLE, to OISY.

[It rained] all night, [but] no water for horses, [and marching in the heat] am sorry for infantry, we give them a lift now and then on horses and vehicles, am glad to stretch legs after long days in saddle.

August 27th

[We] marched via ETREUX, GUISE, to BERNOT [and] came into action several times to cover our retirement.

Was pitiful to see refugees at Guise, they were all horror stricken. [They were] removing what they could carry on any kind of cart. All rushing from the town, for the Germans came in the town as we went out.

Long night march, was lucky to stop to water horse near a bakery and managed to secure a loaf of bread. I was very hungry [for] food had been very scarce for a few days 48– I needed no butter on the bread, and put the remainder in horse's nosebag for next day. – [We] bivouacked in field about midnight. 49

August 28th

[We] marched at 4:30 a.m. and came in action near BRISSY6 to cover retirement, and later to support Scots Greys and infantry fighting [their] way across [a] river.

[We] continued retirement, [and] everybody, men and horses, [were] dead beat – weather very hot.

August 29th

Slowed up, had rather easy day, and much needed short rest. [I had] a wash [and] overhauled telephones etc: - [At] ST GOBAIN [we] heard [the] news of 600 Manchester Fusiliers and section of the 118th Btty getting wiped out.

August 30th

Marched to PINON, [a] long, [and] very hot march. [We] bivouacked in the grounds of lovely chateau, [where I] had a dip in [a] lake7.

August 31st

Marched at 3:30 a.m. [It was a] long, hard, hot march. [The] infantry [were] falling exhausted, at every halt. Men [would] go to sleep, sitting, standing, lying, all seem near knocked up – [We] marched till late at night, I slept for hours on and off in the saddle.

September 1st

[We] marched at 5:30 a.m. and [it was a] long march to MAROLLE Bridge. 50

[We passed] COMPIEGNE [and found out later that] about a mile in our rear was attacked at dawn, L Battery H [indecipherable] getting knocked out. We moved just in time, but did not know how near we were to be out up, until later.

[Arrived] at 6:30 p.m. and I went to sleep by my saddle, [later] we were aroused by alarm at 11:30 p.m.

[We were asked] to move, for [the] Engineers were waiting to blow up the bridge. We got across, just in time and up went the bridge.

[The] German Cavalry were very close, [so] we marched through the night and halted on the roadside about 3:00 a.m. In less than a minute I was sound asleep on a friendly heap of stones.

Up again, marching again, how I longed for a sleep —anywhere. Continued retirement reached MEAUX at 5:30 a.m.

September 2nd

Marched via VARREDDES, GERMINGNY8, and bivouacked near JOUARRE, [it was a] long and weary march - very hot.

September 3rd

Halted nearly all day east of SAMMERON [where] the rear guard was slightly engaged – weather hot.

September 4th

Marched to COULOMMIERS, [and] bivouacked early. [I was able to] washed my underclothing. 51

[I] thought we were going to have a day's rest, but had to move quickly in the morning, and take up position SW of COULOMMIERS. We dug in and remained in action all night, leaving position at dawn; marched with Division to ROZNY9.

September 5th

In position at ROZNY, [but] no contact with enemy.

We hear that the retreat is over, with the French we are to advance, how glad we were - anything but that continual marching52

I found it interesting that Fred's journal did not mention what took place at Landrecies. One could assume that his battery was not involved but I expected that he would have at least documented event.

Chapter 6

THE FIRST BATTLE OF THE MARNE

The British and French armies were exhausted after marching 250 miles, while under constant German attack from August 24th to September 5th.

The French Commander in Chief, Joseph Joffre, believed that timing was right to go on the offensive. However, the British were only lukewarm to the idea based on the condition of their army.

Joffre traveled 115 miles to Melun in hopes of convincing Sir John French to join the French in the upcoming offensive. He emotionally expressed that the ‘ supreme moment’ had arrived. He would throw all remaining French soldiers into the battle in order to save France; the ‘ lives of all French people, the soil of France, the future of Europe’ depended upon the offensive. Joffre went on, ‘ I cannot believe the British Army will refuse to do its share in this supreme crisis… history would severely judge your absence.’ His final statement, ‘ the honor of Britain is at stake!’ brought tears to eyes of the British Commander in Chief. He tried to say something in French but could not. Frustrated, he passionately yelled, ‘ Damn it, I cannot explain. Tell him we will do all we can possibly do.’

Joffre returned to his headquarters and addressed an assembly of his officers, ‘Gentlemen, we shall fight on the Marne’. 53

Sir John French’s Marne Dispatch:

On Saturday, September 5th, I met the French Commander in Chief at his request. He informed me of his intention to take the offensive forthwith, as he considered conditions were very favorable to success.54

He announced to me his intention of using the French 6th Army by directing it to move on the Ourcq, cross the river, and attack the flank of the 1st German Army, which was then moving in a southeasterly direction east of that river.

He requested me to effect a change in the BEF's position in order to fill the gap between the French 5th and 6th Armies. I was then to advance against the enemy in my front and join in the general offensive movement.

The German First and Second Armies were approaching Paris from the east. On September 2nd, von Kluck received an order from Moltke, Commander in Chief of the German Army, that he was to follow the Second Army and will be responsible for flank protection. However, the First Army was already a day's march in front of the 2nd Army, therefore von Kluck rejected his appointed task and pushed hard for Chateau-Thierry, increasing the gap between the two armies.

Viewing the widening gap as an opportunity, Commander Joffre ordered the French Sixth Army to attack the right flank of the German First Army, forcing them to turn, which created a thirty mile gap between the two German armies. This allowed the BEF to slip in and attack the right flank of the German Second Army. 55

Sir John French:

About the 3rd September the enemy appears to have changed his plans and stopped their advance upon Paris.

On the 4th September air reconnaissance showed that the German main columns were moving in a southeasterly direction, while on the 5th September they were observed having crossed the Marne.

German troops, which were observed on the 4th moving southeast, were now reported to be halted and facing the Ourcq River and columns were seen crossing at Changis, La Ferte, Nogent, Chateau Thierry, and Mezy.56

Considerable German columns of all arms were seen to be converging on Montmirail, whilst before sunset large bivouacs of the enemy were located in the neighborhood of Coulommiers, south of Rebais, La Ferte-Gaucher, and Dagny.

Journal entries:

September 6th

We were advancing, occupied a position east of [the town] of VOINSLES [so that we could] cover advance of [the] 3rd and 5th Cavalry Brigades. [We] moved forward and occupied [the] line [between] Le PLESSIS, and ANDNOY.

I dismounted behind the house and went inside, there I first saw house sacked by the Germans, [and] everything was destroyed. Outside I saw one of the Coldstream guards, killed by shrapnel, poor chap.

Even though Fred had witnessed soldiers suffering and even death, but it may not have been on an individual basis. For the first time he experienced firsthand the death of another human being where he could assimilate the significance of death beyond that of the individual. Perhaps it caused him to think of his own vulnerability and how it would impact his love ones back home.

I thought then, I wondered if this means the breaking of a woman's heart, or had he little children. It was my first close contact with a dead man, and it set me thinking. My thoughts were all with my dear ones at home. I shall always remember that hour, my real first initiation into the horrors of war. I cannot say I was afraid, it all seemed so strange, but we were advancing that was our cry we've got'em on the run, and we are going to have our own back. – bivouacked south of VOUDNOY.57

Sir John's Dispatch

With First Army Corps encountered stubborn resistance at La Tretoire, just north of Rebais. The enemy occupied a strong position with infantry and guns on the northern bank of the Petit Morin River they were finally dislodged after suffering considerable loss. Several machine guns and many prisoners were captured, and upwards of two hundred German soldiers were left dead on the ground.

The forcing of the Petit Morin at this point was much assisted by the Cavalry and the 1st Division, which crossed higher up the stream.58

Fred's Journal

September 7th

Marched 3:45 a.m. joined [the] Advanced Guard to FALEYS.

[On arriving we found that] engagement was in progress between our Cavalry and the enemy, but the enemy retreated before we could drop into action, [so we] continued [our] advance to JOUY-SUR-MORIN.

September 8th

[On our arrival at Jouy-Sur-Mor] fighting was in progress on our front. We turned to find a German [artillery] Battery [firing] at [us from] MONTSLAGIEL - [As the fighting continued], a thunderstorm [sprang up and] the Germans retreated.

[That night] we bivouacked in the rear of the 2nd Infantry Brigade. [There were] sounds of heavy fighting in front all night

September 9th

Marched at 4:00 a.m. with the Advanced Guard of 3rd Infantry Brigade to the river MARNE, and [the] Cavalry crossed the river. We finally stopped 2 ½ miles north of CHARLY.

Sir John French:

Our advance resumed at daybreak on the 10th, and we were opposed by the enemy's strong rearguard. We were able to drive the enemy northwards and in the

process we obtained thirteen guns, seven machine guns, about 2,000 prisoners, and a quantity of transports. The enemy left many dead. 59

Fred's Journal:

September 10th

Marched at 6 am, at head of [the] main Body, and was soon in the thick of the fight [that afterwards would be] known as the Battle of the Marne.

We dropped into action in the open, my chum and I deciding to run our telephone wire, over a small ridge from our observing party to the Battery. [Doing so], a French Cavalryman galloped past me with blood running from himself and [his] horse.60

I laid out my wire quickly to the guns, and as I was about to connect my instrument, [when] I heard a loud whining sound, [followed by] a horrific explosion, It was our christening of heavy artillery fire. [The bombardment continued] for two continual hours, it was Hell.

I crouched beneath a gun limber, and thought each moment was my last. I was like a jelly man, and must confess my nerves were for the time gone. I wanted to run anywhere, and it was only by the greatest effort of will power, I stood to my work and yelled out the orders to the Battery Leader, for the firing of the guns.

The Northampton and Sussex Regiments retired right through our guns, and drew the enemy's fire on to us. Their retirement developed into a hopeless rabble and panic, our CRA Gen Finley and Colonel Sharpe with a few more Artillery Officers tried to stop them, and urge them to go forward, but it was no use.

While trying to stop them the genl[sic] was killed and two officers wounded, and both regiments lost very heavily. Nothing was between us and the enemy. The

infantry in their mad rush broke my telephone wire [and] I thought my chum at the other end had got knocked over, he thought the same of me. So the Battery for a few moments was out of action, but the orders were passed down by Semaphore10 by two more chums, and we set out to mend our wire.

[In the] mean time the 60th Rifles advanced where the Northampton's and Sussex retired, and the enemy continued their retreat, how thankful we [were]. 61

Sept 12th

Advanced to MONT NOTRE DAME and came into action with French Artillery on hill overlooking River VESLE. From [our spot we could see] wounded coming down, [so] things were warm in front.

Everywhere are signs of the Germans flight, dead men and horses discarded equipment, overturned motors etc.

Everywhere the houses have been looted and the inhabitants seem overjoyed to see us, for they have suffered bitterly at the hands of the enemy.

The Battle of the Marne claimed 250,000 French casualties, 12,733 British, and a similar number of German casualties – killed, wounded or missing.62

Chapter 7

THE FIRST BATTLE OF THE AISNE

September 13, 1914

The Battle of Marne marked a turning point in the war because it stopped the German army from advancing farther into France. It is also significant to note that the Battle of The Aisne earmarked the onset of trench warfare.

After their defeat in the Battle of Marne, the German Army withdrew north towards the Belgian border. Exhausted from the long retreat from Mons, the Allied armies were slow in pursuing the retreating enemy.

The German first and second armies stopped when they reached the Aisne River. They decided to occupy the higher, northern side of the river, which is located about two miles from the crest of the cliffs, between the towns of Compiegne and Berry-au-Bac.

Sir John French:

The Aisne Valley runs generally East and West, and consists of a flat-bottomed depression of width varying from half a mile to two miles. The river follows a winding course near the southern slopes of the valley.

The high ground on both the north and south sides of the river is approximately 400 feet above the valley bottom. It is very similar in character on both slopes of the valley, which are broken into numerous rounded spurs and re-entrants. The most prominent of the former are the Chivre spur on the right bank and Sermoise spur on the left. 63

The plateau on the south is divided by a subsidiary valley of much the same character is found on the small River Vesle, which flows into the main stream near Sermoise.

The slopes of the plateau overlooking the Aisne on the north and south are of varying steepness, and are covered with numerous patches of wood, which stretch upwards and over the edge on to the top of the high ground.

There are several villages and small towns dotted about in the valley itself and along its sides, the chief of which is the town of Soissons.

The Aisne is a sluggish stream of some 170 feet in breadth and measures15 feet deep in the centre; it is unfordable. Between Soissons on the west, and Villages on the east (the part of the river attacked and secured by the British Forces) there are eleven road bridges across it.

On the north bank a narrow-gauge railway runs from Soissons to Vailly, where it crosses the river and continues eastward along the south bank.

From Soissons to Sermoise a double line of railway runs along the south bank, turning at the latter place up the Vesle Valley towards Bazoches.

The position held by the enemy is a very strong one, either for a delaying action or for a defensive battle. One of its chief military characteristics is from the height of our plateau only small stretches of the enemy's plateau can be seen. This is chiefly due to the woods on the edges of the slopes. Another important point is that all the bridges are under either direct or high angle artillery fire.64

Fred's journal entries:

Sept 13th (Battle of the Aisne)

[We] marched at dawn [in the] pouring rain, no food, or time to get any.

Took up position near PAISSY, from there [we marched] to CHIVY VALLEY to meet a German counter attack. 65

Our infantry suffered heavily, many wounded being near me.

The battery dropped into action, and we found an observing point on a high hill, directly in front.

In running our wire, old George and I were very lucky to escape the bullets, for we were in full view of the enemy – they all but got us once, a bullet coming between our noses as we were deciding the best way to run our wire. We laid down, for they were shelling very heavy all around. This was in the afternoon and the sun was very warm. I couldn't move, I must have been tired for I actually went to sleep, [until] a Staff-Officer later was talking near by [sic] he must have thought I got bowled over.

We made our observing station under the shelter of a small rock, which undoubtedly saved us from getting completely wiped out of existence.

We fired heavy all day, and in the night the Battery moved a little to the right.

I remained on the hill on guard, and posted double sentries with order to shoot anybody, who approached without giving prompt reply to challenge. Towards dawn I lost two sentries and had very uncomfortable time searching for them, for the enemy was again very active.

Sept 14th

[There was] heavy fighting all day. Our little rock proved a haven of refuge, all day we were heavily shelled by ' coal-boxes' .

Major Johnson was killed near by [sic] and Major Madocks slightly wounded.

Some chaps dodged under our rock for shelter and gave us some tobacco; we were smokeless and foodless, my feast being that day a half biscuit, left from emergency ration. 66

Sept 15th

[Today was the] same as yesterday. The 113th and 46th Batteries on our left were heavily shelled [and had] many casualties, we were more fortunate.

[There was] very hard fighting all day – was by this time [I] quite used to the thunder like clap of the coal-boxes, and other a sundry missiles the Germans were flinging about wholesale.

Their artillery was superior, we had no heavy guns to compare to them, nor anything like their number – and we suffered greatly, for sometimes it was like Hell let loose.

Sept 16th

Heavy scrapping [all day].

In the afternoon we took up another position on top of MOUNT GOURTONNE, which commanded a good view of the enemies [sic] lines.

I galloped hard from our little rock and was sickened to see the dead horses lying around.

As soon as the guns left the old position the enemy peppered it with shell[s], for we had been spotted by aeroplane.

We took up position at night, [it] was raining hard [and I] was wet through, but had got used to that now. [I] slept under a gun limber [and] would have given anything for something hot to drink, and a good fire.

Sept 17th – October 13th

We have effectively formed our battle line known as the AISNE RIVER. 67

This long period of fighting all day and almost every night, seems to come to one as a second nature.

We fire an average of 250 rounds per day – it is really siege warfare.

Night attacks take place almost nightly [and] I have dug a hole at the back of a limber, as my home.

All days seem to be alike [except that] some days the fighting is more severe than others. They shell us occasionally and it is never safe to move from one dugout or the shelter of the guns.

Our wagon line are in the great caves, which are a wonderful work of nature, but even there we have had quite a few men wounded, and several horses killed.

At times when they shell us severely, we have had to desert the guns and take refuge in an adjacent cave, which undoubtedly has been the means of saving some lives.

I slept in this cave one night, and on going to the guns before dawn next morning [I] lost my way and wandered towards the enemy's lines. When it became light, I was lost and in a valley between us and the Germans. I was confused, and hardly knew what to do.

I could hear rifle bullets whipping uncomfortably near. The ground was full of great holes caused by the German heavy artillery. I knew that when it became light, [I] would be [in] a veritable death trap.

I was hopelessly lost and worse, unarmed, so I decided to take refuge in a shell hole and await throughout the day. [I would wait] until nightfall and try to make

my way back. After a while, I decided I would chance it and rather get to our own lines or meet whatever came my way.

After a deal of wandering and exciting moments, I met an officer who was forward observing, and he directed me to where he thought our guns were. 68

I reached them without further mishap, and my off man and the others thought I had got swallowed, for nobody saw me go. Strangely the path I took from the cave, took me within 10 yds of the guns, by which I could see now daylight had well advanced – well! I laughed.

On the 20th

I managed to get a bit drop of water to wash my face, for it had not seen water for 8 days and I had not shaved for over a fortnight. I looked at myself in somebody's little pocket mirror – and thought what a picture I was.

October 9th

Was [going to] be [a] well remembered day of this period.

During the morning things were a little more quiet than usual, we were sitting around the guns. I left my telephone, which was beneath [a] gun limber. We were having a feast of Bully Beef 11and potatoes - (potatoes did not come our way often), [when] a battery of German artillery found us with shrapnel. The first round burst directly over our No 3 gun, which was just by me, we [all] scattered.

Poor old Bramwell, who was by my side, ducked, and got it in the head.

I dived under the limber to phone my chum Collins, [while] two more gunners dragged Bramwell to the limber, for what shelter it gave. [Then] the two gunners were hit. Collins and I did what we could to poor Bramwell, but it was useless.

The [shell] bullets12 simply hailed on the limber, and we expected to be hit every second, but it saved us. 69

After the shower stopped, we removed poor Bramwell, it was an unpleasant sight to see a chums brains by ones [sic] side.

A shell case was stuck in the ground 2 yards from where I lay – lucky it didn't splinter for Collins and I. would have been bowled over.

Everything seemed to bear marks of that lively hour excepting we two. We dug a hole that night and many times while there the hole saved us, for when it was most quiet, inevitably they would switch over on to us.

Several were wounded at different times when it was least expected, and about this time, night attacks were very frequent and severe, often 3 attacks during the night.

My wire often got broken by shell fire, through a wood of the observation point, in spite of a double line and was unhealthy at times to repair.

On the morning of the 8th October a 'coal-box' dropped by No 5 gun – killing one gunner and wounding four. We were shelled in the afternoon [and] they flung no fewer than 40 'Dud' shell [sic] over us in an hour. It was amusing to feel the thud when they struck the earth, and no explosion ensuing.

We lost several horses and a couple wounded in Wagon Line.

A party was sent out to prepare a new position, but [they] were shelled out. The Major asked us at night would we prefer to move as the position was warm, but we decided at once to stop, for our place was as good as another.

October 12th, was the anniversary of my wedding and the thoughts of my dear wife and child, were more to me than the scrap that day. [I] had a long chat that

night, with Lieut Marshall on the duration of the war – we thought 'about Xmas'. 70

October 13th

I went with two Sections of guns to position on BEAULINE RIDGE. We arrived about midnight, [it was] pitch dark and heavy going. [We] could not use lights or even smoke, owing to close proximity of enemy. We got into position without mishap, at dawn next morning; it was a sight almost indescribable, [for] one could not walk for three yards unless he was in a great shell hole.

A small bank about 10 foot high was the only shelter and the guns and wagons were well dug into this.

We had trenches dug by the side – the guns we relieved must have had a terrible time – this place was called by us ' Pepper Hill' and the infantry called it ' The Devil's Own' .

Collins and I worked like niggers and dug a small cavity under the bank and felt quite at home, we were in fact like rabbits when not firing.

We remained in this position until the night of the 16th, while leaving, a terrific night attack was in progress – we were relieved by the French.

[We] marched all night [and] rested for a few hours next morning, and [then] marched to NEUILLY-ST-FRONT. [We] entrained, for unknown destination, what a great relief it seemed, to be away from the ceaseless sound of battle. 71

While the Battle of The Aisne continued, Germany had assembled an army further north, which was heading towards the lower River Somme, between Amiens and Abbeville.

The BEF was now six divisions strong so Sir John and Joffre agreed that the British II Corps should be rapidly repositioned to Abbeville.

While the British repositioned themselves, the French attempted to attack the German's western-flank. 72

The enemy was trying to accomplish the same, thus producing a leapfrog effect which continued in a westerly direction. Later it became known as the' Race to the Sea'.

Winston Churchill pulled General Haig's 1st Corps and transferred them from Aisne via rail to Hazebrouck, where they started their march north towards Cassel and the cities north of Ypres. 73

Fred wrote:

October 17th and 18th

Travelled by train through AMEINS, [sic] BOULOGNE and CALAIS, detraining at HAZEBROUCK – 25 miles from the Belgian boarder, where we bivouacked [for the night, before marching to CASSEL74

Chapter 8

THE YPRES CAMPAIGN

In medieval times Ypres was once a center for the cloth trade, which is evident in the impressive Cloth Hall. By 1914, the town was better known for the manufacture of ribbons and lace. Both Cloth Hall and Saint Martin's Cathedral are excellent examples of Gothic architecture.

The population of Ypres in 1914 was about 17,000, which made it the nearest large city to the North Sea. It was of military importance because it was the road, rail, and canal center of the area and it was only 30 miles from the Port of Dunkirk. Many of the roads headed westward, towards the Channel ports of Boulogne-sur-Mer and Calais, making Ypres the enemy's last major obstacle. To accomplish their goal of reaching the channel ports, they had to break through the Allies' defenses, which surrounded Ypres. 75

Perhaps the Battle of First Ypres should be renamed "The Battle for Ypres" since it was a combination of four battles, which ultimately converged on Ypres. The battles lasted from October 10th to November 22, 1914. The Battle of La Bassee took place between (October 12 – November 2nd); Armentieres (October 13th – November 2nd); Messines (October 12th – November 2nd); and Ypres (October 19th – November 22nd). The battles were intermingled with one-another, making the timeline of individual battles complex and difficult to sort out. 76

In order to comprehend the importance of each battle, it is critical to understand the landscape around Ypres. The area has been described as a shallow saucer with the town of Ypres at the center. The rim of the saucer represents a ridge, which begins seven miles south of Ypres, in the town of Messines, then continues two miles north to Wytschaete, before curving north-east to Hollebeke, Zillebeke, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Gheluvelt, Winhoek, Nonne Bosschen, Polygon Wood, Broodseinde, Passchendaele, Langemarck, and Bixschoote.

It could be surmised that the First Battle of Ypres was a series of battles fought to control the ridge, which became known as the Ypres Salient. 77

The army in control of the ridge had the advantage of overlooking all of Flanders plain, permitting their artillery a choice of targets. 78

Sir John French had removed two sections of Second Corps from the Battle of The Aisne, and concentrated them at the town of Bethune, which is located 25-30 miles south of Ypres. Winston Churchill, Lord of the Admiralty, pulled First Corps from Aisne and transported them by rail to Hazebrouck. From there they would march through towns north of Ypres.

Prior to the arrival of the German Army, the Allies created trench defensive positions around Ypres in the shape of a small salient13. The BEF held a thirty-five-mile-long line in the center of the bulge, while the French Army protected the British flank south of the city, while the Belgian Army guarded the northern flank.

On October 20 the German Army Chief of Staff, Falkenhayn, ordered his army to break through the Allied lines to capture the ports of Dunkirk, Calais, and Boulogne. Initially they struck the Belgian defenses on the Yser River near Nieuport. The Belgian forces were unable to hold their position, therefore to prevent the enemy from continuing their path along the coast, they opened the sluice gates and flooded the surrounding land. With the water table around the Yser River only a couple of feet below the ground, opening the sluice gates turned the land into a sea of mud, thus forcing the Germans to reconsider their plans. An added benefit of this action was that it protected French's northern flank for the duration of the war.

Now that the German Army was unable to break through the coastal area, they decided to launch a series of attacks against cities around Ypres. As was the case in previous battles, the German forces outnumbered the British; until some of the Empire's Indian divisions arrived to replace the reserves. 79

Chapter 9

THE BATTLE OF La BASSEE

October 10 – November 2nd 1914

The Battle of La Bassee was part of the 'Race to the Sea', which was a series of battles that established a line from the North Sea to Aisne, the initiation of the Western Front.

When the Battle of Aisne stabilized, the British turned their attention to Flanders to address the German threat of capturing the port cities. To prevent this from happening, the BEF's II Corps was transferred by train to Abbeville on October 8th-9th, where Sir John French would plan a general offensive aimed at recapturing Lille. In order to accomplish this, he would have to move his army northeast towards La Bassee.

On October 12th, II Corps was ordered to move east to a line north of Givenchy, where they were confronted by four German cavalry divisions from the I and II Cavalry Corps. The confrontation delayed the BEF from reaching their goal for three days, resulting in 2,000 casualties.

Smith-Dorrien discovered that the German cavalry were to withdraw on October 15th, but he did not know that they were being replaced by the infantry from the German VII Corps. He developed a new offensive plan which entailed the II Corps to attack from the southeast in hopes of outflanking the German troops who were attacking the French lines to the south.

He launched his attack on October 16th, 1914. Even though he recaptured Givenchy, Smith-Dorrien failed to reach La Bassee. As a result the BEF suffered another 1,000 casualties.80

The offensive failed to reach La Bassee because the German VII Corps received reinforcements from the German XIII Corps, thus thickening the German lines. The total casualties for Givenchy amounted to 4,000 British and 2,000 German – killed, wounded or missing. 81

Chapter 10

THE BATTLE OF LANGEMARCK

21-24 October 1914

Haig's I Corps marched northeast from Hazebrouck to Langemarck where the 2nd Division was sent to take up a position north of the city while 1st Division was positioned west of Langemarck and stretched to the Yser Canal. The battle that ensued was part of the first battle of Ypres. It began as an encounter between troops of the British I Corps and German troops, which were simultaneously advancing. The encounter ended with the Allies forming defensive positions around Ypres. The Germans launched a series of fierce attacks which would become common for the battle of Ypres.

At the end of October, two divisions of I Corps were separated by Ypres. French ordered the two corps to reform at Langemarck in order to attack to the north in hopes of liberating the town of Bruges82

Fred's journal:

October 19th

Marched to CASSEL and had days rest, during [the] march my charger had severe choke, [and] came down with me, but I managed to keep him up.

We were greatly elated to be in a town, and feasted ourselves on cakes and sweets etc; after the hardships the previous weeks, this was a grand change indeed. 83

I Corps left their billets on the morning of October 20 at 0:600. The roads were heavily congested, but by evening they reached their position two-and-a-half miles east of Ypres, to the left of IV Corps.84

October 20th

Marched to POPERINGHE once again we were in Belgium. It was awful to see the pitiful sight of refugees streaming into the town from the outlying towns and villages, when the enemy were advancing rapidly.

I happened to stop to pat a pretty little child, and gave it some biscuits I had in my pocket, the poor little mite was simply starving.

In a minute I was surrounded by children, I emptied my pockets and haversack.

With a couple of chums we collected all the biscuits and Bully Beef in the Battery, and gave it to the women and children. It was pitiful to see them struggling to get at us, and we had a job to keep the men away – for we had not any to give them, and the women and kiddies had everything we had in the food line – Bivouacked outside the town.85

Haig's 1st and 2nd Divisions were to start their march to the German frontier on October 21. The French Cavalry Corps covered Haig's left flank, while 2nd Division was forward on his right.

By early afternoon, 2nd Division had almost reached the battered 7th Division; however, there had been 200 casualties from German flanking fire. The leading formations of 2nd Division were approaching the main German defense line when they came under heavy rifle and artillery fire. Unable to proceed, they dug shallow trenches to maintain position.

Meanwhile the 1st Division, made steady progress until the French cavalry, on their left flank, came under heavy attack. With additional enemy troops approaching them from the north, the French cavalry were ordered to withdraw. 86

Knowing that his withdrawal would expose the British left flank, the French commander refused to leave without a formal order. Upon their eventual retirement, pockets of French soldiers remained in action until dark.

Haig heard of the French withdrawal about the same time the commander of the British IV Corps reported he was under heavy attack; his only reserve amounted to a single cavalry brigade.87

By late afternoon Haig ordered them to dig-in and prepare to defend. Both 1st and 2nd Divisions were attacked but were able to turn the enemy away.

Sir John believed that there was only one German corps north of Ypres, when in actuality there were five positioned between Ypres and the coast.

It took time for the two divisions of the I Corps to coordinate their march towards Langemarck. While advancing they began to encounter an increasing number of German troops, which concerned General Haig. At 3 p.m. he ordered his men to hold their positions and begin excavating makeshift trenches, intending to form a new front line only 1,000 yards beyond the city. As it happened, the trenches did not form a continuous line nor were they protected by barbed wire; at best they were only three feet deep in some places. Since the trenches were not connected, they were prone to infiltration.

By October 21st the Allies realized that the enemy was in greater numbers than expected, greatly altering any plans for launching an offensive. Joffre decided to send IX corps to Ypres.

The Germans launched an attack along a large stretch of the British line on October 22nd which was repulsed, except for 1st Division's centre, where the 1st battalion of the Cameron Highlanders held a semi-circular position north of the Kortekeer Cabaret. It was late in the afternoon when the enemy penetrated the northwest section of the line – a series of unconnected trenches. Once inside they were in the position to attack the rear of the remaining British line, forcing the Camerons to retreat at 6 p.m., leaving a gap in the British line. 88

In response Haig created a reserve force designed to 'putty-up' holes in the line. The reserve force was used on October 23rd to recapture the cabaret; at the same time a major German attack against Langemarck was defeated.

On the same day, French General Foch launched a counterattack from the front held by the British 2nd division. Foch looked to the British to support his attack, however, due to communication problems, Haig did not receive Foch's request until it was too late. Despite the failure of the counterattack, the French division replaced the British 2nd division. The following day the 1st division was also relieved by two French territorial brigades.

After October 24th the fighting at Ypres moved southward, where the British position on the Menin road was fiercely attacked on October 25-26th. Action then moved to Gheluvelt on October 29-30th.89

Fred's Journal:

October 21

Marched before dawn towards the village of LANGEMARKE, the village was being heavily shelled. We reconnoitered, but for some time could not find a position, [until] finally two sections took up position just in rear of the church – I went with remaining section through the village. As I passed through there were a lot of wounded French in the open by the Churchyard. We dropped in action by the railway – as we could not find an observation station, I stopped by a deserted power-house. Later [I] was ordered to regain the two sections with remaining Battery Staff. As we went towards the railway crossing, a shell burst in the centre of the road, 30 or 40 yards ahead, as we galloped past the Church.

The wall saved us, for a shrapnel burst against the wall, which but for the wall would have been right among us. As I galloped past the spot where the wounded Frenchman were 2 hours before, the whole lot were dead and in pieces - it was a horrible sight. 90

We rejoined the guns without mishap, and George and I were ordered to lay our wire to a large deserted convent, which was by our Infantry.

We were sniped at pretty hard by Germans in houses to our left; one missed me by inches that evening. I went the next morning and got his bullet for a souvenir. I was on guard with 12 men in front of the guns.

The French Infantry had relieved in the afternoon [and] our Infantry went up to hold what they lost. They were greatly outnumbered, but held on grandly. We were firing at very short range, which we knew would be observed by the enemy; neither were we mistaken, as the next two days showed.

The night passed quickly, we dug in by side of a stream, which effectively screened us from the continual presence of rifle bullets - had no food all day, and was not at all pleased with events.

October 22nd

George and I laid our wire to the convent – it had been deserted hurriedly, and was well stocked with provisions. We found biscuits, butter, jam, etc and had a good feed, and brought some away with us.

[It] was fairly warm getting back to the guns – they sniped [at] us across a large scarred field – wasting good ammunition.

Two signalers dug a shallow trench by the edge of the field and amused themselves, putting their hats on a flag pole, for the Germans to shoot at. ditto

We fired hard all the morning. The enemy replying on the village, they did grand shooting on the Church [for] shell, after shell passing through the steeple. 91

Finally it caught fire, and was soon one mass of flames, and the steeple from the clock collapsed with a crash, it was an awe inspiring sight. But it seemed they wanted to get at us, for they shelled the fields in front and behind very hard.

Our wagon line, [which was] some distance behind, had a few men wounded and horses killed. Fortunately at the guns we had only one man wounded.

Our infantry had been forced to retire, we sent for a infantry escort for our guns of 100 men, but one platoon of 20 men. At dark George had gone along wire to forage for food, bullets were very plentiful and I stuck to our little trench waiting for him to get into communication and return with the spoils.

Things seemed to [be] quieting down for about half an hour, when suddenly the Germans played a machine-gun dead on us. We all thought they had us, but the infantry were on our left now, although we did not know, [and they took care of them].

While waiting for George, I heard strange rustling sounds in the trees [on] the other side of the stream. I, for the moment, thought it was some of the German Snipers getting in our rear. I crawled very cautiously on my knees to a small bridge crossing, and along the stream. [I] found after no little time, the sound I had heard was caused by some tame rabbits, which the chaps had released from an adjoining farm. It was amusing to think of it after, but not at the time.

Old George returned loaded with goods, when I mentioned the machine gun and the rabbit stalking, he said 'B – the guns and rabbits too. Have a bit of this strawberry jam, Old China – it's the goods.' I declined the food, for I was too dry

to eat, and nothing drinkable was to be got, except the water in the stream, and that was dirty. But I had to drink it next day. The night passed rather quickly. 92

October 23rd – 24th

At dawn George and I went along our line, which had got broken during the night, [and] some small houses by the road, which the previous day had been occupied by our chaps, were utterly destroyed.

[There was] one great hole in the centre of the road; [it] was the largest I had seen. [It] must have been caused by a very large shell.

By the terrific burst in the village, they were putting the same like there, for with every shell a complete house seemed to go in the air.

We reached the convent and connected the telephone in the attic. We had to get in a ditch on our way back for the shelling was rather hot. [When] we reached the guns, we fired a few rounds, [and] the wire was broken again by a 'coal-box'. We kept up communication by flag.

Our wire was broken no less to five times during the morning, and it was very unhealthy work repairing it.

A little on our right was a small farm, and chickens, rabbits, and all provisions had been left by the inhabitants, when they left so hurriedly. There were also a couple of goats, which we collared for milk. [Later] I prevailed upon George to nip over to the farm, while I attended to the firing, and make a can of tea.

No sooner had he left, than a German Horse Artillery Battery [opened dead on us]. It was horrible, and nothing could have lived above the ground. By the guns, we were absolutely tied to our little trenches, and it was impossible to fire.

This went on for two hours, I thought old George must have been caught by the farm. [I] was greatly surprised to see him come crouching along by the trees with the can in his hand. About 5 yards by my trench, our two officers were, one of them, Lt Marshall, stood up to shout to George to get under cover. 93

I was talking to George as Marshall shouted, [then a] whining bang [and] Marshall collapsed with seven shrapnel bullets in him. [This] all happened in a flash. Old George must have had a charmed life then, for how he lived through it, back from the farm, is to me marvellous.

We had the tea anyway, [for] it cost near one life, and a dozen very narrow escapes. We enjoyed it, for tea with real milk was good.

We were shelled very heavily all day [and] several were wounded.

The Wagon Line and hospital in our rear caught it also. The position was untenable, and we received orders to retire at nightfall.

At dusk George and I resolved to wind in our wire, we would need it, as no other was obtainable. I had just started, when a 'Johnson' 14 burst immediately in front, rather more close than where they had been bursting in salvos of four all day.

I laid down, and splinters and lumps of earth passed over my head. I heard the other three coming, and dodged behind a large tree by the stream, in my haste [I] fell into the stream; perhaps it was well for me I did, for the splinters took some pieces out of the tree.

That seemed to be the German's final salvos, for after waiting awhile, we started again.

An occasional bullet was all that passed to the convent. [It] was dark when we got there, and we hurried down to the crossroads where our horses would be awaiting us. We were held up by French Cavalry but eventually got to our horses, only to find that another fellow, named Hodge, who was to meet us from the convent, was not there. 94

We decided to go and look for him, and on the way we heard him coming along the road. We hastily arranged to give him a scare [by] turning our hats with peaks to the rear. We waited, it was very dark, when he got near us we both jumped to the head of his horse; old Hodge thought Germans had him, and it was not until we burst out laughing, he tumbled to who we were.

We marched back and joined the Brigade. [We] then marched, through various villages and finally bivouacked about 12 miles from our recent hard scrap. It was great relief to sleep on straw and above damp ground.

October 25th

A day of rest – The farm was inhabited [and we] had a feast of bacon and tomatoes, also some boiled milk, the first since I left home.

Busy in morning overhauling phones, and in afternoon writing letters. It rained hard at night [with] no shelter [we were] wet through. George and I made our bed on some dry straw, but was near washed away before morning.

October 26th – 30th

In position of readiness at HOUGE, [which is] 3 miles from YPRES, [it] was very quiet but for an occasional shell.

[We] were in the grounds of a beautiful chateau, [but] the ornamental lakes and gardens [were] being used for horses, [and] everything is wrecked.

On the night of 28th, shrapnel burst over us, the flash of shell bursting woke me up. Some of the chaps ran into the woods for shelter, but George and I decided to remain where we were, and we soon [fell] asleep again. 95

At daylight we found two chaps were wounded, one after died, and five horses killed and several wounded; all within 20 yds of where we laid.

On the afternoon of the 29th, we went into action. We ran a wire, and when I went to connect up, I was greatly surprised to find a shrapnel bullet embedded in my telephone, which had laid by me the previous night. I fired it up and managed alright.

We fired a few rounds and returned to the chateau, [where we] remained until the morning of 31st.

Heavy firing seemed to be all around, and a ceaseless stream of infantry wounded going towards YPRES. The weather was horribly wet and nights very cold.

October 31st – Nov 6th

[We] marched through the beautiful old town of YPRES, which contains some very fine buildings, notably the Cloth Hall and Cathedral.

[We] took up a position of readiness outside the fortifications of the town, [where] we dropped into action in various places around, doing little firing.

The enemy commenced bombarding the town on Nov. 2nd with their great 17' Howitzers. The noise of these shell[s] passing over our heads is almost indescribable.

On Nov. 5th a few of us in the morning had made one of our famous 'Bully stews' and we were about to commence the feast, when we heard some of these monster shell[s] coming; they fell in the fields on our right and rear.96

We had to move, [and] as we moved, we heard more coming. They dropped almost in the same place. One shell burst near a cow and threw it bodily about 30 yards. One came by the sound, directly for us, it was like an express train roaring through the air.

We crouched behind one of the ammunition wagons, the shell landed about 15 yds and exactly in line on our front. The concussion was terrific, and the wagon rocked as if it were near a minimum earthquake.

We afterwards measured the hole; it was gigantic, 23 foot deep and 20 foot in diameter – fully three to four times as big again as the often met 'Jack Johnson's'. I afterwards found out that these shell[s] were 11.2" and not 17" as we thought.

We moved by the river, and although very cold, I had a plunge – the first since the time of the retreat. It's a very common thing to go a week or even more without having a wash. Since the time of the Aisne, food is a little plentiful.

[The] weather very wet, and the whole country is a veritable sea of mud.

The enemy seemed to shell everywhere haphazard, especially at night.

On the morning of 6th we were read an appeal from Gen. French urging us to hold on despite the overwhelming masses of the enemy, until reinforcements could be brought up.

Attacks were 'twice daily' and were nightly occurrences.
Our losses were very great, but despite the fact of our trenches being so thinly manned, and our guns so few, our line was formed and maintained. As the enemy were stopped in France, so were they in Belgium. 97

Thanks to the splendid leadership of our little army, and our chaps…[sic]… love for dangerous scraps, and [to] the splendid Infantry in the trenches who suffered infinitely more than us, in every way.

Nov. 7th – 12th

[We were] in various positions in front of YPRES – these days with Head ' Q[uarters] 25th [Brigade].

The Battery returned each night to a field off the main road, things were very quiet, but for occasional shelling.

On the night of 10th, I waited at the 25th [Brigade], for my horse to be brought over. After some time, George came and told me it was impossible to get over with horses, [so] we walked across to where the horses were, and [then] started to find the Battery. After travelling some good way we knew we were lost, it was very dark, and the road was being shelled. On coming to a deserted farm, where some Infantry were, we decided to anchor till morning - by a friendly straw stack. We got

some food and tea from the infantry - with some straw from the stack and blanket from our horse, we had the best bed we had had for some time. We found the Battery next morning and there had been the usual speculation that we had got nipped.

When dawn arrived on 11 November it greeted the BEF's 1st and 2nd Divisions with a heavy downpour, which set the stage for what the Official History described as 'the most terrific fire the British had yet experienced'. The German artillery concentrated its fire on I Corps and on Wing's 'division' of II Corps.

On the night of 12th we came through the most severe storm I have ever experienced. I was simply blinded by the fierce rain and wind, [and I] had no cap. We were simply like drowned rats, [and] we had an awful march in the pitch darkness.

[In the] storm I could not open my eyes, [so] I simply held on the saddle and let my old charger follow the rest.

We were too wet to sleep in mud and rain that night, and after a deal of skirmishing, George, Collins and I got into a deserted estaminet15 and remained there till morning. 98

It was a horrible night and the shelter we got was acceptable. It took me two days to get dry – I would have given a deal to had [sic] sit before a fire in dry clothes.

Nov. 13th

One section of the Btty [Battery] was in action near ZONNEBEKE16, I went with [the] other two Sections to a position by a small wood17 –

about 3 or 4 miles NE of YPRES.

We did a little firing, and towards evening I ran a line to K Battery R.H.A. to get into communication with the trenches. It was very wet, and everywhere was bog and mud.

I was beside a railway embankment [and] the CO K Battery and I had high words about the communication. He promised to get me 5 years or shot – I told him to get on with it, etc.; he treated me quite differently next morning.

Another night in the rain, could not lie down, had a wet 'standing up sleep' by the embankment.

Nov. 14th

Went with left Section and positioned beside 51st Battery, [which was] on a ridge a thousand yards in rear of the trenches. We could see the German fire trench - and watch our own lyddite18 burst. [It was] a very near position and we had hardly began to fire when they had us spotted.

That day the Prussian Guard made a big attack, [but] our guns with the 51st did great slaughter, and from the trenches, the ground was covered with dead Germans and many of our chaps.

During the morning they peppered us, but we kept on replying, and the 51st with the quick-firing 18 pounder did grand work keeping up a wall of fire on the German foremost trench. 99

Early in the afternoon we had to desert our guns, for it was suicide to stay. We took cover in some small trenches about 30 yards behind the guns. About every twenty minutes, [we would] run up to the guns, loosed off a couple of rounds gun fire, and back to cover. The 51st rushed up and let go six rounds gun fire in grand style, and ran back to cover.

I was with the 51st at this period, [and] we had been two days almost without a drink of any description and my thirst was troubling me more than the shell and bullets. When running from the guns, I came across the Officers' cook in a dugout, about 50 yds in rear of the guns, and he gave me a mug of rather dirty water, but it tasted grand.

I went back to the guns with the Sergt Major of the 51st, and a shell dropped within 10 yards of us. The concussion rather shook us and we immediately fell down and dodged splinters. On getting up we were both surprised to find that the other was not hurt - the shell cut down a tree, which fell across my overcoat, which was lying close by.

We kept up firing until dark.

George, Collins and I were beside a wagon getting something to eat, when the enemy's infantry attacked, and the bullets rained over. We ran to the guns for shelter of the shield when Collins pushed me a little aside, a few seconds later [he] got a bullet in the foot – the thick boot, luckily diverting its course. Had he not pushed me, I should have caught it, and with perhaps not such lucky result.

After a while George and I managed to get into a small trench, he had dug during the day.

The attack dropped off, but they shelled us throughout the night. We had a good sleep [even though] it was cold and wet, but we were strictly exhausted and slept. 100

In the morning the ground all around was peppered with shell-holes and we were indeed fortunate that one did not drop in our little trench, for quite a few were very near.

Nov. 15th

The section continued firing during the morning – we were shelled a little, but nothing in comparison with previous day - I went over to the 51st Btty, to get my telephone, which I had left in a dugout the day before when we had to leave the guns - but found that a shell had dropped plumb into the dugout and destroyed the instrument - there was two other telephonists with me the previous day and had we not run when we did - undoubtedly we should have all shared the fate of our instruments.

I went back to the Section and about noon we had orders to take up position with our right Section - [while] the 51st Bty remained and had it as bad, or even worse than the previous days. Two guns were put out of action, and their casualties were heavy. One shell killed five and while they were being buried, another dropped among the burial party killing four more.

We reached our right Section in the afternoon and I remained with the wagon line, and was in PIEGUAT – very wet and cold, shelling all night.

Nov. 16th

I removed some wagons into an adjacent wood for aeroplane cover.

While going to a ruined farm nearby, a bullet hit a wooden gate post as I was passing. I dodged behind the post, for I thought a sniper had me, but it must have been a spare bullet, for nothing else came near me. During my look round the farm - I got some water, a few potatoes, and a couple of onions. On returning to the wagon line, [upon] getting a tin of 'bully' prepared a dinner, which I had not had for a considerable time. 101

I had just got it nicely on the go, when I was sent for from the guns, and was ordered to run a line to the reserve trenches.

George and I ran the line and I remained with a borrowed instrument from a Sergeant of the R.E's in a dugout with a Gordon named Bruce (whom I afterwards learned was the famous runner).

I was warned by him to keep low, as snipers were pretty busy – and almost as he spoke a fellow coming towards me got a bullet in the chest - the bullet just missed me, so I took his word and kept low.

It was terribly cold – he gave me some bread and cheese, which I gratefully took. I sent the orders to the guns until after midnight, and things seem to quite down.

I pitied Bruce in his bare legs and kilt, but he slept sound, but I could not sleep a minute for the cold, and was glad when morning came. I was stiff with cold, and dared the snipers in running up and down for a few minutes to [undecipherable] warm myself.

Nov. 17th

I was under the direction of Major Baird,102 Gordon Highlanders, to send the orders for our guns to cover the trenches, as much as possible.

Shortly after dawn, the enemy made a big attack and considering the small number of men in the trenches, it was marvelous that the enemy didn't break through. About 9 o'clock they started to shell us. The first shell went into a dugout a few yards in front of me and killed a Lieut. Colonel and his servant, [while] another fell 10 yards to my right, and killed or wounded 3 officers, who were buried – they were hastily dug out, and presented a pitiful sight. Many were wounded during these first few minutes. 103

An Artillery Officer and a man rode up and dismounted. The man jumped into my dugout, hitching the two horses to a tree about one yard away. Almost immediately a shell burst right over - [and] killed the two horses, one of whom fell dead, right on top of the dugout - the blood running in.

Then the shells came in terrific force – all the Gordons had to run, for it was murderous – I felt like running – but could not leave my instrument, as the guns would not be firing.

So I stuck [while] they all ran, bar Bruce. He asked me if I was going to stop, I said yes, and he answered – 'If it's good enough for you, it's good enough for me' as he stopped with me. In the run, a chap passing got a splinter in the leg and a bullet in the arm. I dragged him in and we bandaged him up; he was with us throughout the day.

Two more attacks took place, and every available man was pressed forward – and that was very few.

During the day Bruce was telling me that of the 1400 hundred in the regiment who left Plymouth in September – all that remained of the number was 34, and he was one of them. They had had some terrible times, he said, but this is worse than any of them. I fully believed him, for I was sick with the smell of powder and blood.

Bruce very pluckily ran to and from where Major Baird and the rest were in trenches outside the wood, to take messages from me, and to bring the orders for the guns.

All day the enemy kept up the fierce bombardment.

Old George came and relieved me that night, for I was fairly done and felt bad, [because] four nights out of six I had had no sleep and very little food. I was absolutely more like a sponge than a man, and on reaching the guns, Collins took

on the instrument and I got my two blankets. They were wet – it was snowing and freezing hard, but I slept like a top, and in the morning [I] felt a little better and quite able to carry on with the business. 104

Nov. 15th – 21st

I remained with the guns and George with the Gordons. We did considerable firing, but [with only] an occasional shell coming over, it was peace compared with the previous 17th.

We were informed that we were to [be] relieved by the French. [We] were to be withdrawn and to have a rest, to refit and get made up in horses and men.

I was also told that the Centre Section had had a warm time. Hodges19, my lube offman, was killed. Taylor20, Farmer and several others wounded.

We were elated at the idea of a rest, and a change from the ceaseless scrapping of the last weeks – and we sadly needed a rest.

Nov. 22nd

Left our position at dawn and marched to YPRES, the whole country was in a terrible condition, not a farm was standing – and the town itself was ruined. The beautiful buildings destroyed, how different when we marched through less than a month before. We got safely through the town and marched all day. It was very cold, [and] I walked most of the time, for my old charger could not keep his legs on the slippery roads.

We arrived at night and billeted at a farm a few miles from MERRISS, where we were to stop and rest. How strange it seemed to be away from the ceaseless roar of gun fire, etc. The sheds, barns, cow-houses in which we slept seemed to us like mansions. 105

Nov. 22nd – Dec. 12th

This, our period of rest, was greatly appreciated for a time, but soon became monotonous.

Our Officers had short leaves, and I was fortunate, through the good graces of Major Madocks, to obtain 48 hours to BOULOGNE. He kindly gave my dear wife instructions on his arrival in England, how to get to BOULOGNE, time etc.

I left camp on the evening of the 1st Dec and rode into HAZEBROUCK. [I] arrived by train at BOULOGNE 7 o'clock next morning, [and] I expected to meet my wife at 5 o'clock. [I] was delighted to see her at 11 o'clock – our stay together was short, the shortest 28 hours of my life, and to leave her next day was the hardest thing for me through the campaign.

I arrived back in camp next day – and we were all getting impatient to get to business again. [We] were pleased to hear on the 11th that we were [leaving] for the firing line next day.

Dec. 13th

Marched to PONT DE NEIPPE and billeted in a farm just outside the village. [We] could hear the old familiar sounds in the distance, the rockets from the trenches.

Dec 14th

Marched through PLOEGSTRESTTE, [sic] and took up position beside the 35th Btty, behind a ruined chateau, on the grounds of which had once been a beautiful garden.

We ran our line beyond the chateau to some ruined houses, from where we had a good view of the German trenches and MESSINES beyond.106

On my way back, I went into a partly wrecked house and was surprised to find a young woman and her brother, and her five little children. The baby I took from its bed, for it reminded me of my own, she gave me some hot milk. As well as I could I tried to induce her to go away to a safe place, but she would not. She told me her husband a soldier, had been killed. I was rather upset I think over the poor little kiddies – I gave them my peppermints and odd money and came away. I never had time to go that way again, but I thought of the kiddies very often.

Dec. 18th to 20th

Remained in position for a bombardment of MESSINES. Did little firing until 20th, when the bombardment took place – it was horrific, but we had nothing much at the guns in return. The wagon line was shelled out in the morning, but fortunately only one man was wounded. We left position at 5 o'clock and marched back to our rest billet.

Dec. 21st to 23rd

Remained in rest billet until morning of 23rd, then marched to BETHUNE and billeted in a school house.

George and I having no blankets, resolved to find a bed somewhere, and while asking a Frenchman in our best French, his daughter came along and invited us to their house, which was only a little way down the street. They were very poor, but treated us handsomely.

The mother, an elderly woman, doted on us, [and] gave us as much as we could possibly eat and drink. [She] made us up a bed on the floor, she called us at 3:15 am and had coffee ready for us. On leaving [she] was indignant when we went to make payment.

We marched at 4:30 am towards LA BASSEE to take up position. It was Christmas Eve – a very grim Christmas Eve, and my thoughts were far away.107

Dec. 24th

We took up position at CAMBRIN, CUINCHY and GIVENCHY were just on our left; all were in a state of ruin, for heavy scrapping had been recently taking place.

George and I took over the wires of the 47th Btty, and were very busy firing up our communications. We had a grand observing station – a ruined brewery – It was beautifully furnished – but everything was ruined, lovely carved furniture and ornaments – in pieces – a piano, and large gramophone, everything had been left as it stood. I secured plates, cups and an assortment of cooking utensils and took [them] back to the guns.

Late that night I had orders, to get into communication with 2nd Infantry Brigade. It was uncomfortable laying the line on account of rifle bullets, but did the job without mishap and got back to my dugout.

The thoughts of the previous Christmas Eve were with me, and I felt anything but happy.

Dec. 25th

I forgot it was Christmas Day for I was busy firing up communications all day. All was very quiet – it was a mutual truce.

I had a piece of bacon for dinner – one of the chaps secured a chicken and some vegetables, and at night we had a feast. George came down from the observing station, and with couple more, we went to a large house nearby and collared a piano, and brought it to the guns.

We had a concert, it was not a great success – but we made the best of it. There were many poor devils much more worse off than us. 108

Dec 26th

Rather quiet, occasional shelling.

[I] had a sorely needed wash, the first for four days.

[We] did little firing. [The] dugout [was] swamped, [so we] moved into a small shed at rear of farm. [It was] very cold and drizzling rain.

Dec 27th – 28th

Nothing unusual, [we] fire at intervals, at working parties of Germans, and [into] trenches. They search for us but all over, and save for a shell now and again, nothing near us.

Kept up very slow fire at long intervals throughout nights.

Am on duty day and night with phone, but am so used to it, that it takes little or no effect, although I never have a complete night's rest when in action.

Dec. 29th and 30th

Did much firing – and were credited with smacking up a German Field Battery near LA BASSEE.

Dec. 31st

The morning was rather quiet.

At 2:30 pm we were subjected to a fierce bombardment and a heavy attack. The enemy capturing the KEEP,21 by the railway embankment, from the Kings Royal Rifles, who [then] recaptured it again late in the afternoon. 109

About 10pm the Germans again attacked and gained the KEEP and REDOUBT.22 We were firing heavily all night, it was very cold. After two attacks we succeeded in again retaking the lost ground about 3 am, but could not hold it, the KRR's being ' bombed' out soon after gaining possession.

Throughout the night until about 8 am we kept up hot fire – the New Year had came in, in real war like style.

Jan. 1st

I was hard out, and handed over the instruments to Collins. [I] went in a stable and slept throughout the day - a little shelling took place, but I slept through it all.

Jan. 2nd to 23rd

During this period it was the usual give and take. We fired every day at any targets that presented themselves, and were occasionally shelled, very often at night.

The REDOUBT was retaken and lost many times, each attack meaning a fierce couple of hours work, till at length it was [undecipherable] 'no man's land' for neither side could hold it.

Rifle bullets at night made it rather uncomfortable.

The weather was very cold and wet, a few heavy snowstorms. I sometimes had a fever in a bucket23.

Night attacks were very frequent – we were lucky in having only a very few casualties, [or] wounded, although quite a few went away sick.

One day during this period, I went to Bethune and had a much needed bath and change of underclothing. It was a relief for I, as most, was overstocked with 'livestock'. 110

Jan 24th

During the day the enemy bombarded the lock of the canal and railway line (by our observing station) with their 8' Howitzers. Sending over 129 shell[s], which did no material damage, one shell fell plumb on the railway line and flung a piece of the rail (about 4 foot) right over our guns fully a thousand yards, and fell a few yards from where I stood, I thought it was a shell coming over.

We afterwards read in the papers of this incident and smiled to read the lot they made of it, whereas when it happened, we took little notice. We were rather more interested watching the effect of their fire on the lock, which they failed to hit.

Jan 25th

The night passed rather quiet, rather less than the usual amount of shooting taking place.

About 7:15 am I received a message from 25th Brigade R.F.A. that information had been given them by a German deserter that a big attack on our front [at] GIVENCHY and CUINCHY was to take place at 7:30, preceded by a heavy bombardment.

I sent the message to the observing station, and hurriedly rousted the gun detachments and the officers. [When] it started, it was horrific, and we replied with rapid gun fire.

The enemy captured our first line trenches and our infantry fell back to our observing station.

Two out of my three lines got cut by shell[s], and while I attended to the instruments, Collins ran a line to the left Section.

[He] was knocked in the knee, the same shell wounding two men and fatally wounding Mr. Watkins, a young officer that had only joined us 8 days previous. I sent two of my chaps along the observing line, and [then] the line to the 25th Btty got broken. 111

I hastily got Collins, who was limping, to attend to the phones and I went along the line to the 25th.

It was warm for we were heavily shelled, [but] I found a couple of yards of the line had been cut out by shrapnel, where the wire ran along the top of a wall. I climbed on the wall and dropped very quickly, for a shell seemed to whiz inches by

my head, bursting a little way behind. I got a piece of wire that had been holding up a vine of some description, and managed to fire up the line. [I] was very glad when I reached the 25th to find that communication was through.

I stopped a little while to recover my breath. On my return to the Battery I had a very close shave from a splinter from a shell, which burst directly in front of me. I fell on the ground, I think just in time.

Reached the battery without mishap – just as I reached them, another big shell burst right in the farm, about 20 yards from where my little shed was, luckily doing no damage except to the building.

Just opposite, a shell came right into the shelter where the telephones for the left Section was, severely wounding one man.

It was in all a horrific morning, our infantry had been forced to retire right back, and we thought it was all up.

We were the foremost Battery, and knew if our infantry lost the small ridge in front of us, it was the finish of us and our guns. Luckily the third line stood, and we kept up firing at ground range, [and] were credited with doing great execution among the masses of advancing Germans.

The Guards Brigade, consisting of the London Scottish, Seaforths, Camerons and Guards were brought up as reinforcements, and stopped the German advance, [by] entrenching themselves behind our original line. In spite of all attacks the Germans held on to the ground they had gained by overwhelming odds. 112

Jan 26th

At 7am our troops made a counter- attack on the lost ground. After a fierce bombardment, of about 3 hours, the Guards regained a little, but failed to get our six fire trenches, which was the objective. We fired feverously and were shelled in return. One 6' going right into the cellar of the farm by the left Section, quite a few near the guns, but only two men were wounded.

The fight went on more or less all day, but we failed to get any further forward, but repulsed an attack from the Germans in the afternoon.

The 1st Siege Battery, on our left rear, got it hot, shell going right into the farm where they were in action. It was very soon ablaze – but in spite of the heavy shelling, I watched the gunners pluckily go to and from the farm, moving the wounded. After a while [they] managed to put out the fire in spite of the persistent shelling. It was grand to watch them, [although] at times they were obscured from view by smoke from the shells and fire. But they stuck it grandly and after putting the fire out, they started shooting again, as if it were to get their own back.

During this time some shells fell very near us, but did no damage.

Jan 27 and 28th

[In] two days of attacks and counter attacks, very fierce and severe scrapping, we regained all the lost ground, and numbers of prisoners were taken.

No further casualties at the guns, which was lucky considering the shell fire they put over at intervals.

The Germans did a great deal of entrenching during the night's and we had some good targets to shoot at during the day.

Our guns were dandy, for considering the enormous amount of shooting they had done throughout this campaign, they were still perfectly accurate and our lyddlite accounted for many things. 113

Jan 29th to Feb. 5th

A rather quiet period, the enemy seemed to have [undecipherable] off a little, for at times they never replied to our fire, and the attacks of the previous week seemed to have quieted them considerably.

Feb 6th

We bombarded the Germans front line trenches from BRICKFIELD to RAILWAY TRIANGLE. The fire was so effective; the Guards advanced and captured the trenches without losing a man. The Artillery there, were afterwards highly praised in a letter for the splendid work; special inference was given to the way communications were kept by telephone. Undoubtedly which was for our Battery, for at one time I was receiving and sending orders for the firing of three batteries, besides our own, [with] all their lines being broken by shell-fire.

The Battery received orders to move to relieve 55th Battery R.F.A. next day.

Feb. 7th

I proceeded with the Captain to CROIX BARBETTE, to take over the wires and communications of 56th Btty. Arriving there about midday, one of the telephonists took me along the observing wire to the trenches. It was rather quiet, save for occasional bullets; - the chap with me was rather merry. He advised me to crawl on hands and knees across a point of ground just in rear of the trenches, as we would get sniped. I followed a little way, but on seeing an R.E. fellow walking about unconcerned, I thought, if it's safe enough for you, it is for me. I walked

across much to the other fellow's disgust. He got wild when I insisted upon him helping me to mend a broken wire and prop it up on some trees. He was very angry and crawled back, but it was quite unnecessary, [for] I walked back and nothing came near me.

We went along some reserve trenches – a few light shell we[re] bursting a little beyond – I traced a wire into a redoubt and dodged inside as one whizzed over. 114

There was an Infantry telephonist inside, he said, 'Just in time mate, three of ours were put out just outside a few minutes ago.' He was working away quite unconcerned. I had a chat for a few minutes and started back, I think much to the relief of the chap with me. On the way back, the enemy were shelling RICHEBOURG Church with 'coal-boxes'. I stood on the road and watched about 20 go over, but they failed to reach it.

I went into the village at night and had a few drinks of rotten trench beer, came back to the 56th Btty and slept in a loft of the farm, and had the best night' sun broken sleep that I had had since we were at rest, seven weeks before.

Feb. 8th

Had a day on my own strolling about, waiting for the Battery to come – they arrived about 6 pm. As we could not bring the guns into action until after dusk, on account of aeroplanes observation, the 56th Battery went out of position and moved towards RICHEBOURG. We took up the position of their guns, also the farm, and it was about the most comfortable billet we had ever had, as regards accommodation, for the building had escaped shell fire, which was strange, considering the village at the back had been ' through it' as had those on the left and right.

Feb. 9th – 17th

One day whilst in front, the Leicester's found the bodies of two young girls in a nude condition, underneath some straw, just in front of the trenches. They had evidently been violated and murdered some long time before, for the bodies were decomposing – just two more innocent victims and proof of the way the blaggards fight. 115

During this time it was very quiet; we did little firing. It was the nicest position we had ever been in.

It was a change, except for Collins having a couple of squeaks while repairing the line. Nothing worth recording happened, for nothing in the nature of a shell came near us, and we did very little night firing – we called it rest.

Feb. 18th

We were recalled from action to go to rest. [We] marched via BETHUNE to rest billets near LILLIERS.

I was fortunate in securing a billet in a house, the old lady [in the house] gave me a bed. It was rather crude and hard, but still a great change.

I was greatly elated in hearing that I should be going on leave during this period of rest.

Feb 19th – March 2nd

Our period of rest, - we were well employed in overhauling, etc. I was to go on leave on March 3rd, and was bitterly disappointed when the order came in that all leaves were stopped from March 1st.

March 3rd

Marched from rest billets towards RICHEBOURG, [and] billeted at night near LA FOSSEE. [The weather was] very wet and cold.

George and I, by our good French, managed to get quite a good feed of eggs in a farmhouse nearby. 116

March 4th

Marched at 3 am, and came into action about 400 yds on the right of RICHEBOURG Church. We were informed that we were to bombard NEUVE CHAPELLE – a village on our left front, which had been in the hands of the Germans since October.

We took a fresh position and were engaged in gun-pit digging and fortifying it as much as possible. 117

Chapter 11

THE BATTLE OF NEUVE CHAPELLE

10th – 13th March, 1915

The Battle of Neuve Chapelle took place between the 10th and 13th of March, 1915. Located in northwestern France, Neuve Chapelle is north of La Bassee and west of Lille.

Sir John French's plan was to capture Neuve Chapelle, then push forwards to the village at Aubers, situated a mile east of Neuve Chapelle. If he successfully captured Aubers, his army would attack the German defenses at Lille, a major communication hub.

To accomplish these goals, Sir John French had amassed 374 pieces of artillery. Douglas Haig's First Corps was to lead the attack after a 35 minute artillery barrage. It was reported that the shelling was so intense, that it resembled machine gun fire.

The focus of the shelling was along the German frontline. The bombardment was so devastating, that when the shelling lifted, only small sections of the enemy's trench remained. All of the entanglements were in ruins, allowing the British to rush through the opening.

Often there was hand-to-hand fighting as the British and Indian infantry made a rapid advance towards Neuve Chapelle. It took just four hours to secure the village.

Unlike Neuve Chapelle, the artillery barrage around Aubers was lacking in both scope and intensity, causing little damage to the enemy's trench entanglements. Of the 1,000 troops that attacked Aubers, no one survived. 118

Another source placed the casualties at 11,000 killed, wounded, or missing. Although unsuccessful at Aubers, the British still maintained control of Neuve Chapelle. However, due to the lack of artillery shells, as well as communication problems, the British were unable to maintain the extensive119 artillery pressure necessary to prevent the enemy from bringing up its reserves. With the additional strength, they launched a counterattack on March 12, which the British were able to repel, enabling them to hold the ground they had gained.120

The following excerpt of Sir John French's Seventh Despatch covering the Battle of Neuve Chapelle:

I do not propose in this despatch to enter at length into the considerations which actuated me in deciding upon the plan, time and place of my attack, but Your Lordship is fully aware of these.

As mentioned above, the main attack was carried out by units of the First Army, supported by troops of the Second Army and the general reserve.

The object of the main attack was to be the capture of the village of Neuve Chapelle and the establishment of our line as far forward as possible to the east of the city.

The object, nature and scope of the attack, and instructions for the conduct of the operation were communicated by me to Sir Douglas Haig, in a secret memorandum dated 19th February.

The main topographical feature of this part of the theatre is a marked ridge which runs south-west of Lille to the village of Fournes. Within the village, two spurs run out, one due west to a height known as Haut Pommereau, the other following the line of the main road to Lilies.

The buildings of the village of Neuve Chapelle run along the Rue du Bois-Fauquisart Road.

There a few big houses, with garden walls [are], located at a triangle of roads just north of the village where the enemy had established a strong post with the aid of numerous machine guns. This location flanks the approaches to the village.121

The Bois du Biez, which lies roughly southeast of the village of Neuve Chapelle, influenced the course of this operation.

Full instructions as to assisting and supporting the attack were issued to the Second Army.

The battle opened at 7.30 a.m. on the 10th March by a powerful artillery bombardment of the enemy's position at Neuve Chapelle. The artillery bombardment had been well prepared and was most effective, except on the extreme northern portion of the front of attack.

At 8.5 a.m. the 23rd (left) and 25th (right) Brigades of the 8th Division assaulted the German trenches north-west of the village. At the same hour the Garhwal Brigade of the Meerut Division, which occupied the position to the south of Neuve Chapelle, assaulted the German trenches in its front.

The Garhwal Brigade and the 25th Brigade carried the enemy to where the wire entanglements had been almost entirely swept away by our shrapnel fire.

The 23rd Brigade, however, on the north-east, was held up by the wire entanglements, which were not sufficiently cut.

At 8.05 a.m. the artillery turned on to Neuve Chapelle, and at 8.35 a.m. the advance of the infantry was continued.

The 25th and Garhwal Brigades pushed on eastward and north-eastward respectively, and succeeded in getting a footing in the village.

The 23rd Brigade was still held up in front of the enemy's wire entanglements, and could not progress. Heavy losses were suffered, especially in the Middlesex Regiment and the Scottish Rifles.

The progress, however, of the 25th Brigade into Neuve Chapelle immediately to the south of the 23rd Brigade had the effect of turning the southern flank of the enemy's defences in front of the 23rd Brigade.

This fact, combined with powerful artillery support, enabled the 23rd Brigade to move forward and by 11 a.m. the whole of the village of Neuve Chapelle were in our hands, as well as the roads leading from the eastern end of that village.122

Our artillery, using a curtain of shrapnel fire, completely cut off the village and the surrounding country from any German reinforcements.

Prisoners subsequently reported that all attempts at reinforcing the front line were checked.

Steps were at once taken to consolidate the position won.

Considerable delay occurred after the capture of the Neuve Chapelle position.

Due to the violent nature of the attack and by passing through the enemy's trenches, as well as buildings of the village, the infantry was greatly disorganized; therefore it was necessary to get units together before pushing on.

The telephonic communication being cut by the enemy's fire rendered communication between front and rear most difficult.

The fact of the left of the 23rd Brigade having been held up required adjustment since the 8th Division was kept back, and caused a portion of the 25th Brigade to fight north of its proper direction of advance.

An orchard held by the enemy north of Neuve Chapelle also threatened the flank of an advance towards the Aubers Ridge.

I am of the opinion that this delay would not have occurred if the clearly expressed order of the General Officer Commanding First Army been more carefully observed.

Many of the difficulties may have been corrected if the General Officer Commanding 4th Corps had been able to bring his reserve brigades into action earlier. As it was, the further advance did not commence before 3.30 p.m.

The 21st Brigade was able to form up in the open without a shot being fired, thus showing that at the time the enemy's resistance had been paralyzed.

The Brigade made good progress pushing forward in the direction of Moulin Du Pietre. Subsequently it was held up by the machine gun fire from both the houses and the defended work in the line of the German entrenchments, which was to the right of the 22nd Brigade. 123

Further to the south, the 24th Brigade, which had been directed on Pietre, was also held up by machine-guns coming from houses and trenches at the road junction, six hundred yards northwest of Pietre.

The 25th Brigade, on the right of the 24th, was also held up by machine-gun fire from a bridge over the River Des Layes, which is situated to the north-west of the Bois Du Biez.

Whilst two Brigades of the Meerut Division were establishing themselves on the new line, the Dehra Dun Brigade, supported by the Jullundur Brigade of the Lahore Division, moved to the attack the Bois Du Biez. However, they were held up on the River Des Layes by the German post at the bridge. 124

The defended bridge over the River Des Layes and its neighborhood immediately assumed considerable importance.

Whilst artillery fire was brought to bear, as far as circumstances would permit, Sir Douglas Haig directed the 1st Corps to despatch one or more battalions of the 1st Brigade in support of the troops attacking the bridge.

Three battalions were thus sent to Richburg St. Vaast.

Darkness coming on, and the enemy having brought up reinforcements, no further progress could be made.

The Indian Corps and 4th Corps proceeded to consolidate the position they had gained.

1st Corps, in accordance with orders, delivered an attack in the morning from Givenchy, simultaneously with that against Neuve Chapelle. However, the enemy's wire was insufficiently cut, therefore very little progress could be made, and the troops at this point did little more than hold fast the Germans in front of them.

On the following day, March 11th, the attack was renewed by the 4th and Indian Corps, but it was soon seen that a further advance would be impossible until the artillery had dealt effectively with the various houses and defended localities which held up the troops along the entire front. 125

Efforts were made to direct the artillery fire accordingly, but owing to the weather conditions, which did not permit of aerial observation, and the fact that nearly all the telephonic communications between the artillery observers and their batteries had been cut, it was impossible to do so with sufficient accuracy.

Even when our troops which were pressing forward occupied a house here and there, it was not possible to stop our artillery fire, and the infantry had to be withdrawn.

The two principal points which barred the advance were the same as on the preceding day-namely, the enemy's position about Moulin de Pietre and at the bridge over the River des Layes.

On the 12th March the same unfavorable weather conditions prevailed, hampering artillery action. Although the 4th and Indian Corps most gallantly attempted to capture the strongly fortified positions in their front, they were unable to maintain themselves, although they succeeded in holding them for some hours.

Operations on this day were chiefly remarkable for the violent counter-attacks, supported by artillery, which were delivered by the Germans, and the ease with which they were repulsed.

As most of the objectives for which the operations had been undertaken had been attained, there were reasons why I considered it inadvisable to continue the attack at that time.

I directed Sir Douglas Haig on the night of the 12th to hold and consolidate the ground which had been gained by the 4th and Indian Corps, and to suspend further offensive operations for the present.

On the morning of the 12th I informed the General Officer Commanding 1st Army that he could call on the 2nd Cavalry Division, under General Gough, for immediate support in the event of the successes of the First Army opening up opportunities for its favorable employment.

This Division and a Brigade of the North Midland Division, which was temporarily attached to it, was moved forward for this purpose.

The 5th Cavalry Brigade, under Sir Philip Chewed, reached the Rue Bacquerot at 4 p.m., to render immediate support, but he was informed by the General Officer Commanding 4th Corps that the situation was not as favourable as he had hoped, and that no further action by the cavalry was advisable; therefore General Gough's command retired to Estaires. 126

The artillery of all kinds was handled with the utmost energy and skill rendering valuable support in the prosecution of the attack. The losses during the three days of fighting were, I regret to say, very severe; numbering- 190 officers and 2,337 other ranks, killed; 359 officers and 8,174 other ranks, wounded; 23 officers and 1,728 other ranks, missing. But the results attained were, in my opinion, wide and far reaching.

The enemy left several thousand dead on the battlefield, which were seen and counted. We have positive information that upwards of 12,000 wounded were removed by train. Thirty officers and 1,657 other ranks of the enemy were captured.

I can best express my estimate of this battle by quoting an extract from a Special Order of the Day which I addressed to Sir Douglas Haig and the First Army at its conclusion: - ‘I am anxious to express to you personally my warmest appreciation of the skillful manner in which you have carried out your orders, and my fervent and most heartfelt appreciation of the magnificent gallantry and devoted, tenacious courage displayed by all ranks whom you have ably led to success and victory.’ 127

Fred recorded the following:

March 4th – 9th

Preparing for the big bombardment, Batteries were everywhere. Under almost every tree there was a gun, and our giant 15" Howitzer was to make her debut, as well as quite a few of our new 9.2" Hows.

We laid out double lines to our observing station, as well as lines to various parts of the trenches. [Supply] dumped a large amount of ammunition [so that] every preparation was made to give the Germans the biggest shock they had yet received at our hands.

March 10th

The bombardment of NEUVE CHAPELLE commenced at 7:30 am. It was horrific to hear the tons of metal going through the air; in all we had 476 guns on about a four mile front. The 18 pounders were cutting the enemy's wire embankment. 128

The heavy artillery were all concentrated on the enemy's line of trenches and the fierce fire was kept up for ¾ hour.

We then lifted to the BOIS-DU-BEIZ to enable our infantry to attack. Our trenches were lined with Garhwals24, Purchase,25 and several other regts of native troops. The Leicesters made the first charge, taking the German trenches in grand style but were held on the edge of an orchard outside NEUVE CHAPELLE. A regiment of Territorials26 came to their assistance. A terrific hand-to-hand fight ensued, especially at a spot we called, 'The Street of Hell'. Eventually, after fighting that can hardly be described, we gained the village about midday. Many

prisoners were captured. They were brought in batches and they all seemed terrified and glad to be captured.

The natives advanced on the right and captured the trenches in front, but were held up by machine guns in a redoubt by the left edge of the BOIS-DU-BIEZ.

The Gurkhas did grand work, especially with their wicked little knives, which accounting for many German heads. As the Germans ran from the trenches, the little Gurkhas were after them, and many of the little chaps clambered on the backs of the big Germans [with] the knack [of] Sweeney Todd for throat cutting.

The Seaforths were brought to assist the natives at this point, and in a splendid charge, (which according to our officers and many old campaigners who were observing with us), was the finest sight they had ever witnessed. They went into the murderous fire as if they were going on a picnic. In spite of the enormous losses they incurred, the[y] captured the redoubt and its contents of Germans and machine guns.129

Meanwhile our Infantry on [the] left dug themselves in, in front of the BOIS-DU-BEIZ beyond the village of NEUVE CHAPELLE.

We kept up continual fire until dark, from when we slowed down and searched for enemy reinforcements.

During the afternoon the enemy launched several giant counter-attacks, and our losses were great, but we did not budge an inch on any of the ground we had won.

My observing line had stood all day, but the two officers and telephonists who followed up the infantry charge could do no good. The Major observed all our fire and we were credited with doing good work during the day.

Not counting shrapnel, we fired 1201 rounds of Lyddite; it was a fierce day and we were glad when darkness came to give us a little respite. The enemy made another attack after dark but it was repulsed. Both sides kept up artillery fire all night.

Our infantry had suffered terribly for ceaseless streams of wounded were coming down. The ground from our old front line trenches, to where they were now, were literally covered with corpses, both of our chaps and of Germans, especially in NEUVE CHAPELLE itself.

Strangely enough we were a happy crowd that night; especially we, the Battery Staff, for the day's horrors were forgotten in the thought that we had given them a little taste of the gruel they so often gave to us, and that we had easily beat them at their own game.

During the night firing I managed to write my usual letter to my little girl. 130

March 11th

We opened at dawn on the BOIS-DU-BEIZ, which was still held by enemy. We learned that the 7th Division had advanced as far as possible on our left, but had failed to take the AUBERS RIDGE. So to cooperate, our Division (Lahore) was ordered to consolidate the position we had won, and to hold it, which we did in spite of numerous counter attacks.

It was awful to see the Germans mowed down by our guns, for they made attack after attack in close formation, and were literally blown to pieces. Every attack, leaving the ground in front of our trenches more thickly covered with bodies.

A column of their reinforcements were caught plumb by our 15" Howitzer. One round made a gap in the column of about 60 yards – men, horses and vehicles going in the air. In a confused mass, this our most mighty gun, did some terrific work.

My line, marvel of marvels, still held, only being broken once by shell fire. The day was much the same as yesterday – continual firing.

A stream of wounded and prisoners, as one batch, was coming through the RUE-DE-BOIS. Three of their own shell[s] came long into them, [which] killed or wounded about 20 of the prisoners. Strangely enough [they] never touched any of the natives who were escorting them.

Our artillery observers in the vicinity [said that] it was funny to see the niggers laughing at the Germans, the thought of them being outed by their own chaps seem to amuse them greatly. They made the Germans walk slowly and keep to the road, for it was evident the scared prisoners would have liked to have run across country. 131

March 12th

[We] kept up steady rate of fire throughout the night, raising a little at dawn, and throughout the morning [we] engaged various targets. The enemy commenced to bombard RICHEBOURG (which was about 400 yards to our left) with salvos from their 8.2 Howitzers (nicknamed coal-boxes or Jack Johnsons).

In the afternoon my communication broke down; consequently the battery had to stop firing. I went along the line and whilst crossing a main road, shell[s] were falling pretty thick, although the majority were going into the village. I found the break in the wire; a shell had hit it square and chopped a piece out. I took our now favorite cover and got in the hole made by the shell. [I] repaired the line, [then]

tapped in and found everything alright. Another line running in the same direction was also broken like mine, so I repaired it, tapped the line and asked who they were, it was the 9th Brigade. They were profuse in their thanks for it had saved them an uncomfortable job.

Was still pretty hot when I reached the battery; the guns were very lucky for nothing fell between us and the village.

They were bombarding the poor old church fiercely. Three of us (two telephonists and myself) were watching the effect of the fire and speculating which would be the next to go in the air.

Several splinters [were] whizzing over our heads at every salvo, but we took no notice, until one small piece hit me in the muscle of my right arm, but [it] did not penetrate.

The next salvo, a good sized piece, just grazed my cheek and went about 2 inches into the ground at my feet. I scratched it out, [but] had it been a couple of inches more near, it would doubtless have given me a nasty knock. 132

We thought we had watched the fun long enough, so we went into our little house and had ' tea' – nothing short of an earthquake would make us miss that at this time, for some cows near bye [sic] kindly supplied us with milk, and milk in tea is ' bon' .

In the evening the Manchesters caught 5 spies in RICHEBOURG. They were found in underground cellars and must have been there months. They received scant ceremony, and no doubt were soon put out of the world quickly. For spies, either man or woman, were promptly dealt with, especially by the French.

The night was rather more quiet, only doing little firing; we had gained and consolidated our objective and the Germans seemed glad to keep quiet, as long as we would let them.

March 13th to 15th

[It was] rather quiet, done little firing. Collins had a squeak on 14th whilst going along [the] wire, a shell bursting near missed him, but caught a Garhwal, and cut him clean in two.

I went into RICHEBOURG to have a look round; I went all over the deserted and desolate piles of ruins that had a little time before [been] a pretty little town.

The church had suffered severely, only parts of the walls and tower remaining. The churchyard was pitiful to look at, graves and tombs absolutely heaved up skulls and bones lying about everywhere. The top of the steeple had been caught fair by a shell and had fallen off and the top stuck firmly in the ground just by the door. It was as if it had been planted there. Everywhere was a hopeless mass of wreckage, which can hardly be described and wants seeing to actually believe.

March 16th

Marched to PAQAULT and billeted, orders to move before dawn. 133
March 17th

Marched and dropped into action near LAVENTIE. This town was deserted and partially in ruins. Were busy all day laying our line to a ruined house in rear of our trenches, from where we could observe the German lines and AUBERS, a town in their possession. Whilst doing this, we went into an establishment, which was not damaged, and had only been abandoned the day before. It was beautifully furnished and in the attic were [an] abundance of women's clothes. We secured

plates and cooking utensils, several things that would be handy to us, and took [them] back to the guns.

In a field near the establishment were a good number of graves of our chaps, quite a miniature cemetery, and every grave head a cross and name upon it, etc. It was fenced in. I thought it will [be] a consolation one day perhaps, for some woman to visit the spot where someone dear to them was laid. This was a very unhappy day for me, for my thoughts were far away, and I slept but little at night, more due to my thoughts than the cold.

March 18th to April 3rd

This period [was] very quiet. [We were] firing for registration only, by observation and by aeroplane. I find this very interesting, signaling to the aeroplane by means of a very powerful light. We were credited with doing damage to German gun targets.

Hostile aeroplanes were very active, but invariably our 13" pounder anti-aircraft guns gave them a warm reception.

The Germans brought down one of our aeroplanes, which fell between our fire trenches and theirs. We destroyed it with our guns to prevent [the] enemy getting any of the remnants. 134

The enemy aeroplanes frequently drop bombs on ESTAIRS27, some 5 miles from us. Almost every day they drop a few shell[s] in LAVENTIE. As in every place, the church, a beautiful old structure, is utterly destroyed.

I came through the town one day at a stretch gallop, as it was being shelled. Stopped a little way outside and watched the fire, which always seems to have a

fascination for me. They did some grand shooting and repeatedly hit the church, one shell clearing off clean the one of the four pinnacles that remained.

I learned that the 37th Brigade, including my old battery, the 55th28, were in action near us. After a deal of scouting and a ride on my old charger, [I] almost [rode] up to the trenches, when I was chased back by the infantry. Eventually found them and spent a pleasant afternoon. All my old comrades were Sergeants; Sergeant Majors and two [others] had got their commissions, for great changes had taken place during the last 3 years.

All the old officers, excepting one, had gone. I learned that several of my old chums had been killed and felt very sorry about one of my old friends named Hayman. The last time I met him was on Christmas Eve 1913, when I was shopping with my dear wife. I little thought then that the next time I heard of him [he] would be 'blown to bits, [as] we only found his legs'. He married a girl living in Battersea, only two weeks before the war.

On Good Friday I was interviewed by my CO. he told me he would forward a strong recommendation for old George and I, that we both should be granted commissions and advised us to take promotion which we had [previously] refused.

[I] had several rides to wagon line through ESTAIRS and LAVENTIE and enjoyed this period of what was practically inactivity; during the whole time only two shell[s] came near the guns.

The bombardment of AUBERSs was postponed and we received orders to take up [an] old position [at], CROIX BARBETTE.

April 4th

Collins and I proceeded to CROIX BARBETTE to take over wires and communications of 35th Battery, [which] we were to relieve.

We arrived about midday, and went along observing line to [the] observation station, which was what little that remained of the brewery in Neuve Chapelle.

It was interesting to go over all the ground that we had won in the big scrap on the 10th March. Everywhere was hapless ruin and the old German trenches were in a very battered condition.

One could not walk for shell holes and graves; many of the graves [had been] ploughed up by shell and the remains re-buried. There were still scores of dead Germans between the trenches, and the smell was not pleasant.

The church and churchyard was utterly destroyed, but strangely enough, a large crucifix was standing intact and apparently untouched, while everything else within a mile from it had been battered to pieces. In the whole village, there was not a house standing.

Rifle bullets were plentiful as we wired, at times in full view of the enemy trenches. However we fixed up the line without mishap and on the way back [we] came across the grave of a telephonist of the 35th that had been killed. We felt sorry for we knew him quite well, and worse still he had been killed by one of our own 6" shell[s] which fell short. A 6' Howitzer had also blown up in a field in front of the battery, killing 3 and wounding several.

We were told that it was not so quiet here, as it was when we were here before. From the sights around, it was quite evident, but still the little farm was still intact. 136

All the inhabitants of the village in the rear had been cleared out. I got a woollen mattress, which made a grand bed, and was much preferable to the straw we got; [it] was firm and warm.

The battery came in rather late, and things seemed a little noisy in front, but it was only a 'wind' attack [from the] batteries in our rear firing slowly all night on barring. 137

It is most difficult to justify the loss in lives to ground gained, as the following casualty figures show the Battle of Neuve Chapelle casualties amounted to 7,100 British and 4,200 Indian killed, wounded or missing. It is estimated that German casualties were about the same.

Chapter 12

THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES

The Second Battle of Ypres could be considered as a resumption of the first battle, since weather conditions and the coming of winter had curtailed the continuation of fighting. Although sporadic fighting persisted throughout the winter, neither side launched a major offensive.

The German Army was planning a major attack when the weather improved in April. This would be the only major German offensive on the Western Front in 1915. Some historians believe that the primary reason for this offensive was to distract the Allied army's attention away from the Eastern Front.

Perhaps the Second Battle of Ypres is best remembered for the introduction of the German Army's newest weapon, chlorine gas, than for any strategic achievements. Chlorine vapor is heavier than air, so it flows along the ground following the contour of the land. Upon reaching a low area, such as a trench, it descends into the trench filling it with a lethal yellowish-green mist.

It was first used on the Eastern Front during the winter of 1915, resulting in limited success as a result of the sub-zero temperatures impacting the dissipation of the vapor. This problem did not exist with the warm April temperatures of the Western Front, making the results strikingly different.

Since The Hague Convention of 1899 prohibited the use of projectiles containing poisonous gas, the Germans calculated that they were not in violation if they delivered the gas via cylinders.

On April 22, 1915, the enemy soldiers strategically staged, then opened, the valves on fifty-seven hundred canisters that were positioned so the wind would carry the mist towards the Allied lines.138

The enemy initiated the attack by launching a massive bombardment of the Allied trenches. During the shelling, the contents of the cylinders were released, allowing the wind to transport it towards its intended target. Since it was common for an attack to be preceded by heavy shelling, the Allied forces were in their trenches waiting to repel the anticipated assault. The bombardment produced dark, heavy clouds of smoke, preventing the Allies from spotting the approaching cloud of death until it was too late.

The Allied troops were expecting to see waves of enemy soldiers crossing the battlefield. Instead they witnessed a low cloud of greenish-yellow mist coming towards them. The lethal mist permeated four miles of trenches, affecting some ten thousand soldiers. It took only about ten minutes for half of the exposed troops to die.139

Another source reported that on the 22nd of April, French resistance was intense for the first 15 minutes, then gradually lessoned until it ceased. Many of the fleeing French and Algerian troops stripped off clothing, their eyes were bulging and tongues hung out. Many died. Civilians gave milk to some of the affected to sooth their eyes and ease their distress.140

There are conflicting assessments as too the number of troops affected by the gas. One stated that the gas affected some 10,000 troops and half of them died within ten minutes, while another argued reliable data of the event is not available, partly because of the confusing situation at the time, and in part because gas casualties were not actually counted and recorded. Therefore general consensus is casualties may not have been as high as previously been claimed, perhaps 2,000-3,000 unrecorded for 23rd of April with a mortality rate of 40-50%.141

The German Army had not gauged the potential effectiveness of the gas. As a result, they neglected to have sufficient reserve troops in place to fully take advantage of the wide opening created in the Allied line. Although they captured a significant quantity of land, they lost most of it when the allies launched a counterattack.

Attempting to capitalize on the success of their new weapon, the Germans repeated the process two days later, on April 24. This time they used it against the unsuspecting Canadian troops.142

Fortunately, the quick-thinking Canadians used urine-soaked handkerchiefs to cover their mouths and noses, lessening the impact of the vapor.

After the success witnessed on April 22nd, the advancing Germans were anticipating a similar result in the annihilation of extensive numbers of Canadian troops. Instead they encountered a defiant Canadian force standing its ground. Fierce fighting ensued, causing heavy losses on both sides.

By the end of May, after staging several persistent attacks, the enemy gained additional high ground, offering their artillery target opportunities with devastating results for the Allies. This forced the Allied forces to consolidate their positions closer to the city of Ypres.

After many failed attempts to capture the city, the frustrated enemy retaliated with an unrelenting bombardment that, by war's end, had reduced the entire city of Ypres to piles of rubble.

The Second Battle of Ypres cost the lives of 69,000 Allied soldiers (59,000 British and 10,000 French), as well as 35,000 German troops. The significant contrast between the number of Allied and German casualties is attributed to the use of chlorine gas.143

Fred's journal entries:

April 5th – 23rd

Remained in this position firing on enemy's trenches and guns, [but] aeroplanes [were] very active and often stop us [from] firing. Very little night doings. 144

Our observation station in the brewery was [a] veritable trap, for it was continually shelled.

In spite of this [we] stuck it for four days, until one shell hit direct on the little cellar, wounding Grogan and Smith, (the two telephonists on duty). Lt Richie had a marvelous escape, [but] poor Grogan died afterwards, and Smith was so shook up, he was sent away. We now used the remnants of a house, which we called the green house, for the observation post. It was shelled often, but we had no further casualties and nothing out of the ordinary happening; just the usual give and take.

The batteries in rear were shelled occasionally, but nothing came within harming distance of our guns.

Can hear sounds of continual heavy fighting far away to our left towards YPRES and on our right by LA BASSEE; some pretty hard scrapping was in progress on the French front,

April 24th

Received orders to move with all speed to YPRES; marched and billeted for night near LA GORGUE.

April 25th

Long march to ODDERDUM [where] I went forward as billeting party. [There was] very heaving fighting going on at YPRES. I heard of the gigantic German assault, the retirement of the French, and of the forced retirement of the Canadians in consequence. The battle was raging fiercely all night and it sounded horrific.

April 26th

Marched about 8:30 am with Battery and halted outside Vlamertinghe. 145

George, Collins and I went with CO to [Ypres to] reconnoiter a position for the battery. As we neared Ypres, we could see the hellish bombardment going on.

On all sides [of the road] were dead horses, overturned lorries and discarded equipment. Hundreds of wounded were being carried down, or hobbling along the best way they could.

As we galloped through the town, some awful sights met our eyes, men and horses blown to pieces. Every few yards along the road was something dead, and bits of men and horses were everywhere.

We found the Artillery Head Quarters and the Captain went for orders.

The shells were absolutely falling everywhere – it was an inferno. Every second man we met was wounded, and we said to each other, ' I reckon we're on the last lap this journey. '

We found a likely position, where some old trenches and dugouts were, about ½ mile in rear of ST JEAN. Shells were bursting right over, but everywhere seemed to be the same.

The Captain didn't like it, for there was practically no cover, [so] we went a little more near the town. A Canadian officer asked what we were wanting, and when we told him that we thought of bringing the battery into position there, he said – ' For God's sakes, don't bring them here, this corner is Hell itself. Get out of it as quick as you can.'

Shells were dropping all around and it seems marvelous that none of us have got hit. I afterwards learned that this part was called ' Dead Man's Corner' , and it deserved the name, for many dead were thereabouts.

We had just left and decided it would have to do, for all places seemed alike.
146

While the battery was coming up, we started to lay out a wire to a likely spot to observe. George took a couple [of men] to start from the place they found, and I took Collins and Billison with me.

[We] ran a wire from the position through the village of ST JEAN.
We reached the village alright, and as everywhere [else], it was being shelled. As I jumped a small stream by the church, a large shell burst almost on us, [so] we took shelter behind a building. [We] could not move for shrapnel bullets.

We [were shelled] for quite an hour, 13 to the dozen; it was awful.

Just a few yards from us was an artilleryman and his horse lying dead. A motor ambulance smashed, the driver [was] killed and burned to a cinder by the petrol which ignited.

A nigger was lying dead in the ditch, and round the end of the building were several others.

After a time it abated a little and we started again. I met George, he had been in a much-like stew as I. We went through the village and it was terrible. I managed to get a drink of water and after a while I decided to go back to the guns, if I could get there.

I hadn't gone far when they started again, and we ran for our previous little shelter, and gained it just in time. Shells burst very near, and I said to Collins, 'What a stink, and strange smell.' My eyes were watering and we all three began coughing and decided to chance it anywhere [else].

After an exciting half-hour [we] got to the guns. I felt bad and sick.

We learned from an officer that it was due to the gas shells the Germans were using. It was very lucky we decided to get out of it or undoubtedly the three of us would have been gassed properly, instead of partially, but it was bad enough, sufficient to stop me eating anything for three days. 147

The following are excerpts taken from Sir John French's Eighth Despatch where he addressed the use of poisonous gas.

15th June, 1915.

In the North, the town and district of Ypres have once more, in this campaign, been successfully defended against vigorous and sustained attacks made by large forces of the enemy, which are supported by a mass of heavy and field artillery. Their artillery in number, weight and calibre, is superior to any concentration of guns which has previously assailed that part of the line.

In the South, a vigorous offensive has again been taken by troops of the First Army, in the course of which, a large area of entrenched and fortified ground has been captured from the enemy, whilst valuable support has been afforded to the attack, which our Allies have carried on with such marked success against the enemy's positions to the east of Arras and Lens.

I much regret that during this period of fighting the enemy's side has shown a cynical and barbarous disregard of the well-known usages of civilised war and a flagrant defiance of the Hague Convention.

All the scientific resources of Germany have apparently been brought into play to produce a gas so virulent and poisonous in nature that any human being brought into contact with it is first paralysed, and then meets with a lingering and agonizing death.

The enemy has supported his attacks by discharging great volumes of poisonous gas fumes whenever the wind was favourable.

Such weather conditions have only prevailed to any extent in the neighbourhood of Ypres. There can be no doubt that the effects of these poisonous fumes have influenced operations, until an effective counter-measure, which has now been perfected, has rendered them innocuous.

The Germans must have harboured the design of this poisonous gas for a long time. 148

As a soldier I cannot help expressing the deepest regret and some surprise that an Army, which hitherto has claimed to be the chief exponent of the chivalry of war, would have stooped to employ such devices against brave and gallant foes.

On the night of Saturday, April 17th, a hill, known as Hill 60, which lies opposite the northern extremity of the line held by the 2nd Corps, was successfully mined and captured.

The operation was planned by Major-General Bulfin, before the ground was handed over to Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Fergusson, whose troops carried out the operation. The mines were successfully fired at 7 p.m. on the 17th, and immediately afterwards the hill was attacked and gained by the 1st Battalion, Royal West Kent Regiment, and the 2nd Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers.

The attack was well supported by the Divisional Artillery, assisted by French and Belgian batteries.

During the night several of the enemy's counter-attacks were repulsed with heavy loss, and fierce hand-to-hand fighting took place.

On the morning of the 18th the enemy succeeded in forcing back the troops holding the right of the hill to the reverse slope, and held onto it throughout the day.

On the evening of the 18th, the 1st Battalion, Royal West Kent Regiment, and the 2nd Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers, was relieved by the 2nd Battalion, West Riding Regiment, and the 2nd Battalion, King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. They stormed the hill under cover of heavy artillery fire, and they were able to drive off the enemy at the point of the bayonet.

In this operation fifty-three prisoners were captured, including four officers.

On following days many unsuccessful attacks were made by the enemy, and Hill 60 was continuously shelled by heavy artillery.

On May 1st another attempt to recapture Hill 60 was supported by great volumes of asphyxiating gas, which caused nearly all the men along a front of about 400 yards to be immediately struck down by its fumes. 149

The splendid courage with which the leaders rallied their men and subdued the natural tendency to panic (which is inevitable on such occasions), combined with the prompt intervention of supports, once more drove the enemy back.

A second and more severe ‘ gas’ attack, under much more favourable weather conditions, enabled the enemy to recapture this position on May 5th. The enemy owes his success in this last attack entirely to the use of asphyxiating gas.

It was at the commencement of the Second Battle of Ypres on the evening of the 22nd April, referred to in paragraph 1 of this report, that the enemy first made use of asphyxiating gas.

Some days previously I had complied with General Joffre's request to take over the trenches occupied by the French, and on the evening of the 22nd the troops holding the lines east of Ypres were posted as follows: - From Steenstrate to the east of Langemarck, as far as the Poelcappelle Road, a French Division.

Thence, in a south-easterly direction toward the Passchendaele-Becelaere Road, the Canadian Division.

Thence, a Division took up the line in a southerly direction east of Zonnebeke to a point west of Becelaere, whence another Division continued the line south-east to the northern limit of the Corps on its right.

Of the 5th Corps, there were four battalions in Divisional Reserve about Ypres; the Canadian Division had one battalion in Divisional Reserve and the 1st Canadian Brigade in Army Reserve.

An Infantry Brigade, which had just been withdrawn after suffering heavy losses on Hill 60, was resting about Vlamertinghe.

Following a heavy bombardment, the enemy attacked the French Division at about 5 p.m., using asphyxiating gases for the first time.

Aircraft reported that at about 5 p.m. thick yellow smoke had been seen issuing from the German trenches between Langemarck and Bixschoote.

The French reported that two simultaneous attacks had been made east of the Ypres-Staden Railway, in which these asphyxiating gases had been employed.150

What follows almost defies description. The effect of these poisonous gases was so virulent as to render the whole of the line held by the French Division, mentioned above, practically incapable of any action at all. It was at first impossible for anyone to realise what had actually happened. The smoke and fumes hid everything from sight, and hundreds of men were thrown into a comatose or dying condition, and within an hour the whole position had to be abandoned, together with about 50 guns.

I wish particularly to repudiate any idea of attaching the least blame to the French Division for this unfortunate incident.

After all the examples our gallant Allies have shown of dogged and tenacious courage in the many trying situations in which they have been placed throughout the course of this campaign, it is quite superfluous for me to dwell on this aspect of the incident, and I would only express my firm conviction that, if any troops in the world had been able to hold their trenches in the face of such a treacherous and altogether unexpected onslaught, the French Division would have stood firm.

The left flank of the Canadian Division was thus left dangerously exposed to serious attack in flank, and there, appeared to be a prospect of their being overwhelmed and of a successful attempt by the Germans to cut off the British troops occupying the salient to the East. In spite of the danger to which they were

exposed the Canadians held their ground with a magnificent display of tenacity and courage; and it is not too much to say that the bearing and conduct of these splendid troops averted a disaster which might have been attended with the most serious consequences.

They were supported with great promptitude by the reserves of the Divisions holding the salient and by a Brigade which had been resting in billets.151

Fred's journal entries continued:

April 26th

The guns were getting it pretty warm, but we started firing in good style. 152

The wire broke three times, but by arrangements we raised the range, while out of communication.

Twice during the afternoon I went through ST JEAN and each time thought I should never get back. I felt quite alright and thought I was bound to meet it somewhere, so [I] took it easy, but at nightfall I thought I must have been very lucky.

The enemy kept up hard shelling everywhere; it was one continual roar, shell[s] frequently bursting over us and bullets and splinters knocking lumps off my dugout. I really thought it was the finishing touch, for of all the places I had been through [in] the campaign, this was by far the worst; it seemed impossible for one to live long in it.

I had a few hours sleep, awakening now and again when a large shell burst somewhere near. At daylight we were at it again; the first thing that met my gaze was a shell dropped just the other side of the hedge. [It fell] among what was left of a Canadian Battery Wagon Line, (most of the men had been killed when the Germans broke through the previous week). They bayoneted them whilst they slept and hung the Ferrier to a tree. [Then they] crucified a Sergeant of the Canadian

Scottish to a barn door with bayonets. This wagon line had about a dozen horses left of 200 – the guns were captured by the enemy, but were afterwards regained by a magnificent charge by the Canadian infantry. (Figure 8)

These are fine fellows and splendid fighters and hated the cursed Germans like fury for their murderous ways of waging war.

A couple of days previous the Canadian Scottish were ordered to retire, but refused to do so. [They] charged the enemy on their own. It was a mad thing to do and they lost over 500 men, but captured some trenches and captured 100 prisoners or more; not one of these prisoners were brought down. 153

We were fighting as they – no quarter, and the Canadians gave none. Just in [the] rear of our guns, there was a Prussian Guardsman (a fine fellow, fully 6' 3" in height and big with it) pinned to a tree with a bayonet. [He had] a post card stuck on his forehead with the words, 'Canada does not forget.'

The byword of the Canadians were, 'we'll give'em crucify.' The happenings around of this period would fill a book with horrors of this description.

[Word spread] of the splendid fighting of the Canadians and the Indian troops who were with us.

Truly enough the Canadians had served Ypres, as did the 7th, 5th, and 1st Divisions in November. 154

There has been an ongoing controversy over the story of the Canadian soldier being crucified by members of the German Army. The debate is centered on the question, 'Did the event actually take place, or is it an embellished incident?'

Additional research supported the fact there are many variations of the account from eyewitnesses. Similar to a chain story, where someone starts a tale

and it is passed from person to person, it becomes so convoluted, it slightly resembles the original story. Some reported the Canadian soldier was an officer, while others a sergeant; version of the event had him bayoneted to a barn, a tree, a cross, or a fence.

A documentary exists on UTube titled, 'The Crucified Soldier'. The program deals with the history and controversy surrounding this event, as well as new findings. The program was produced by 'A United Kingdom-Canada Co-production'. The historians involved were: Norm Christie, author of 'The Canadians at Ypres 1915'; Jack Davis (Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry – 107 years old); Professor Joanna Beurke –

Birkbeck College, University of London; Dr. Adrian Gregory – Pembroke College, Oxford; Dr. Maria Tippett – Churchill College, Cambridge.155

The first part of the program covered the alleged tale of a crucified Canadian soldier and the controversy created, when a three-foot bronze work depicting the 1915 event was displayed at the 1919 dedication of Canada's contribution to the war, which took place in London.

The German Government strongly criticized the piece of art and requested that the Canadian and British Governments prove that the atrocity occurred.

Sir Edward Kemp was placed in charge of the investigation. He sought out eye-witnesses and found a few that were welling to tell their story.

Most accounts were conflicting, but one from Lance Corporal William Metcalf was more believable. He was a stretcher-bearer and was carrying a wounded soldier when he saw what appeared to be a soldier bayoneted to a barn door. He investigated and confirmed it was indeed what he thought it was. However, he could not stop because of transporting the wounded man. The issue with his story was he identified the spot as St Jean which was then in German hands, whereas St Julian was in Allied control.

With conflicting testimony and lacking the name of the soldier involved, the German Government denied everything and stated that they never had army personnel in that area.

The case was closed for several years until a typewritten note from a British Red Cross Nurse was uncovered. The nurse, Ursula Chaloner, was interviewing a wounded soldier, Lance Corporal Kenneth Brown, who conveyed the story of discovering a crucified Canadian Sergeant with the last name of Band or Bund, who served in the 48th Highlanders of Canada, 15th Battalion.

With a name to work with, researchers identified Harry Band, who was born in 1885 in Montrose, Scotland. He immigrated to Canada and enlisted in the Highlanders in September 1914. He was reported missing on the 24th of April 1915.

The Band family was contacted, and they produced a letter written by Private William Freeman to Harry's sister Elizabeth, informing her of Harry's death. 156

Elizabeth wondered if her brother might be the one reported to have been crucified, so she pressed William Freeman for more details. He responded by confirming that her brother Harry was crucified at St Julian. The documentary presented a handwritten letter as evidence of this occurrence.

Fred's journal account of the incident adds credence to the more popular version of the story. However, there is one thing missing from any other variation, except for Fred's.

The other stories do not mention the Canadian's retaliatory response, which included bayoneting a Prussian Guardsman to a tree – pinning a post card on his forehead that read, 'Canada does not forget.' (Figure 9)30

Fred's journal entry continues:

April 27th

Much the same as yesterday – continual shelling and firing, the enemy also sending over their great 17' Howitzer shell (the real ones) into YPRES (a mile in our rear), as well as at artillery and the trenches.

The enemy must have been preparing for this for months, for their ammunition expenditure was enormous and unceasing.

We found another observing post near ST JULIEN, a wrecked house about 200 yards in rear of our trenches, but it was almost useless as the wire was continually getting broken, and it was impossible to signal.

April 27th

Our Captain was a perfect brick and stuck it grandly, his hat being carried away once by a shrapnel burst. 157

He had just left the house and was running to the fire trench [when] a 17" came right into the house. [It] threw it almost bodily into the air – after the smoke cleared off, the house was a pile of wreckage. Several natives had been killed, Lt Donahue having a lucky escape – three natives were horribly wounded and pinned down under the wreckage. An officer mercifully shot them to put them out of their misery.

We kept up fire by map all day. Several shell[s] burst upon us and one pitched right against the trail of Jerry's wagon, and funny enough hurt nobody.

The thought struck me in the afternoon that it was my birthday – Gee! It was a very grim and bloody one.

Old George and Collins had an exciting afternoon. While going along the wire, they had to take refuge in a shell hole, [They] had to stay in it for a long while, and they eventually got back alright.

About midnight we got orders to move at once, for the position was absolute[ly] suicidal to hold. The battery got away alright; I remained with my

horse holder to wait for George and Collins, who were with the Infantry Head Quarters. [They] were reeling in what remained of our wire. Shelling was still going on, and the burst of shells, firing of our own guns, and the rockets from both side's trenches always lights up the Heavens like a gigantic firework display.

I waited a long time behind the shelter of a building for them to come, and I thought that they must have got knocked over. I resolved to go and look for them; it was a nasty job for the road and the village [of] ST JEAN was still being heavily shelled. The road was deserted as I crept from tree to tree. But every here and there were dead horses and occasionally a dead man.158

As I got to the village, two infantry chaps were coming down from the end of the village. I asked them if they had seen anything of my chums, but they told me they had not seen anybody, and advised me to go no further, if I wanted to live.

So I returned to where I had left the horses, thinking that George and Collins were 'goners'. I was greatly relieved when I got there to find them back. They had come back a different way, as it was too hot through the village and road.

I had hardly been back 10 minutes when a shell struck the roof of the building, or rather, shed. We were inside and tiles [and] bricks fell in a shower [on top of us]. Collins got a whack in the shoulder, but it was not serious. Another shell followed; 19 burst all within 40 yards of us and not one of the four was touched.

They seemed to lengthen the range a little on to the road where we had to go to get through Ypres. We resolved to go for it and we did. It was the maddest gallop I had ever had; my old charger never moved so quickly as when he galloped round ' Dead Man's Gulch' and through the town itself.

The only ones we met till through the town were the dead ones lying about.

Our troubles for this night were not over yet. I had only a faint idea where the battery was going to, and instead of following the right road, we took the wrong.

Eventually found ourselves just on the left of Hill 60, which was being subjected to a fierce bombardment from all directions. We had another mad ride back and tried another road. We found a reel of wire which must have fallen off one of the wagons, and knew we were on the right track. We were, and eventually caught the battery just as dawn was breaking. 159

April 28th

Went into action on the edge of a wood on the left of Ypres; this seemed more quiet than the place we had vacated.

In the afternoon we ran our wire to a point for observing, just over the canal. Everywhere about here was a scene of desolation, half- starved cattle roaming about, pigs, and all sorts of farm commodities; many [were] lying about dead.

The French Infantry held this front and just in [the] rear of the trenches were 4 of their Howitzers, which showed how far the enemy had advanced. We stopped to observe some big shell bursting near, a kind we had never seen before, and promptly named it ' Black Jack' on account of the great volume of black smoke they gave off. While we were watching one burst directly over the heads of a few Frenchman, they scattered and I didn't think any were harmed.

We went back, [while] shells of large caliber were continually passing right over the guns, but only one burst near, about 20 yards from where I had made my dugout at the foot of a large tree – it did no harm.

The night passed uneventfully, except for the continual shelling, and during [the] night, two batteries of French 7.5's took up position about 50 yards in our rear.

April 29th

Was impossible to fire from observation, as we could not get to [the] observing point and the wire was broken in many places by the continual shelling. We fired by map and wireless from aeroplane.

Hostile aeroplanes were very active and one must have spotted us, for they gave it to us warm in the afternoon and evening. 160

The officers had made a bivouac beneath a large tree, a few yards on my left.

A few shell[s], and they were real coal-boxes, burst very near. They moved over to the left and lucky they did, [for] a few minutes later a shell hit the tree and snapped it off like a match. Other shells followed and we had to leave the guns for a while. When it was over we went back; the officer's huts had been blown to pieces. Two coats that hung on a tree were absolutely in ribbons; almost everything there was irrevocably ruined. One of them had been sitting on a box of biscuits; this box was blown yards away and not even a biscuit that was inside remained. The tin box was like a piece of twisted tin. Everything was almost unrecognisable.

Dowling one of the servants got both arms badly splintered. [They were] continually shelling roads to our rear and right all night.

April 30th

[We] fired in the morning by wireless, bombardment to support attack by the French, which was said to [be] successful.

In the afternoon, we were again heavily shelled as we expected.

The 57th got it worse than us, about 50 yards on our right. One shell pitched into a dugout, killed 4 telephonists and several men were wounded.

They got it so fiercely that they were compelled, as we were yesterday, to desert their guns, but they were soon back again.

One 17" dropped by the French guns and they nipped (as per usual). Several fell in front of us and one 30 yards to, and in direct line with, our left gun, just where I was. 161

It is impossible to describe these monsters coming through the air. The nearest it is like an express train going through a tunnel and the burst is like a terrific clap of thunder.

The earth sways as if it were an earthquake. We measured this hole at night and it was 25 foot deep and 43 foot across; great lumps of earth, like rocks, had been scattered many yards. It seems impossible, even to one who understands artillery that this great eruption could have been made by a shell. We picked up several splinters going anything from a few ounces to several pounds.

The attack was repulsed and towards dark it became a little more quiet, just the usual nightly dozen per hour. The 17" must have put the wind up the Frenchies, for they had moved during the night and never came back.

May 1st to 4th

[We were] still in same position. The hostile shelling never ceases, day or night.

We fire mostly by aeroplane wireless – attacks and counter attacks twice daily.

Batteries on our left seem to get it jolly hot, but in spite of the gases and their preponderance of artillery, we are informed that we have stopped the march on CALAIS.

[We] were ordered to move with Lahore Division, (which was now sadly depleted in numbers) to move on [the] night of [the] 4th.

I was billeting and Mr Donahue and I left about 5 pm, and eventually, after a hard ride, found billets some 1.5 miles from Ypres in a village I never knew the name of. I left at midnight to conduct the Battery.

It was raining all night and I tied my horse to the railings of a churchyard, determined to get a drink somewhere and something to eat. After a while I came on an establishment and vigorously knocked, which was opened by a Staff Officer. I told him I wanted something to eat and drink. He was very good and took me inside and fixed me up. 162

I left refreshed, [While it was] still raining and cold; I eventually met the Battery about 6 o'clock.

I got some breakfast from the Officer's cooks of the Ammunition Column and then had a sleep about 10 am.

May 5th

Was awakened after a couple of hours and went on again as billeting party with Mr Woods, in [the] direction of ESTAIRS. [Due to] a long ride, [we] could not fix up billets before about 7 pm. Had a little trouble with a farmer, but after a threat and help of [an] interpreter, managed to secure [a] place I had selected for [the] Battery.

[I] was very tired and went in a barn, after fixing up the old charger, and dropped just as I was, sound asleep.

The Battery arrived at dawn, and after fixing this up, was informed that the Battery was to take up the old position at CROIX BARBETTE that night for an attack in the region of FESTABERT.

May 6th

Was a beautiful [day], which I spent mostly in much needed sleep; I was elated to find my mattress still there. 163

The cost in human life during the Second Battle of Ypres was similar to previous battles, high. The Allies suffered 70,000 killed, wounded or missing, while the German losses amounted to 35,000 killed, wounded or missing. There would be two more battles fought over the town of Ypres, making it among the top-ranking pieces of real estate for the cost in human life. 164

This was Frederick Coxen's last journal entry for reasons unknown. However, one could speculate that the loss of his friends and continuing exposure to horror may have influenced his decision to stop writing. Another explanation might be that his area of responsibility changed prior to receiving his field promotion, a position that prevented him from maintaining his journal.

Fred's friend, George Millington, also received a field promotion and they kept in contact during the war. They first met when they both joined the Royal Field Artillery in 1905, even though they did not know one another at the time. They both graduated from the 168th class, School of Signaling, at Aldershot in 1911.

When Fred moved his family to America he lost touch with George. But in February of 1938 Fred wrote to RFA. Records, Woowich to obtain information on George's whereabouts so he could arrange a meeting when he visited England during that summer. I often wonder if they reconnected when Fred traveled to England and what they talked about.

After the Armistice George stayed in the service but relegated his commission down to Regimental Sergeant-major so he could qualify for a pension.

I wanted to get in touch with one of George's living relatives so I used forums on different WWI sites but I did not receive a response. It would have been very satisfying to share the journal with a family member.

Chapter 13

MILITARY SERVICE AFTER THE JOURNAL

The last journal entry was on May 6th, 1915. I wondered what occurred to alter Fred's routine of recording his daily experiences; perhaps the answer might be among his numerous military documents. They may contain bits of information necessary for reassembling the century old puzzle.

After May 6th, the first recorded event impacting Fred was his field promotion to 2nd Lieutenant, which took place on August 21st, 1915. Although significant, it does not reveal what happened during the three months between his last entry and his promotion; questions without answers remain.

Within the box of documents, I found and opened Fred's 'Officer's Record of Services – Army book 439'. Studying its contents, I found a notation on the pages titled, 'Service', stating he left France on September 1, 1915 and returned to England. Under the column marked 'At Home', he had written, (AA31 Drilling), September 2, 1915 to November 27, 1917. This notation disclosed complexities within his simple statement 'AA drilling', which were previously unknown. Reviewing other military communiqués, I discovered that the Royal Field Artillery sent Fred to the Mersey Defence District on May 13, 1916. He was to perform inspections on the Anti-Aircraft Gun Detachments in Liverpool.

I questioned what transpired in the eight months prior to his deployment to the Mersey Defence District. One plausible explanation would be that he was being trained on anti-aircraft guns, which would be logical, considering his previous experience, had been with field artillery. Anti-aircraft training would also offer credence to his qualifications for inspecting the AA batteries.

Another theory would be officer training. He had received his promotion to 2nd Lieutenant in August 1915 and was transferred back to England by September 2nd. During the next eight months he may have been attending officer training.

I discovered a great deal of military correspondence regarding Fred's request for additional duty pay, for the period he held the temporary rank of Captain while serving as adjutant for the Mersey Defence District.

Referring back to his service record, I noticed that he remained in England until November 11, 1917. Then on November 28, 1917, he was redeployed to France and assigned to the 47th AA Battery. Rummaging through the box of documents, I noticed a small piece of brown paper with a handwritten message. In the upper left-hand corner, the paper was stamped; 'N ANTI-AIRCRAFT BATTERY' and directly below it was Fred's signature 'F Coxen RFA 'N' Battery.

The handwritten message congratulated Fred's AA battery for the downing of a bird (aeroplane), however, headquarters could not verify if the craft was downed solely by N-battery, or a section of Q-battery, so they divided the kill between the two batteries. Fred's Battery was part of the HQ, 3rd Army group, which according to sources on the 'Great War Forum,' was assigned to defend Paris. The fact that the paper was a congratulatory note from headquarters, and sent to Fred, indicates that Fred was 'N' Battery's commander.

Referring back to his service record, Fred remained in France until May 18, 1918, at which time he returned to England.

A military record disclosed that in November of 1918 he was seconded for service with the newly-formed Royal Air Force, and was assigned to the 253 Squadron, RAF Bembridge. He was listed as an Observer Officer and placed in charge of the payroll department. I have no doubt that Fred was sent to the RAF because of his prior payroll experience while Adjutant of the Mersey Defence District.

While searching through the box of documents I uncovered a communiqué from Captain D. Dustin, Officer Commanding 74th Wing, RAF Calshot. In the letter he recommended Fred for a promotion to the temporary rank of Lieutenant. A

further search produced a memo affirming that Fred was promoted to the permanent rank of Lieutenant – retroactive to July 1, 1917.

During the period Fred operated the payroll department for the RAF, the RFA sent a message requesting his return to his RFA unit forthwith. Within the same communiqué, the RAF requested he remain with them for an additional two weeks, reasoning that with a heavy work load and complicated payroll system, his skill level was required until a replacement could be trained. Therefore on August 7, 1919, the Officer Commanding, RAF Navigation School, Calshot, drafted a letter cancelling Fred's orders to report to his RFA unit.

I speculated as to whether he learned to fly during the time spent with the RAF. I found nothing within his records indicating he received flight training; however, I have a photograph showing Fred in an aviator's suit.

I posted the photo on the 'Great War Forum' website; a member identified the suit as a standard RAF issue Sitcom Suit, made from proofed khaki twill, which was rubberized and lined with mohair.

It is indisputable that while serving with the RAF, Fred wore an officer's uniform with an Observer's Half Wing, located above the left top pocket of his uniform jacket. His uniform would be congruent with his Navigator's training, and gave credence to the fact that he had an aviator's flight suit. Nevertheless, this latest discovery contradicts our personal family lore, and ruins a good story.

Prior to my in-depth research, it was believed that a cherished, wooden picture frame, containing photographs of both Fred and his wife, was likely crafted from the remains of a WWI aeroplane propeller. However, a further assumption was made that the propeller came from an aircraft flown by Fred, which now appears to be false.

Fred's official military record shows that he transferred back to the Regular Army Reserve of Officers as Captain, on the 26th of February, 1920, at which time he left the service and returned to his civilian occupation of electrician.

The exact reason he ended his journal on May 6th, 1915 will remain unknown.

Chapter 14

An Old Contemptible

After reading a book on the “The Old Contemptibles” I came to the realization that my grandfather belonged to that elite club. According to history, the small BEF army kept his mighty German Army at bay while inflicting heavy casualties. The Kiser was so frustrated that he stated to his generals to do what is necessary to destroy Britain’s contemptible little army. The nickname stuck and was heavily used to inspire the soldiers fighting in Ypres.

The soldiers that served in the British professional army suffered such heavy casualties during the Battle of Ypres that they, as a group, no longer existed. Throughout history Britain’s professional army was referred to as “The Old Contempables”.

The following explanation of the origin of this story was supplied to me through a member of the “Great War Forum” website:

" A thorough investigation of the authenticity of this order, "issued by the Kaiser," was undertaken in 1925 with the assistance of a German General, who had the archives in Berlin carefully searched, and of a British General, Sir F. Maurice, who was able to throw a good deal of light on the subject.

While the Kaiser's proverbially foolish indiscretion might account for any preposterous utterance, it was known that he did not issue orders of his own volition; they were prepared for him by his Staff, which was certainly not so ignorant of its business as to tell the German Generals to concentrate their energies upon the extermination of an army when they could not tell them where that army was. Their ignorance of the whereabouts of the British Army was proved by a telegram sent by the German Chief of the Staff to Von Kluck on August 20th (the day after the issue of the supposed order): "Disembarkation of English at Boulogne must be reckoned with. The opinion here, however, is that large disembarkations have not yet taken place."

It was further discovered that German Headquarters were never at Aix la Chapelle. Headquarters moved from Berlin about August 15th. and went to

Coblenz, later to Luxemburg, from whence they moved to Charleville on September 27th.

A careful search in the archives proved fruitless. No such order or anything like it could be discovered. Not content with this, however, the German General had inquiries made of the ex-Kaiser himself at Doorn. In, a marginal note the ex-Kaiser declared he had never used such an expression, adding: "On the contrary, I continually emphasized the high value of the British Army, and often, indeed, in peace-time gave warning against underestimating it."

General Sir F. Maurice had the German newspaper files searched for the alleged speech or order of the Kaiser, but without success. In an article exposing the fabrication (Daily News, November 6, 1925), he remarks that G.H.Q. hit on the idea of using routine orders to issue statements which it was believed would encourage and inspirit our men." Most of these took the form of casting ridicule on the German Army.... These efforts were seen to be absurd by the men in the trenches, and were soon dropped."

We may laugh now at this lie and some may be inclined to give some credit to the officer who concocted it, although he made a careless mistake about the whereabouts of the German G.H.Q. There can be no doubt as to its immense success, nevertheless there are many who will share the opinion of a gentleman who wrote to the Press (Nation and Athenaeum, August 8, 1925), who, having heard that doubt was cast on the authenticity of the well-known and almost hackneyed phrase, remarked on "its extreme seriousness to our national honour or to that of the British officer originally responsible," were it proved to be an invention. "

Source:Falsehood in War -Time, Propaganda Lies of the First World War, Arthur Ponsonby MP, (1928, George Allen and Unwin)

Chapter 15

AN UNKEPT PROMISE

By unraveling the poignantly historical threads of my grandfather's war years, through the examination of his personal relics, I was able to sculpt together a more complete replica of the remarkably complex man he was.

I could not have anticipated that further excavation into the box contents would have had such a dramatic effect on the next few years of my life. Tucked away in the depths of all the memorabilia was a more recent correspondence of my grandfather's, typed on onion skin paper in 1945. The letter was addressed to no particular person or group; it just contained a title:

' I Had A Dream The Other Night'

It was one of those hazy, disjointed dreams that cause you on awakening to try to connect it in sequence, and leave you greatly perturbed in mind - yes, and in spirit.

It seems that I was sitting at a table - it might have been after a good dinner, for I felt quite satisfied with everything, and very complacent.

I leaned back in my chair, picked up a glass from the table, and was enjoying the odor of its contents - most likely an after-dinner brandy.

I seemed to hear a noise and looked up, and there stood three of my old buddies, 'Pudgie' Taylor, Bobbie Glue, and George Bramwell. I seemed to become elated with a supreme sense of happiness, just as if I was suddenly transported into a kind of world hitherto unknown to me.

It appeared that we greeted each other with an enthusiasm beyond what we humans experience, and then it seemed that we all became rigid as Pudgie filled up glasses for each one of us.

We apparently stood a long time in silence, and then Pudgie spoke, just one of his utterances that I had heard so many times, 'Here's to you, Old China' . (in modern parlance: ' Here's to you, old pal'). 'May we all do the job together.'

Then everything grew hazy, as it does in dreams, and I woke up. In the few moments it took to collect my senses, I was at first excited, then let down, 'I have been dreaming.' Memory took me over the years and thoughts drifted sadly.

Pudgie, Bobby, George, and I were old pals. A couple of days before the battle of Mons in August 1914, we promised each other that should one or more of us get back, we, or he, would call on the family of those who perished and explain how and when ' it happened.'

Within a few weeks of that pledge George was killed beside me at the Marne, and died in my arms. Pudgie got his at Ypres, repairing a telephone wire. Bobby's legs left his torso when I tried to pull him from our blown-in dugout, also at Ypres.

Since that enlightened dream the thought has been with me, 'May we all do the job together.' Pudgie meant, in forming that pact just prior to when the shooting started, that we all GET BACK TOGETHER.

Well, we didn't! Just one of the four did and that one failed to carry out the promise. For in the more than four years that the war continued, so much happened; time has gradually softened the memory, which is now one among so many.

Throughout the years I have had a great many dreams or mild nightmares fighting that war all over again, and have so often thought, 'Was it worthwhile?' We positively know now, those of my generation who are left, together with the

younger generation who are now engaged in completing the job, more clearly how to see to it that it will be completed the RIGHT WAY this time.

I am wondering now, was that 'visit' of my old buddies who have been lying in Flanders Fields for nearly thirty years, a reproach or a reminder? I don't know, but it has certainly caused my criticism of myself to assert itself. Were they not telling me that the job has to be done together?

Were they not asking, 'Are we all united in our cause?' Were they telling me to do all I could to help COMPLETE the job which they and millions of others died for? It is all too complex for me to answer but I do know one thing, and that very definitely, I HAVE NOT DONE MY BEST! I have made no sacrifice that could, in the smallest measure, be compared with that of the boys who are now going through that hell that I know so well.

Sure, I have done and am doing war work, getting well paid for it too. Sure, I have given time to selling war bonds, and bought some too. But I have to admit that I often get sore at the way the war is being run, like all the damn dumb things that make it cost so much, at the cockeyed forms that I have to fill in, and the taxes I have to pay.

I get mad 'too' when I read and hear of strikes, when my gas is running low. I criticize about everything, EXCEPT TO PROMOTE THE ALL IMPORTANT FACT THE BOYS (as we fondly call them) ARE GOING THROUGH HELL AND DYING FOR FIFTY BUCKS A MONTH.

Dying for fifty bucks a month, that's what it amounts to, unless we of the home front do our part to back the fighting front, with every ounce of our individual strength, in dollars, work, and brains.

If we do not (even at the thought I would scream to high heaven), it will mean, as it did last time, veterans of war would be transformed into peddlers, aye, even beggars, yes, even worse, paupers, together with general chaos.

The question of 'Why and for what did my old pals give their lives?' is still unanswered. May God grant that World War Two mold a different world than did World War One. We must see to it, or World War Three will develop. The irony of the thought of world war defined by numerals!

For a few days my dream sort of worried me. But I am grateful now, because it gave me reasons to do a little more thinking, the result of which gives me determination to try in every way to do a little more. Candidly, there is not much I can do in comparison to the sacrifice others are making, but I can and will work harder, count to ten before I start bellyaching, conserve, and save (that word ' save' is right up my alley) for I can really do that by BUYING WAR BONDS TO THE UTMOST.

From now on I am going to ask myself a question very often, the question being, 'What did I do today for the one who may die for me tonight?' The answer, 'I bought an extra bond.'

Thanks for the visit, George, Bobby, and Pudgie; may you forever rest in peace, together with those who are joining you now.

By the Grace of God, and our efforts, perhaps we can make sure that my grandsons will not have to make the sacrifice you, and thousands who are now joining you, were called upon to make.

It took a while to digest the content of the letter and even longer to comprehend its full meaning. I started to imagine at what point in time these young men entered into their pact. The setting could have been on a train enroute to the Belgian frontier, or during the long march to their first engagement in Mons.

Perhaps it was the trepidation from hearing the first barrage of heavy artillery prior to battle that drove the moment. Whenever or wherever it took place, these chums felt compelled to formulate a promise to each other and vowed to notify one another's family in the event that he, or they, became a fatality of war. No one will know the emotional rationale behind the promise made that day; nevertheless, the letter does reveal that, as the lone survivor, my grandfather neglected to honor their covenant.

This letter testifies to the fact that Frederick G. Coxen, although very grateful for surviving the war, remained haunted by that fervent agreement made among friends - one devised by naïve, untested warriors, who could never have imagined the agonizing inferno they were about to face. My grandfather's dream epitomized the residual guilt he carried all those years, surmising that he had disappointed his chums.

Upon reviewing this revealing personal confession, I immediately became determined to fulfill my grandfather's promise, to locate and inform the descendants of those fallen soldiers of how and where their ancestor met their deaths.

Having now become acquainted with his war exploits, I can only imagine the terror and hardship my grandfather faced each day. By sharing his journal with you, along with the aspects of my search for these three families, you may come to understand the compelling reasons for committing myself to this quest, as well as to ascertain the likely motives behind my grandfather leaving his promise unfulfilled.

Chapter 16

RETURNING BRITISH HISTORY

In July 2011 I contacted both the Imperial War and the Royal Artillery Museums, to determine interest they may have in digital copies of my grandfather's documents. Eventually an email response was received from Anthony Richards, of the Imperial War Museum's Document and Sound Section.

In his email, he explained the museum had copies of most of the documents I had listed in my original email; however, he was very interested in learning more about the journal. In my return correspondence I explained I had digital images of the journal as well as an image of a piece of paper describing the downing of a plane.

On August 1, 2011, Mr. Richard requested that I send him a few journal images for him to read and evaluate. I attached a few images to my email, and then waited for his response.

After a period of time, I began to question if perhaps he had not receive the images, so I contacted him to determine if he had indeed received the images and if so, was he interested in the remaining ones. In his reply he informed me that he had not received them, and requested that I resend them, which I did.

On September 2, 2011, I received Mr. Richard's dispatch:

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM
DOCUMENTS AND SOUND SECTION

Dear Mr. Coxen

Thank you for your latest emails and for sending the various attachments, which have now arrived correctly.

I was very interested indeed to see the images you sent, as the journal written by your late grandfather is full of excellent details regarding his military service and I am sure that we would be keen to look after the full version of the account so that researchers could consult it here at the Museum. Similarly, the document regarding the shooting down of a Zeppelin is an unusual wartime record that could be usefully preserved alongside the journal.

If you were happy to send a CD containing copies of all of the papers, I should therefore be glad to accept the copies as a donation to our archive. Alternatively, if you would prefer to visit the Museum in person and leave the collection with us for photocopying, I should be pleased to meet you here. For your reference our address is the Documents and Sound Section, Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ.

I look forward to hearing from you again.

I was elated by his statement that the pages I sent were, 'full of excellent details regarding his military service'. That same day I copied the images to a CD and dispatched it per the address on the September 20th email.

Several months passed without a response, and again I wondered if he received the package. I sent a request for confirmation and he responded with the note that appears in the beginning of the book.

I felt proud of my grandfather for his efforts to record history as he experienced it.

As publication of the book grew near, I contemplated the future protection of the journal and the assorted documents I had labored over for so long. They were part of me now, their value – priceless, yet their worth to others is unknown and that haunted me. I discussed my concerns with my brother and sister; we concurred

that the items should be donated to a museum where they would be protected. We also agreed that since our grandfather served in the British Army, the museum of choice should be in London.

Since I had been communicating with the Imperial War Museum, I offered to contact Anthony Richards. Then a thought occurred to me, 'since my grandfather served in the Royal Field Artillery, it would be fitting if the Royal Artillery Museum accepted them.'

I sent an e-mail to the museum's donation address, detailing the documents and the story behind them. Weeks went by without a reply, so I sent another inquiry, which suffered the same fate. I was surprised by their lack of interest, so without second thoughts, I contacted Anthony with my offer. Close to a month later I received the following e-mail:

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM
DOCUMENTS AND SOUND SECTION

Our Ref: APR/DOC1
17 July 2012

Dear Mr Coxen

Thank you for your email of 27 June, regarding your grandfather's First World War documents. I do apologize for not responding sooner, but we are very short-staffed at the moment.

I was delighted to learn that you are considering the archival preservation of the original journal and associated papers, and can confirm that we would be pleased to accept the collection as a donation to this Museum, where the documents could be preserved under your grandfather's name and made readily available for public study, alongside the transcript that you have already kindly deposited with

us. I would also be most interested to read the book which you have recently completed.

If you wanted to send the material by post then I should be glad to receive it. Alternatively, if you would prefer to visit the Museum in person, then I should be glad to meet you here. For your reference our address is the Documents and Sound Section, Imperial War Museum, Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ.

I look forward to hearing from you again.

Yours sincerely

A poignant realization struck me like a bolt of lightning; I would be returning a component of my grandfather's life to his homeland. This would be a special moment, for my family, as well as a great PR opportunity; American grandson of British World War One soldier donates his grandfather's journal and military papers to the IWM. The story of the promise might also draw interest.

Since I have been a member of the Western Front Association for the past three years, I thought they might be intrigued by this event, so I contacted the chairman of the London branch, Tom Thorpe. He thought highly of the story, as well as my returning part of British history, so he invited me to tell my story to the London membership, at their September 2013 meeting. I accepted – before realizing that I had never given a speech before a large audience. Fear filled the cracks between my initial reactions of honor and pride. Despite my trepidation as a speaker, it is fitting to share this remarkable journal and the impact my grandfather's wartime promise with a receptive audience.

The journey towards donating my grandfather's military documents to the Imperial War Museum started in September of 2009. That is when my sister, mother-in-law, my wife and I began our two week Italian cruise package. It

included a three day stay in London before traveling to Barcelona where we would board the cruise ship. From Spain the ship was scheduled to stop at several of the more popular Italian ports, such as Florence and Rome.

While in London we stuck to the standard tourist sightseeing agenda, Tower of London, The London Eye and so on. However, on our last day we toured the Tower of London, which we discovered was very close to the Parish Church, St. Mary, Lambeth, which is where my grandparents were married in 1912. From the Tower we boarded the ferry that stopped at the London Eye.

The panoramic views from the Eye were breath taking even on an over cast day. We visited several of the venues around the "Eye" until we wore out my wife's 85 year old mother. It was getting late so we decided to take a cab back to our hotel. Before flagging down a cab I presented an idea to the group, "Since we are on this side of the Thames, why not see if we can find our grandparent's house?" Although everyone was tired, we decided we should try it since we may not have another opportunity.

When we entered the cab I explained to the driver our intentions and gave him the address I remembered from the research I was doing; 93 Rectory Lane, Tooting Bec Common. The cabby entered the information into his GPS and ventured out into London's evening rush hour traffic. I do not know why I thought the house would be closer than it was but finding it became a race against the failing light. Just as the last of the day light faded from the sky we stopped in front of the two story row house.

The house was painted white with black trim. The small front yard was boarded by a four foot high brick wall which had an iron gate for access. The front windows were leaded glass in a diamond pattern. There was a small enclosed front porch to pass through before arriving at the front door.

My sister and I quickly exited the cab to take photographs in the failing light. While in the process, a man and his children exited the house. The man looked somewhat surprised to see complete strangers milling around in front of the house taking pictures. To calm any fears I introduced myself, and began to explain

the situation. However, before I started he said he was not the owner; he was just picking up his children from a birthday party.

However, while the man and I were talking, a woman appeared at the front door and she was wearing a very confused look on her face. The man identified her as the owner. The young lady came out to greet us and we explained who we were and the reason why we invaded her front yard. She was excited to meet relatives of a previous owner and wanted to hear some of the historical information regarding the house. She surprised us when she invited us into her home.

With the cab waiting, I knew we couldn't spend the time I would have liked to have had to assimilate my surroundings. The woman explained that she and her husband were restoring the house and apologized for the mess. While the women talked, I wondered around trying to etch the layout of the house into my memory. Everything was happening so fast, it was hard for me to envision my grandparents living there with three children.

From what I recall, the house was narrow, perhaps thirty feet wide. When we entered the front door there was a very small entryway. To the right was a set of stairs leading to the second story, where the bedrooms were located. There was a short hallway leading to the kitchen. Walking towards the kitchen there was half wall dividing the hall from the living / dining room. I believe there were columns on both sides of the large opening for the living room. Standing in the entrance, I noticed that there was a fireplace on the opposite wall. I recall that there was a low wall partitioning the dining room from the living room. There appeared to be French doors located at the far end of the dining room, but we did not venture in that direction to discover what was behind them. A doorway existed on the common wall between the kitchen and the dining room. Unfortunately we did not have the opportunity to see the kitchen or the upper floor.

I wish there would have been enough time to see the whole house so I would be able envision what it might have looked like when my grandparents lived there. But I was thankful for seeing even a small portion of the home my father lived in for the first five years of his life.

The Imperial War Museum

September 6th would be a day I would remember for the rest of my life. I had an appointment at 11:00am to meet with Anthony Richards of the Imperial War Museum to officially donate my grandfather's military documents.

I had mixed feelings regarding the transaction, even though I know it was necessary in order to preserve the historical documents. It was difficult facing the fact I would not have them physically around me for they represent a tangible connection between me and my grandfather; this was especially true regarding his journal. After having it in my position for over four years, the journal became a link to a grandfather I was just getting to know. Quite often I would pick it up and randomly open to a page just to look at his hand writing; even the thought of not having it triggered strong sentimental thoughts which were converted into tears.

At times I tried to imagine him writing his entries, wondering what he was feeling, as well as the conditions surrounding him while he wrote down his experiences. I was concerned on how I would handle it when it came time for the emotional separation

I arranged for a cab to pick us up at 10:30 and drive us to the museum, which was about a 30 minute drive from where we were staying.

We were a few minutes early and I asked the young lady working at the information desk if she would contact Mr. Richards to let him know we had arrived. Waiting slows down time while it increases anxiety. I had my backpack on my lap with my arms wrapped around it. While embracing it I could feel the documents within, which seemed to prompt me to squeeze the pack even tighter. Almost as though I was trying to absorb the history and significance they represented.

Anthony entered the room and we greeted each other with a handshake, then I introduced him to my wife. He asked us to follow him to the research / reading room where he found a table where we could talk without disturbing others. I sat next to him while Lynne sat across the table from me. I placed my pack on the

table, unzipped the main pocket, and extracted the journal. While handing it to him I said, “I believe this is what you have been waiting for.” He smiled as he accepted it and immediately opened it to a random page. I watched him as he began to read one of the entries and made the statement, “It is difficult to read his handwriting isn’t it?” I was surprised by his response “Actually it is among the best. Many we receive are small pocket diaries with writing so small it requires a magnifier to read. Many come from frontline soldiers with poor grammar, which often follows their dialect, which makes it very difficult to interpret.”

I stated that I thought my grandfather’s journal entries were very detailed and seemed similar to how a war correspondent would report the action. He agreed and added that the detail is what makes his journal historically important. Anthony’s statement made me think of the journal entries describing the crucified Canadian soldier. I brought up the subject, but Anthony did not elaborate on this topic, in fact he down played it as possible propaganda, which was commonly used to stir up emotions among the troops. I then pointed out the entries that described the Canadian’s reprisal, which was the bayoneting of a Prussian Guardsman to a tree. I explained that during my research I had not found any mention or recording of this event. Again he changed the subject causing me to think I should leave controversial subjects alone.

Removing the other documents from the pack, I tried to lay them out according to date and subject matter so I could explain how I used them to reconstruct my grandfather’s military career. Anthony was surprised that my grandfather saved so many correspondence documents and how well they had been taken care of. He said, “The museum will keep all of his papers together for they seldom receive so many items supporting one soldier’s career and researchers will be interested in reviewing this information.”

There comes a time during a conversation when there is a pause, which usually indicates that the subject matter has been covered and it is time to wrap things up and end the discussion. We had reached this point so I thanked him for taking the time to allow me to present and talk about the documents. He thanked me for donating them to the museum and assured me that the museum will never

sell any of the documents. Then he added, “When items are donated they are kept forever in the museum’s archives.” I found this very reassuring since I had read articles about museums selling some of their donated items. Anthony said I would be receiving a formal letter from the museum thanking me for the donation. (Figure 19)

He gathered all the papers and placed the journal on top. He again thanked us before heading off to wherever his office was. I was pleased with myself for handling the transaction without a great deal of emotion, which surprised me. However, I did experience a sense of loss and sadness enveloped my present state of mind, but it quickly passed. Perhaps it was the time I spent reviewing the material with Anthony that expanded my comfort level, knowing the museum would care for my grandfather’s things. Whatever it was, I was pleased everything went well and anticipation was far worse than the actual participation.

EPILOGUE

I have received accolades from family and friends on publishing 'World War I – An Unkept Promise', although rewarding, the success would have been sweeter if my father would have been able to share this adventure with me. He passed away in 2006, two years before I was given the journal. I'll never know if he was aware of his father's exploits during the war, or for that matter, if he knew the journal existed. Regrettably, he was not a participant in this mission, for he would have enjoyed it immensely

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Following active duty my grandfather returned to his civilian occupation as an electrician. At one point he was involved in rewiring the Parliament Building and Buckingham Palace in London. There is a reliable family rumor that during the rewiring of the Parliament, my grandfather took a lunch break and sat on the throne of England while eating his cheese sandwich.

By 1922 climatic conditions in London had degraded, continuing to adversely affect my grandfather's lungs, already damaged by exposure to gas. This postwar environment drove a difficult decision to emigrate from England, with either the United States or Australia as appealing destinations. Many years later, during a conversation I had with my paternal uncle, I was astonished to learn that the Frederick Coxen family's destiny was determined in 1922 by the toss of a coin!

It was at this point that the family of five boarded a ship, "The Homeric" on April 13, 1922 bound for the United States out of Southampton, England. At the time the oldest child Doris was 8, followed by Frederick Albert age 5 and the youngest Douglas age 3. Upon arriving in New York harbor, they were processed through Ellis Island. The family moved to Detroit, Michigan, to stay with one of my grandfather's relatives. He worked in various jobs in the area until 1930, when he started his own company, Excelda Manufacturing. (Figure 20)

Excelda primarily produced automotive polishes; one of its main customers was Ford Motor Company. As was common with many enterprises prior to World War 1 I, in order to meet the growing needs of a country at war, my grandfather converted the business to a tool and die shop. For a time, the facility manufactured parts for a military bomber being assembled in Detroit's Willow Run Airport. Excelda continues to be owned and managed by family members, retaining Ford Motor Company as an important customer.

Fred participated in Memorial Day Parades in Detroit for several years until his military uniform shrank in direct proportion to his body mass. Figure 21 shows Fred leading one of the parades he participated in. Figure 22 is a photograph of Fred, who is located in the lower right of the photo, with other war veterans before or after one of the Memorial Day parades.

To the best of my knowledge, there were at least two occasions when my grandparents returned to London to visit relatives. But to my knowledge he never took advantage of these opportunities to fulfill his promise. I do not recall anyone in the family discussing my grandfather's involvement in the Great War, nor do I remember hearing my grandfather tell anyone about his war experiences. The box of mementos is my only link to this phase of my grandfather's life.

I was thirteen when my grandfather died of lung cancer in 1960.The doctors attributed this fatality to damaging gas exposure during the war, combined with cigarette smoking. My grandmother remained with us for a few more years, at which point she was laid to rest alongside my grandfather, in a small cemetery in Pompano Beach, Florida.

SOLDIERS MENTIONED

Lieutenant Marshall – wounded
Colonel Sharpe
General Finley – killed in action
Lieutenant Richie
Grogan – telephonest died of wounds
Smith - telephonest
Mr. Wood – young officer KIA 8 days after arriving
Mr. Donahue –
Major Baird
Major Madocks – wounded Sept 14, 1914 KIA
Taylor & Farmer – wounded Nov 21, 1914
George Hodge – Corporal KIA
Bruce – Gordon Highlanders
Major Johnson – KIA
Collins – main character within the journal
George Millington – major character in journal, survived the war and retired as Sergeant Major
Percy / George Bramwell – KIA
Hayman – KIA
Frank W Taylor – corporal reported wounded 8/12/14 KIA 1917

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GLOSSARY

Bully Beef: Canned corned beef that was the principal protein ration of the British army.

Coal-box: A type of artillery shell used by the German Army that produced a great deal of black smoke when it exploded. The black smoke looked like the dust produced when a box of coal is dropped.

Envelope: To be surrounded and captured by the enemy

Garhwals: A group of people who primarily live in the Garhwal Himalayas of the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand.

Gurkhas: A regiment of the British and Indian armies comprised of people from Nepal.

Jack Johnson: The nickname given to a German artillery shell. It was named after the boxer, Jack Johnson, because he was very powerful and really packed a punch.

Keep: A stronghold or innermost fortified part of a castle.

KIA: Killed in action

Lorry: The British term for a small truck.

Lyddite: British explosive used for filling artillery shells in World War One. Actually molten and cast picric acid.

Parapet: The side of the trench facing the enemy.

Redoubt: A temporary fortification built to defend a position.

Salient: The trench system projecting toward the enemy.

Semaphore Flag: Hand-held flags that are used to send visual messages.

Territorials: Spare time volunteer force of the British Army

Tommy: Slang word for a British soldier.

[i] By the time of the First World War, existing coastal batteries on the east coast, most of which had been built during the nineteenth century against the perceived threat of France, had been adapted or new batteries created to take the new breech-loading guns. At the outbreak of hostilities, it was the Admiralty that was responsible for overseeing the home shore defences, as the Army was overstretched providing men and equipment in France, Belgium and the Middle East. Because of the concentration of strategic factories and installations (in Tyne and Wear for example, twelve armaments factories) the North-East coast was one of the most heavily defended areas in the country; the perceived threat was initially against bombardment or invasion from the sea, but by 1916, when the Army took over command of the home defence, the aerial threat from Zeppelins and, in southern Britain, heavy bombers, was the most pressing concern, fuelled by panic among the civilian population, who were under attack from the enemy for the first time. In 1916 a network of searchlights was established 25 miles inland from Sussex to Northumberland.

[ii] Coxen, Fred G

[iii] **Shorncliffe** is located on the coastal plain where the North Downs meet the Straits of Dover. The British government purchased a large piece of land at Shorncliffe in 1794 and fortified it in preparation for the expected French invasion. The Shorncliffe Redoubt is significant as the birthplace of modern infantry tactics.

[iv] **Deepcut:** Military barracks were started in the late 19th century near Surrey Heath village Deepcut.

[v] Coxen, Fred G