

Section 171

The Retreat from Mons

1st Battalion - August to Sept 1914)

The 1st moved from its camp at Aldershot on August 12th and were in time to take part in the retreat from Mons and the subsequent events as part of the 6th Brigade of 2nd Division.

Aldershot

4th to 11th August 1914

The First Battalion was at Aldershot when war was declared against Germany on the 4th August 1914. Orders for mobilization were received at 5.30 p.m. on that day.

The next day 105 reservists with a Captain and a subaltern arrived from the Depot and 33 more arrived next day. The Battalion was formally attached to 6th Infantry Brigade.

8008 Pte Harry Wright formerly of the 2nd Bn was one of the reservists recalled. He kept a diary until repatriated in October 1914 with trench feet. He begins:-

Left home 5/8/14 for Reading drew our equipment and clothing and proceeded the same day to Aldershot met Fred Orchard RE. Wrote to Daisy and Curly. Went out in Aldershot town on Friday 7th with lots of civilians. Had one or two drinks returned to our barracks and went to bed slept well, the chaps say they could not sleep through my snoring must have been very bad. Just had a letter from Daisy she seems worried

Agst 8th Just had two letter, one from Georgie & one from Loise. Both were very exceptable [sic]. Its still raining. Went for a route march this morning about 12 miles in full marching order. I sweat something awful. Just had enough of Aldershot. Wrote a letter to Y.

Sunday August 9th. I thought we should have had a day off today but the CO evidently thought otherwise for we are going out on another route march. We went about 10 miles and things went a little better than yesterday but it's a queer Sunday somehow.. There is a rumer [sic] that we are going to Dover on Tuesday morning – roll on its better than this anyway.

Monday August 10th. Just come back from Ash ranges. Coming back all uphill. I don't think I have ever sweat so much in my life & I have a very bad cold and haven't a handkerchief. Parade again half past one. Another route march. 6.30 parade for Gen Munro who is in command of this division. He wished us luck and promised us we should have a good time when we got to Germany. I don't think he meant beer etc.

Tuesday August 11th. Cold a little better. Just had four handkerchiefs from Daisy only bought one this morning and they have just issued two red cotton ones out yesterday. I had none today but that's always the way. More parades today skirmishing and after dinner another route march. No one seems to know definitely when we are going to make a move. I hope it won't be very long anyway. Ive had enough of rushing about Aldershot. I did not mention in my entry for Saturday but they captured a spy tampering with the water. They

shot him on Monday near the Wellington statue. Long volley at the rifle range – well he deserved all he got if he poisoned the water here a good many civilians not forgetting the women and kids. [TX00882A]

The next few days were spent in integrating the reservists into the organisation and in musketry practice.. They were inspected by Major General Munro who was GOC 2nd Division on the 10th and on the 11th, by the King and Queen. They were deemed ready to go to the front.

Cpl Tiesteel wrote:-

There was plenty of excitement at Aldershot from the 4th of August 1914 until the 13th, the day we landed in France. It did not prevent us playing cricket though. We played and beat The Royal Army Service Corps, I am sorry to say it proved to be the last game for some of our most noted players. I mention two now, Lt and Adj A H Perrott and Company Quartermaster Sergeant Harold Forster, (later in the war Major H T Forster DSO MC) The two officers mentioned were two of the best all round sportsmen the Regiment ever had.

The regular soldiers of the Battalion had had a very stiff six month training before we were ordered to mobilize for War and there is no doubt it stood us in good stead as the saying goes, as, in the writers opinion, the first few months of the war were without doubt the stiffest.

I have often heard it said that the 5th Bn when first formed with Lt Col F W Foley DSO in command was the finest body of men which ever left England for France. I must say I was very pleased to hear it. The same remark was passed when the 1st Bn marched out of Aldershot. The remarks speak well for the Reserve men as both Bns were chiefly composed of such. I should think quite half of our Battalion consisted of Reserve men who were for the most part 2nd Bn men and had done most of their training in India.. They had never put a set of web equipment together before they joined us at Aldershot but they soon got experts at it. They used to start putting it together mostly after Tap-out at 9.20 pm. Their instructors were recruits who could not understand why the old soldiers were so fond of the canteen.

The first old regular officer to rejoin the Battalion was Major O M Redstone who had left the Regiment in 190? When he had completed 20 odd years service. He served throughout the war as camp QM at and always looked well after the many drafts of reinforcements of the Royal Berkshire Regiment who had the luck to be passing through on their way to the front. [TX00147a]

Aldershot to Rouen

12th-14th August 1914

The first train conveying the Battalion left Farnborough at 10.27a.m. on the 12th, and was followed by the second at 11.39 a.m. Just as they were about to depart a third contingent of 115 reservists arrived with Lt Perkins and they had to be left behind.

The officers with the battalion were the following:

Lieut.Colonel M.D. Graham. *Majors* H. M. Finch.
D.B. Maurice, D.S.O.F.F. Ready, D.S.O. *Captains* T. E.
C. Hunt.B.G. Bromhead.L.H. Birt. H.H. Shott, D.S.O.
Lieutenants E. A. B. Orr. F. Batt. (Quartermaster) A. H.
P e r (r A o d j H U a F S r t i W . s . I l . I
Reeves. C. St. Q O Fullbrook-Leggatt. C.P. Wheeler.
J.H. Woods. A.A.H.Hanbury-Sparrow.
Second-Lieutenants T. V. B. Denniss. A.P. J. Hibbert. E.
E. N. Burney.

Attached. Major A. S. Turner,(2nd Battalion).
Second-Lieutenant J Ransom, (2nd) Lieutenant G. H.
Bishop, (3rd). Second-Lieutenant YRD Wigan, (Special
Reserve) Second Lieutenant G Moore, (Special Reserve)

Lt Hanbury-Sparrow wrote his memoirs in a privately
published book entitled "The Land Locked Lake" He
had a very particular perspective and a rather prosaic
way of expressing himself. We begin extracts from his
book with the journey from Aldershot to Southampton:-

Wave! Wave through the carriage windows to those
who are waving to us. How they must envy us! What's
all the knowledge in the world compared to what we
are about to discover! Hurrah! Hurrah!

Go faster, faster, Train. Get us there in time. The war
will be so short that every hour is precious. Already
we're days behind, thanks to our rotten Government's
weakness. D'you remember how the crowds surged up
and down Whitehall whilst at Downing Street the great
ones sat *wobbling*, vacillating? How absurd it was to
act as if we were free to choose! How could we keep
out on a technical quibble when we had been morally
committed to France for years? What's the result? Only
that we're at least three days late, six, really, if you
count the three extra days of mobilisation, and now
the chances are that the French will have beaten the
Germans off their own bat before we get there, and our
chance will be lost. Hurry, hurry, Train.

Has anybody got those pictures of the new German
uniform? When did they alter it? Only recently, haven't
they? I suppose half of them will be in the old blue.
What's the Belgian uniform like? Au, here's the picture!
It'll be a job to distinguish it from the German blue at a
distance. Have to warn the troops.

Did you hear that gunner the other day? He said the
Germans had only just started indirect fire, and knew
next to nothing about it. I tell you what it is, their army's
miles behind ours. Bound to be; you can't make a
soldier under three years, and their infantry only serve
for two. They'll have no chance against our seven-year
men. They don't do half the musketry ours do.

Yes, but do you remember what that sailor said in his
lecture—that he didn't see why if we had invented
things, the Germans shouldn't have done so too?

But they still stick to mass formation. They never
practise extended order. That shows they're years
behind us. Where's this? Southampton? What a miser-
able ship!

Sirens hooting. Wavings. Cheers. The ship glides down
the Solent and out into the Channel. The fishing
smacks bob on the rolling swell, their crews waving,
cheering. Here's the last of them, the man at the tiller
waves his cap, his mate has swarmed hail-way up the
mast, the better to signal farewell, good luck.

Night falls, and our environment slowly crumbles away,
to keep on crumbling bit by bit, and for year after year.
But for us the future was like the sea—hidden in
darkness. [TX00151A]

Southampton was reached the same afternoon, and the
battalion, embarking on the SS Ardmore and the SS

Mellifont, was at Rouen and marched to the camp de
Bruyères three miles off on the 13th.

Cpl Tiesteel was in the first half of the Battalion:-

Packed like sardines, we the half battaion under Major
Finch, crossed the channel on August 12th 1914, the
very day most of us expected to start our summer
leave, Army Orders having ststed that troops would be
granted 10 days leave in the summer.

It was night time when we sailed from Southampton &
what a glorious voyage we had down the Seine we had
next day.. The weather was good and everything on
the banks of the Seine looked beautiful

We landed at 9.30 am at Rouen & marched through
the town headed by the drums. The march to the
camping ground just near the Rouen Race Course was
a very trying test in full marching order, with the hot
sun beating down on us, not a breath of wind. But with
the name of being the best marching Bn in the Army to
hold up, we sped along with correct march discipline to
the tune of "Unter den Linden" & the cheers of the
French people, we landed at the camping ground
alright. Later on the other half battalioan arrived.
[TX00147B]

Pte Barlow was in the second half of the Battalion:-

We embarked at Southampton on the afternoon of
August 11th and arrived at midnight at Le Havre where
we anchored until daylight. We then proceeded up the
river to Rouen, where we disembarked and marched
through Rouen to a camp just above the racecourse.
We had a fine reception as we went through, as I
believe we were the first English regiment to pass
through this town. We stayed at this camp for two days

LCpl Wright was also on the Ardmore. He wrote:-

Wednesday August 12th. Arrived at Southampton
about 11 am and embarked upon cattle boat Ardmore
for unknown destination, France probably. Packed
upon her like herrings have got a job to stand up let
alone lie down haven't the chance of a wash.

Thursday morning 13th. Still on the boat don't think we
shall land until dinner time. Landed at Rouen at 7.30
pm had a pleasant trip up the river. I think we all
cheered ourselves hoarse. At present waiting on the
square at Rouen.

Thursday evening 13th. Marched away from the square
about 8 o'clock and proceeded right through main
street up to La Bre which is about 5 miles from Rouen.
I shall never forget the reception we received. People
rich and poor all went mad. Well, there's only one
complaint so far, the food. Its all bully beef and biscuits
and now and again the vilest jam that was ever tasted
through the contractor. [TX00882B]

Cpl Wickens travelled on the Mellifont. His diary did
not reappear until 2002 when it was transcribed by a
great niece in Australia. He served in D Coy.

Aug 12 Left Aldershot, marched to Farnborough
Station, & entrained to Southampton; Embarked on the
Mallifont about mid-day had a pleasant passage across
but was rather cold at night. Tea served up about half
past five, Took pilot at Havre.

Aug 13 Entrained the River Seine before daylight &
was compelled to stop for over an hour as the fog was
so thick, almost ran aground on one of the banks;
beautiful scenery each side of the River, arrived at
Rouen about 9 am & marched about 3 miles to Camp
on the outskirts of the Town found tents already
pitched, remained the night in Camp

Aug 14th Paid out during the afternoon Parade in the
evening & marched to the Station, inhabitants cheer-
ing us, & begging for Souveniers, such as [numerals]
and Cap Badges entrained about midnight to Wassing-
ry & spent the night in the train.

Lt Sparrow:-

We're gliding up the river Seine. The sun is drying up the morning mist, which still swathes the hills like tulle around a woman's throat. It's lovely, beautiful. Somewhere on the right are the ruins of Château Gaillard, the strong castle of Richard Coeur-de-Lion. We are gliding into history. Oh, sweet, lovely country, you soften the urgent need for haste that only yesterday we felt so imperatively. This morning under your influence we feel gentle. "This war will be a picnic," opines someone, and because this view so fits our present mood, none feel the dismay that only yesterday such words would have aroused.

People on the banks are astir. Monsieur le French pilot is in ecstasies, grandly gasconading with the ship's siren. "Peel's view holla would awaken the dead," then "hoot-hoo-hoot," the syren shall be his horn and rouse the living from their beds. "'Hoot-hoo-hoot!' See the cargo I, yes I, the pilot, am steering to the aid of France. 'Hoot-hoo-hoot!' Where would France be but for me?' 'Hoot-hoo-hoot!' Get up, you lazy ones, and see a sight for sore eyes I" His enthusiasm infects the troops, who wave to anyone who will wave to them, to the village postmen, the village gendarmes, to that petticoat which a bare arm is waving from some closed shutters. "Hoot-hoo-hoot I"

Bah! It's becoming wearisome, monotonous, tiring, this enthusiasm. No man can keep on admiring the view and waving for hour after hour. Suddenly we become aware that all of us are thoroughly tired after the rush of mobilisation, the excitement, and the choppy crossing. We become lethargic, dozing through the hot morning.

After all, one is only twenty-two.

Rouen. Gallic enthusiasm is hereto awaken our national pride. The transport horses are feeling none too good after the tumbling of their voyage. New harness too stiff to fit close. Something suspiciously like a gall here and there. Yet no horses like these in France, we think, and no troops half so good as those that even now are quick-marching through the town. Pity those reservists are straggling up the hill. Spoil the look of the thing. They're damned unfit, some of them. Pity, too, that the transport officer's saddle has slipped with him under his horse. Undignified.

Look at those trains. How free the French seem! We'd never be allowed to stand on the driver's platform. There's a girl offering flowers. What can we do so as not to hurt her feelings? Oh, this is life, life worth living! Happy warriors are we, marching into the camp that's been pitched for us outside the town. It's guarded by French sentries with ball ammunition. Warn the men to be in by dark. They say these excitable foreigners were shooting last night.

The mess is in the farmhouse. There's a fatigue party of red-trousered French soldiers there, shifting straw, and looking for all the world like a Meissonier picture come to life. But we won't wait for lunch; we'll have ours in the town. Come on!

We offer to pay our fares in the tram. The money is waved aside. We daren't go on the platform, but sit, feeling rather foolish, amongst the women inside. One of them hands a paper for us to read. Here's the news. "Great victory in Alsace. Mulhouse taken. Twenty thousand German casualties." "C'est bien, n'est-ce pas?" she remarks. "Oui, très bien," you answer, but in your heart of hearts you are cast down, jealous, and tushamed. The English are too late. The news mars an evening that otherwise would have been unalloyed bliss. All over the town mobilisation posters are stuck up. Crossed tricolours and below them "Armées de terre et dt, mer." "La Revanche." Thrilling. And we're not there. We're left behind with the French Territoria]s and the *gardes champêtres*, unwanted reserves. [TX00151B]

Pte Wright recorded his impressions of La Bruyere Camp:-

Friday 14th. Camp La Bre. Another beautiful morning the time 7.20 am sun very hot. Last night was very cold we haven't any blankets on these turnouts glad to lie down. Anyway can write a lot about the field where we

are camped another time. It is one of the positions held during Waterloo what a fine battlefield one has to remark. We leave here at 6.20 for some unknown destination Will write when we arrive. [TX00882C]

Moving North

15th-22nd August 1914

On the evening of the 14th the Battalion paraded and marched off to the Gare du Nord to board their train. They had great difficulty in getting their General service Waggon onto the narrow French platform trucks. They finally left Rouen at 01:15 on the 15th accompanied by HQ of the 6th Brigade. The train passed through Amiens, where the promised coffee failed to materialise, and they detrained at Wassigny. From there they marched to camp at Venerolles, which was described as a very unsanitary village.

Lt Sparrow:-

The next evening we are off, at an hour's notice, in a hurry. But not so the train, which jangles and jolts through the night, jolts, indeed, a waggon-load of horses over into the most ghastly tangle of kicking limbs. It's morning before we get to Arras - shades of the three musketeers! - where a lady in a yellow waistcoat presents a bouquet to the Brigadier, and then, with the locomotive still going in jerks like a raw colt in harness, spasm our uneasy way to Wassigny, our railroad.

Vénérolles - you can guess what the men called it - was the village where we billeted for a few days of bliss, always alloyed by the thought that the real fighting was not for us. Rumour, in the form of a visitor captain, had it that the French wanted to do it all themselves, and that our role was to be but that of an Army of Pursuit. Pretty disgusting news, that! Selfish of the French in a way, but still you really can't blame them. There isn't a man between eighteen and forty in this village. They've all gone to the war. Have our men noticed it, we wonder - seen the reward of honour that comes to the men of a conscript country. Lucky ones! Yet these French peasants seem impassive, as unmoved as the fields in which they spend their lives. [TX00151C]

Cpl Wickens

Aug 15th Arrived at Wassingry, detrained & formed up in a field while billeting party went out, afterwards marched about 3 miles in the rain to Venerolles & billeted in a barn & remained in the same billets while the remainder of the Division were Concentrating until Aug 20th. Route marches & Musketry Parades every day.

Pte Wright

Saturday 15th. Had a fine reception going through town for station. Waited outside station for about four hours then proceeded. Am writing this in train time 9 am Friday beautiful country we are passing through all corn fields some standing some in stooks as though the world had come to a standstill no men or horses to be seen women and children working in the fields. 10:30 just entered Belgium territory fine reception sweetmeats and eggs and country wine much cheering. Been in train about 24 hours. Still very beautiful country train rocks to and fro hard to write.

Arrived in Wasigny about 8 pm and we marched to a meadow about 2 miles from station had tea and another tin of bully. Rained all the time stayed there about an hour and then my Coy was marched to a village about three miles from station and was billeted out in various places such as empty houses and barns my luck fell to a barn with about 80 others the buildings about here are very old the barn where I am was built 1853 and facing RC chapel which was built about the

same time as it looks modern. All the peasants around here are very good to us giving and doing anything for you. In one inn where we visited last night wine and other drinks were showered upon everybody the Innkeeper refusing payments.

2 pm Sunday or French Monday. [sic] Pleasant afternoon strolling round the village we came here just right for the fruit.

Monday 17th August. Battalion route march went about 7 miles slept all the afternoon walked about the village during the evening all men in billets by 8 pm.

Tuesday 18th. Reveille about 6:30 breakfast 7.15 company parade at 9.15. rifle exercise finished parade at 12 noon as we do most days evening spent roaming village or in village inn drinking cherry wine or trying to understand French newspapers. Up to the present I don't think any of us can grumble as we get very decent rations considering and as we, that is three chums and myself have still plenty of money we are able to buy new bread and eggs fresh butter. Some of the chaps are fortunate enough to get chicken and a variety of vegetables so after all if things don't change for the worst I may as well close my diary.

Wednesday 19th. Same things today parade and walk round. Wrote a letter home. Haven't had any letters since leaving Aldershot but don't expect any more for some time yet.

Thursday 20th. Usual parades today. Colonel says we can be prepared to move off tomorrow morning or evening but this isn't to be considered official [TX00882D]

Here the battalion were training till the 20th, and suffered their first casualty - a light draught horse which died of cholera on the 18th.

Col Graham recalled in a letter to his son Jack dated 5th September 1914:

We embarked at Southampton and went to Havre. Two small Cork cattle boats carried us. From Havre we went up the Seine and disembarked at Rouen and remained in the rest camp one night. Thence by rail to Amiens and on to a place called Wassigny, where we detrained and marched to a quaint little village called Veneroles where we went into billets.

Suddenly on the 19th Aug we received orders to march and averaging over 20 miles a day, we reached Veiller le sec - near Mons - on the 23rd Aug. [TX00458A]

21st August 1914

On the 21st it marched eleven miles to billets at Landrecies suffering another 7 casualties among the men during the very trying heat.

Cpl Tiesteel:-

We left Rouen a couple of nights later after a telegram had been read out wishing us good luck from the King. We gave His Majesty three cheers.

We entrained about midnight and travelled slowly to the place where the Brigade were to rendezvous. The only place I remember passing through was Calais where we were held up for a time owing to a truck breaking loose.

We arrived at our destination about 4 pm. We were billeted in barns & I had quite a good time getting plenty of grub and being allowed in the estaminets. We were also paid out, so had nothing to grumble at. We did a couple of short route marches & had lectures from our Company Officer, Major Readdy, & in one of his lectures during one of the short route marches he halted the Company between two small hills & calling all the officers & NCOs out, told us to imagine we were ordered to attack the hill in front of us. A few of his remarks were as follows: *You might be able to take it in a day & then again it might take you days or even weeks or months, but remember this & this is the most*

important point, You will have to take it at the finish with the bayonet & it will be the bayonet which will bring you the victory.

It was not so much the words he used as the way he said it. One feeling we all had & that was that we had the right man to lead us, a man we would follow anywhere. But how soon we were to lose him. When we paraded next morning our skipper whom everyone was so proud of, was missing from the Company. The Divisional HQs had bagged him at 2 am. We saw him along the road with a large blue band round his arm which meant we had lost him to 2nd Division HQ Staff. We pulled up our chests etc as we marched past him, but we felt a bit down at losing such a splendid man.

Our very first casualty was Bandsman James Hollingsworth. We had just had breakfast one morning and we were moving off when bang went a shot & poor Hollingsworth lay badly hit in the lower part of the abdomen. It happened through one of our reserve men not having his safety catch drawn back. We were all loaded with nine rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber. The reserve men at that time were not used to the new short rifle with the safety catch, hence the accident.

The next thing of note was Drummer F Jones taking Sir John French round the men's billets before taking him to Battalion Headquarters. I remember how proud Jonah (as we used to call him) was when he used to tell us how he had the honour of taking the Commander-in-Chief round on his own.

We were billeted in the barracks at Landrecies for one night. Our Company were in the Quartermaster's stores, true there were no stores to pinch, only the inventory boards nailed on the walls with a list of the stores I expect used to be there. [TX00147C]

Pte Barlow:-

[We] then took train to a place nearer the Belgium frontier. We marched from there to Venerolles, where we had ten days of good hard field training. We thought at the time we were being hard done by, but we found out afterwards that it came in very useful to us. After the ten days at Veronelles we marched nearer to the frontier to Landrecies, where we billeted in some French barracks for the night, continuing the march to the frontier next day which was Saturday.

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 21st Marched to Landrecies & billeted in French Barracks, which were in a very dirty condition

Pte Wright:-

Friday 21st. We are marching off this morning for some unknown place nearer the frontier anyway. Don't much relish the idea of marching about 20 miles in this marching order which weighs about 60 lbs. Arrived at Landrecies about 2.30 pm 14 miles and although this is not considered a long march I am sure we all had enough of it before we got here. Found the barracks where we are being quartered about the filthiest dung pit one can imagine, bones and decaying meat lying about among the straw which littered the cubicles for bedding. Opening the door from my room was astonished to find a bootmakers shop with tools and all needful articles lying about spare. We at once established a shop and commenced the repairing. The barracks was absolutely empty and looked as though the French troops had left in a panic. Not allowed out and we are all worried because we can't get any beer oh why did I leave my little back room? [TX00882E]

An unnamed officer of the Royal Berks reported an incident on the way to the front:-

On arrival in camp there was a general rush for water. We found that on one side there were about 40 half-barrels full of water, but the medical authorities refused to allow us to drink it. It looked very good and, as one man told me, there was a taste of alcohol in it. As a matter of fact the barrels had been used for wine. As we were not allowed to drink it, it was suggested we might wash in it as we had not had a

wash since leaving Aldershot. Permission to do this was given and in very short time most of the men were making a bath of each barrel.

Lt Sparrow:-

At last the order comes. We parade and march off, a thousand fighting men, a third of them serving soldiers, hard, fit; the rest reservists, soft as butter many of them; some of them have been eight years on the Reserve and are a weakness, for any training they remember is out-of-date.

We march, march, march, march all day, over the blistering *pave*, under the sweltering sun, to Landrecies, where a cat-o'-nine-tails, hanging on a barrack wall, gives the men something to think about, and the prettiest girl we ever saw in France is servant in our billet.

Up betimes and breakfast with our hosts, an old couple of some standing in the town, offering a marvellous assortment of liqueurs for our six-o'clock-in-the-morning meal

And then march, march, march, march, march, over this eternal *pave*, under this pitiless sun. Reservists' feet are getting sore, reservists' backs are fraying under the unaccustomed load, reservists' thighs galling under the fret, fret of the entrenching tool. It's becoming a job to keep them in the ranks. The villages we pass are gay with flags, and their inhabitants offer flowers and bread and matches, for our thriftless fellows have already run out of this last commodity, and you hear them calling out their one and only word of French, "Allumettes, allumettes!" as they go through. [TX00151D]

22nd August 1914

The battalion was one unit of the 6th Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier-General R. H. Davies, C.B. The other battalions of the brigade were the 1st King's (Liverpool Regiment), 2nd South Staffordshire Regiment and 1st King's Royal Rifle Corps. The other brigades of the 2nd Division (commanded by Major-General C. Monro, C.B.) were the 4th (Guards) and 5th. On the 22nd August the battalion passed the Belgian Frontier at Gognies, on the road from Maubeuge to Mons.

On the 22nd they left Landrecies and marched to Hargnies, arriving in billets at 16:00 They were at first told to be on the move again at 19:00 but orders were changed and they were able to stay in the billets overnight.

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 22nd Left Landrecies about 5:30 A.M. & marched to Hargnies, about 16 miles, weather beautiful, but too hot for comfortable marching. Two men, one from King's Royal Rifles, & one of the South Staffords in our Brigade died from exhaustion on this march found a billet in a hay loft close to a Brewery & were able to obtain some French Beer, Ordered out during the evening but was eventually cancelled & managed to obtain a night's sleep.

Pte Wright:-

Saturday 22nd 1914 Marched off 5.00 am didn't get much sleep last night cold and on the uneven brick floor. Writing this at first halt 15 minutes. Arrived in billets about 12pm nearly everybody done up. My luck fell to a brewery. Had about a qt of beer felt very much better. Guard in the afternoon and was prepared for a night of it when we received the order to march off at 7 pm I wonder where we are going now, not very far from firing line according to map and what one can pick up from French papers. Stand by until further orders I resume sentry go on the farm gate and got about 2 hours sleep received orders to move off at 3 am will now continue after marching about 18 miles to write the doing of the day. Arrived at Givry where we prepared for

our first encounter with the enemy by digging trenches I and my chum Alan dug ours at the end of trench and about the centre of the line whilst engaged now I wrote the forgoing yesterday. [TX00882F]

23rd August 1914

The 1st Royal Berkshire were the advance guard of the brigade when they set out at 02:00 on the morning of Sunday the 23rd. They crossed the Belgian border at Bognies and were ordered to occupy a position at Villereuil-le-Sec, about five miles S.E. of Mons. The rest of the brigade were positioned at Harmignies, Estinne, and Givry. They were entrenched at 15:00. An hour later heavy artillery fire was heard from the direction of Mons, and German cavalry were reported towards Bray in the east.

Lt Sparrow:-

Pont sur-Sambre, Belgium, and the Belgian flag. How many armies setting gaily forth to the campaign has this old town seen in its history? How many defeated ones returning? In which category will it put us from our appearance? The latter, likely as not, for the unfitness of the reservists has knocked our march discipline to pieces. Our senses get blunted with the strain of keeping these tired men in their fours, and the wearying transport horses up to their bits. Our efforts are bent on getting men and horses to the battlefield. Once there, we feel, the worst will be over. It is evening before we halt.

March, march, march, march. We are passing through a forest and it's cooler this dull morning of the 23rd of August, 1914. The signposts are labelled Malplaquet but what thrill does that glorious name arouse amongst our men? None. Not one in ten has ever heard of it, and of the few that have, scarce one cares a two-penny damn. But what need have they for such romanticism when a real living thrill is vibrating gently in their ears, a soft, purring rumble? Is it—can it be? Yes, it is. Guns. A visible quiver runs down the serpent-like column.

Here's news. Our cavalry has been in action, fairly put it across the Uhlans, they say. Sections have routed troops, and troops have routed squadrons. Somebody who ought to know comes along. "Is it true?" we ask. "Yes," he says, "but it's getting harder, for now they keep falling back on single guns." Proves their rottenness, we think, that they can't fight man for man. It's obvious we've nothing to fear from these fellows, for if their cavalry with three years' service can't stand up to our men, how much less will their infantry with only two, and knowing nothing about musketry. In this atmosphere, pregnant with destiny, the battalion recovers its form, even as explorers, knowing the prize is within reach, forget fatigue and press on with quickened gait and straightened back. What a lot we are on verge of discovering! In peace the Army must needs train on theory and conjecture. Now we are to find out if our training has been right; now we axe to find out what war is really like; and now we are to find out if we are - Men [TX00151E]

Cpl Tiesteel:-

We were up before dawn and well on the way across the Belgian border before we had breakfast. Long marches are alright and can be done easily enough when you always are sure of your ten minutes halt after fifty minutes marching. Evidently this particular morning orders must have been to reach a particular point with as little delay as possible. Anyway we did not get our regular 10 minutes after 50 minutes marching, but were marching 60 minutes and sometimes 90 minutes without a halt, although when we did halt the order was for a quarter of an hour. I think we started marching from Landrecies that morning about 4.30 am & at 8.30 am we halted for breakfast. Of course up went a cheer. Down the road, almost before we could take our packs off, galloped Major Finch

"For Gods sake men!, stop this noise, see that all your rifles are loaded, you may be in action any minute now"

Well the wind being over we carried on with a good breakfast.

This was Sunday the 23rd of August 1914 and before the following morning we were to get a good sample of the German artillery. It would be about 1 or 2 pm when we took up position & started to dig ourselves in. The railway ran through our position with the station about 200 yards to our rear.

No 9 Platoon (Sgt Graves) were digging a trench on the right of the railway line & no 10 Platoon (Sgt Gash) was digging a trench on the left of the railway. Each platoon had a section out in front acting as a screen. We had no picks or shovels, only our entrenching tools, but we made good use of them, especially after the first shell came sailing over about 4 pm.

We were digging across a potato field. The potatoes were just right for eating and we had gathered enough for the Company when we a hare came running towards us. Tom White, with his first cut at it with his entrenching tool laid it out & I skinned and cleaned it and we cleaned some potatoes and laid the lot out on the top of the trench ready to take it to the cooker so that we could enjoy a nice feed. But we never had it. I expect that when the Germans came over next day they found it where we had laid it.

A passenger train passed through the station & then Sgt Graves and some of his platoon blocked the railway line. Corporal Noyse was in our trench with a Maritiden range finder & we took all the ranges of prominent objects in front. Top of the hill to our right front we could just see a church tower 1100 yards. A road came in view about 200 yards from the tower. Along this road we saw a troop of our cavalry gallop, come to down into the valley, dismount and crawl back to line the road. Then over came a shell from the enemy and burst right amongst the horses. The business of war had started. The troopers rushed back into the valley, secured their horses and galloped away followed by a number of shells.

Another troop came galloping over the crest of the hill and along the road, later a riderless horse. Back went a trooper & we saw him return with a wounded man across the horse's shoulders. *Bravo* said our fellows, *He deserves the VC whoever he is.*

Then we got a dose of the enemy's shells, one wounding Lt Bartley-Dennis and another man. It was getting dusk & the shelling had ceased when we could just see three mounted men ride over the hill, calmly dismount, take out their field glasses and examine the ground we were holding. Up to this moment we had not seen a German soldier so did not know what their uniform looked like, so we took these three mounted men for French officers until the covering screen party came in & reported enemy in large numbers. They were German officers. After a good look around they remounted & rode back the way they had come.

Just before darkness came on we saw the advanced troops (scouts I expect they were as we captured one that night) come over the hill in extended order and lie down quite unconscious of our presence. In fact I do not suppose they had any idea we were so near them. We were well under cover, just the sentries & NCO peeping over the top to see what was going on.

Then the German artillery started again, a couple of shells travelling through the top of the railway station. Then the enemy brought up a huge searchlight & opened it out on us from the top of the hill. The shelling ceased for a while & then we got our first German. The honour belongs to Pte Fife of Sgt Graves's platoon no 9. He was one of a double sentry posted on the railway embankment. Everything was dead quiet when out rang the challenge from the other sentry "Halt, who goes there?" - "Its a ---- German shouted Fife at the same time driving his bayonet into the German. Down the bank he came with a most pitiful cry. He was a fine big fellow 6 ft and wonderfully equipped. Scout Smith or something like it was his name. Everything of importance was taken off him, his wound dressed & he was made as comfortable as possible. What happened to

him afterwards when we withdrew the following morning I do not know.

There was plenty of rifle fire that night by the Guards on our left but we did not fire a round. [TX00147D]

Lt Bartley-Dennis's mother wrote an account for the Manchester City News of 5th September 1914:-

"Tom is doing very well. His left arm was very much torn, and the muscles were severed. They had been marching from 2.30 on Sunday morning till twelve or one o'clock midday, when they halted to entrench themselves. Then the Colonel ordered Tom to take two men and go and scout. They got half a mile ahead of the army when the Germans opened fire. Tom told his men to separate, and consequently, they were not injured at all. Tom was struck twice. Shells burst all round with terrific noise. The first only tore his knapsack, which probably saved his life. The second shot struck and tore his arm. The great loss of blood, added to fatigue, so exhausted him that he could not run back to the trenches, but had to walk through the murderous rain of bullets and slide down a steep hill. At the bottom was an empty engine, where he and his men lay for four and a half hours, with shells going over them from each side. There one of his men bound up the arm and stopped the bleeding, and they got back to the trenches after dark." [TX00473]

Pte Barlow:-

Early on Sunday morning we had our first bit of excitement as we were told we had to march to a place not mentioned and hold it at all costs.

We started off very early in the morning and had our first rest on the frontier, where we had breakfast, putting out outposts for protection. Whilst having breakfast we heard for the first time the rumble of the heavy guns in the distance and we knew then that we were not far off the German lines. After finishing breakfast we marched to a place called Givry, where we halted. My Company (C) was told off to Givry station to entrench ourselves; my section being instructed to erect a barricade across the line, and the remainder to entrench parallel with the line. We set about in earnest as the sound of the guns grew nearer and before we had finished our task we saw the German shells ploughing the side of the hill about half a mile to the front of us, where our cavalry was retiring at the gallop. We did not take much notice of this but soon had our trenches finished. We were just going to have our dinner when we heard the first shell screaming over to our direction, and we soon got our kits on and manned our trenches as the shells were coming over a bit thick. The first one went plump into our travelling cooker and upset our dinners and we had to go without that day.

Cpl Wickens

Aug 23 Parade 2.0 AM. forced march commenced to Mons just over 20 miles, fixed Bayonets before starting in the early dawn & later charged magazines. drew Tools & dug Trenches on arrival. spent the remainder of the day in the Trenches & were able to observe the movements of the Whelan Cavalry immediately to our front. Heavy Artillery fire opened about 3 p.m. cutting the telegraph wires on the Railway embankment just in front of our Trenches, pieces of shrapnel falling in the Trenches but doing no damage quieted down a little during the night, but musketry fire on our left continued all night.

Lance Corporal Bignell told his story to the Reading Mercury when he was home on sick leave It was published 26/9/14. He had a slightly different view of the action:-

We arrived at the railway station at about noon on the Sunday and immediately commenced to entrench, but before this work had been completed the Germans commenced to shell their position. We stood in the trenches all that afternoon and night expecting every minute to be our last

Sgt Frogley [6076] reported an incident at Givry:-

At Givry, where the enemy put the villagers in front of them, General Davis gave the word to us not to shoot and we did not fire a shot

For four hours the battalion was under heavy shell fire, but, beyond this, played no part in the battle of the 23rd August. The casualties were slight - Second-Lieutenant T. V. B. Denniss and three men wounded. The ensuing night was quiet.

Cpl Denore:-

AUGUST 23.-We had been marching since 2.30 a.m., and about 11.15 am an order was passed down for A Company (my company) to deploy to the right and dig in on the south bank of a railway cutting.

We deployed and started digging in, but as the soil was mostly chalk, we were able to make only shallow holes. While we were digging the German artillery opened fire. The range was perfect, about six shells at a time bursting in line directly over our heads. All of us except the company commander fell flat on our faces, frightened and surprised; but after a while we got up and looked over the rough parapet we had thrown up; and could not see much. One or two men had been wounded, and one was killed.

There was a town about one mile away on our left front, and a lot of movement was going on round about it; and there was a small village called Binche on our right, where there was a lot of heavy firing going on-rifle and artillery. We saw the Germans attack on our left in great masses, but beaten back by the Coldstreams

A squadron of Germans crossed our front about distant, and we opened fire. We hit a few and the fact that doing something definite improved morale immensely, and took away a lot of our nervousness.

The artillery fire from the was very heavy, but was behind us on a British battery company officer, who had open all the time, had taken of men to help get the wounded from the battery behind returned about 6.30 pm., firing had died down a bit, the battery had been blown

I was then sent with outpost to a signal box crossing, and found it was as a clearing station for. After dark more wounded were brought in from the 9th Battery (the battery that was cut up). One was in a very bad way, and kept crying out for somebody to bring a razor and cut his throat, and two others died almost immediately.

I was going to move a when someone called out, chum. There's a bloke saw a leg completely severed from its body, and suddenly felt sick and tired.

The German rifle-fire started and an artilleryman to whom I was talking was shot dead. I was untouched.

Nothing much happened that night, except that one time kissing a string of and another swore practically all night. [TX00419A]

Pte Barlow:-

They soon had the station in ruins and as we were entrenched only 50 yards to the east of it. We did not feel any too pleasant as it was the first time that nearly all of us had been under fire of artillery. They soon found out where our main body and guns were entrenched and started shelling them. We soon got used to the shell fire and now and again got out of our trench and had a look to the front to ascertain what was going on, and to see if we could spot the guns, but they were over the other side of the hill somewhere in the vicinity of Mons.

The enemy kept up a continuous bombardment until dark and then sent over a few heavy shells every few minutes. Just after dark we heard the first rattle of heavy rifle fire on our left and we found out afterwards that the enemy had attacked the Guards Brigade. This was kept up all night - attacking and counter-attacking.

We were continually being worried during the night by patrols, but we could not tell who they were until one more daring than the rest tried to climb over our barricade. We had one round at him and heard him shout but he must have been only wounded as he was not there in the morning. Soon after this happened another patrol tried to get into the rear of us but ran straight into the trenches running parallel with the line, so we bayoneted the first one and opened fire on the others, who made off.

Pte Wright:-

Sunday 23rd August where I received my baptism of fire. No I am alive and well but I never want to experience anything like that again shells bursting all round us from where I was entrenched I could see pretty well all the field. At first they shelled the cavalry then an artillery duel began with infantry advancing on our trenches. Nighttime - we are now lying in a wheat field for a few hours have been retiring all day giving up the positions we held all day yesterday I must write some other time about yesterday and today. [TX00882G]

An unnamed NCO of the Battalion wrote an account which was published in the Manchester Guardian of 13/8/1914:-

"From the first it was clear that the Germans were trying to turn our left rather than risk an attack on the strongly entrenched position extending along our front for nearly ten miles; but they were a bit put out by the quickness with which we turned about and gave them a hot time there. After a pretty steady artillery fire they came on with a rush, evidently hoping to drive us out before we had time to entrench. But they didn't make enough allowance for the speed with which we get to work, and when they came along we were ready to receive them in a fairly strong position. As they came into view in the open in front of our hastily dug trenches our men opened on them with a steady fire that never once went wide, and we could see clean-cut gaps in the tightly packed ranks as the hail of lead tore its way through them.

They were a game lot, however, and they kept closing up the gaps in their ranks as though they were so many marionettes. Flesh and blood cannot stand this sort of thing forever, and after a while they began to come along with a less confident step. Then they halted for a few minutes, gazed about them in a dazed sort of way, and ran like hares. Their place was taken by another bluish-grey mass behind them, and this body came on in much the same way until they too had had as much as they could stand, and then there was another bolt to the rear. This advancing and retreating went on for hours, each retirement unmasking a fresh body of men, and by the time they were close enough to hurl themselves on our trenches it was an entirely fresh mass of men, who had suffered little from our fire. As they scrambled up they seemed cocksure of themselves, but they had forgotten our men posted under cover on their right, and just as they were steadying themselves for one last rush at us a withering fire was opened on them and at the same time we cleared the way for the Hussars, who were at them right and left as soon as the fire of our men ceased.

Fury blazed from the eyes of the Germans as they tried to grapple with their new foe, and we stood there silent spectators lest we should hit our cavalry. It only took them a few minutes to make up their minds, and with a blood curdling wail that I will remember to my dying day they ran as though all the fiends were after them. They were cut down like chaff and it was at this point that most of the prisoners were taken by our men. Rifles, bandoliers, caps, and everything else that could be cast off was sacrificed to speed, and many of the scared men outpaced easily the tired horses of our Hussars.

Later, during a lull in the fight, we went out to collect their wounded lying near our trenches, and you would hardly believe the fury that was manifest against us. I think they hate us ten times worse than they hate the

French, and that is saying a lot. Those of them who talk English tell us that had it not been for our interference they would have been in Paris now dictating terms of peace, and that is why they hate us so. [TX00472]

Lt Sparrow was trying to keep his cool as he sought for his transport:-

We are entrenched amidst stooks of corn behind a railway cutting. The trenches have been hurriedly dug at the end of the morning's march, hurriedly and badly dug, for there is so much to see. In the rolling open country beyond the cutting, cavalry patrols are at work. If you are lucky, you can catch sight of them galloping from one position to another. Far to the right pillars of smoke are rising straight into the still air from burning homesteads. A man suggests that it is the German way of signalling where their cavalry patrols have got to, and he's likely correct. For the smoke columns gradually extend in an enveloping curve. Otherwise they seem just stupid incendiaryisms.

But on the left is the real, irresistible attraction, for there in the air, are puffs of fleecy cotton-wool, magically coming, instantly full-born, and reluctantly fading away. Its shrapnel, think of it, real shrapnel. The men cut themselves seats in the back of the trench so as to view it all in comfort. For the officer they have, by the Colonel's order, dug a perch at the back of the traverse. We know where he got the idea from—a picture in the Sphere of Bulgarian infantry. An hour hence and the idea is dead for ever. A Taube aeroplane, with iron crosses painted on the wings, flies insolently over-head how we picture the battle to be. Ourselves, sitting quietly in our trenches, half-sardonically, half pityingly watching the German masses advance. Then staggering them with our "fifteen rounds rapid fire," that mad minute to which all the roads of the musketry course lead. Attack after attack beaten off, growing wails of slain, growing piles of brass cartridge-cases, and rifle barrels too hot to hold. A lava stream of dead rolling slowly up to our trenches, our numbers getting fewer all the time. Indomitable, the survivors will fix bayonets and charge to victory or death.

There's a shout from the left: "Get in your trenches." Next instant Fear has screamed over our heads and burst with a clang fifty yards in rear. Spiritually, you're winded. The manhood's gone completely out of you. It's like a punch on the solar plexus that has caught you completely off your guard. Could—those—distant—puffs of—cotton—wool—be the same as this hideous, vicious, shrieking stream of terror that has sent you and your men grovelling to the bottom of the trenches? Clang! Whiz-clang, whiz-clang! Strepitant, screaming steel, tearing the veil of the spirit, sweeping aside illusion, disillusion, and showing us what we are, slavish, trembling, cowering cowards.

Bang! The heart misses a beat. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! God, what is it? You can hardly breathe with terror. Fool, fool, fool that you were to join the Army. Heavens! It's our guns, a battery just over the edge that you never knew about. Someone at all events is brave For very shame's sake pull yourself together,

Light your pipe. Their infantry will be attacking at any moment. They won't waste this terrific bombardment. (Actually there were three four-gun German batteries against one of six guns, but Life is relative.) Where are your sentries? Down at the bottom of the trench where you are. You can't blame them. Set them an example.

With a dozen pairs of eyes watching you, you unstrap your field glasses and, kneeling, look over the parapet.

There's nothing! Just the same, open, rolling country that there was before, only emptier, for the cavalry patrols have disappeared. Yet stay. Why is our battery shooting at that thin belt of firs that lies a mile or so away half left? Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Four puffs of shrapnel unfold on the edge. Four, only four. It looks as though two of our guns have been knocked out already.

It will be the turn of ourselves in the trench soon. By Jove, our fellows are shooting short, for there are two

figures standing on the near edge of the firs. Officers, probably reconnoitring our position. How terribly visible our trench feels! Four more puffs of smoke. That's nearer. The two grey-clad men are walking away. And what's that moving behind the belt? Cavalry, on my oath, in sections of fours, galloping off. A Squadron at least, but it's hard to make out

Other of your men are looking out of the trench now. They're going through exactly the same process as you are yourself, only without the spur of rank to help them. You nominate two as sentries and, feeling well-pleased with yourself, sit down and look about.

Frightened men, men spiritually winded, are not pretty to behold. Some are using their packs as a sort of shield for their heads. One is praying. Others are turning up their coat-collars as if that were any protection. You, who have just won the first round with yourself, feel unpleasantly superior and contemptuous.

Bang! Bang! Bang 1 They jump. "You fools," you jeer. "Can't you tell our own guns?" But to yourself you say: "Only three now. This is getting serious. When our turn comes, they will pretty well take the trench in enfilade."

Crash! It's come. A shell has hit the telegraph wire that runs along the railway, burst, and hit one of the men.

Terror! Fear mounted on Reality riding a charge over the trench! Only Will-to-be-brave can repel him. Will-to-be-brave, coming up into consciousness, wrestles with Fear. The two are locked in straining tension. Which will win? It is a crisis of the soul.

The tension eases. That shell was a short, an accident.

Our turn has not come yet. Will-to-be-brave withdraws into the shadow whence it came and Fear glares from a distance.

"Look! Here comes the Major!" To be sure. Here he comes, walking along the open. You go out and meet him. "It's all right," he says. "They're not shooting at us." "I know," you reply and walk along with him.

Its evening. The artillery duel still continues, but, except for these shells, there is not a sign of a German. Only two of our guns are replying. There's a queer smell in the air, which puts you in mind of stories you heard as a boy of Russian sailors being gassed by melinite fumes at the sea fight of Tsushima. Is this gas, you wonder. You begin to think how you can improve your trench for to-morrow, for it's fairly certain that you are going to have one night of respite. Recessing—that is, digging niches in the front parapet—seems the only answer to lie oblique fire to which it will be subjected.

At last one gun only of the British battery is in action. It fires a last round into the darkness, the final word, for no reply is made. The men start work furiously on the trench. They can see the danger as well as you. After a while you leave them and wander off to the next company to see how they've fared.

"Have you seen the dead German, sir?" asks one of the men. "No, where?" "Just outside on the parapet. He came up in the darkness and was shot and bayoneted."

This company has built a sort of breastwork here. You scramble up and have a look, gazing fascinated at the young fellow who lies here in his field-grey. It is the first dead man you have ever seen. You think of the gamut of emotions that you yourself have been through that afternoon, and in the wake of their vibrations the spirit that has been expelled from his chilling, leady clay takes on the form of knight-errantry. This German private, scouting boldly, too boldly, in his thirst for honour and glory, becomes a Sir Nigel, debonair to win his spurs. And now his noble ambition has been thwarted by the death we had to inflict. Oh, Tragedy, Tragedy! Pitying deeply, you move away, hoping you will never have to kill anyone. Leave that to the men.

But the mood vanishes, pricked like a bubble by the order, "Find the transport!" This order sounds mad, but what had happened was this. In the early summer of 1914, the post of transport officer had been abolished for infantry battalions, the work being taken on by the Quartermaster. On mobilisation, the author was sent to

the transport, but his position was extremely ambiguous, as theoretically the Quartermaster was still in charge. Hence the author felt himself primarily a platoon commander, and, having got the transport to the battlefield and seen it parked at the back of the village, the horses watered and fed, etc., he asked and obtained leave to join his platoon for the battle. And this was the result; the transport had disappeared into the darkness and nobody had the least idea where it was.

The night was pitchy black. The transport officer wandered through the streets of the village, searching like little Bo-peep for her sheep. He tried a farmyard where the horses had been watered and an unexpected iron gate in the archway took the skin off his poor nose. Only once could he see more than a yard ahead, and that was when a powerful searchlight suddenly swept the British position. It only came on once that night just for a minute, and presumably it fused or something, for it never worried us again; it failed to reveal the missing transport. After two hours of search little Bo-peep had tried all the likely places, and was as far off finding it as ever. Ah! Here's the house with a light. Perhaps whoever's about will know.

Outside the house a white horse is standing, harnessed to a shandydan of a cart that is piled up with goods. The door is open. Two or three women, fully dressed for travelling, are bustling about it inside. Running away! The transport officer is astounded. "Pourquoi fuyez-vous?" he demands in his atrocious accent. "Demain nous vaincerons. Mais oui, certainement," he adds, seeing a look that he takes for incredulity sweep over their faces. But he is mistaken. They are Walloon-speaking Flemish and his French is completely unintelligible to them, so he makes no headway in his enquiries about the transport. It is two o'clock in the morning. Suddenly he is aware that he is very, very tired. "Café," he demands. 'rue women look at one another and say something. One of them gets down a pot of cold coffee from a cupboard, which the transport officer drinks, thinking it to be the right way of taking coffee in these parts, as sort of first cousin to the iced variety he got at dances. He cannot understand what the panic's all about. As far as he's aware, no shells have got as far as the village. There's no question of retreat. It's simply "wind up," and he's doing them good service in calming them with his coolness.

However, the transport's got to be found, so, assuring the women once again that "Tout va bien pour nos armes"—the stock phrase of the French papers—he bids them good night and takes his leave.

He's in luck. At the outskirts of the village there's a military waggon, the driver of which says he believes there's some infantry transport three miles down the road at Givry. Good God! What have they been up to? However, there's nothing for it, but down the road the transport officer sets off. The information is right enough. It's there on the outskirts, drawn up on the roadside, with the men comfortably hogging it. The interrogations in the dark: "Who are you? Oh, you are, are you? Then what the devil do you think you're doing here?" You won't listen to their story about having been shelled. "You remember that aeroplane, sir? It must have seen us." Back they've got to come at once, cooks, cobblers, mess staff, interpreter, waggons, the whole blessed lot of them, back to their lines of yesterday. Temper's not too good at four o'clock in the morning. [TX00152A]

The Retreat Begins

24th August 1914

At 05:00. on the 24th orders to retire were received. No casualties were incurred, but, owing to the scattered trenches, eighty thousand rounds of rifle ammunition together with tools and supplies had to be abandoned. The Brigadier had sent up the supplies during the night but had ordered the lorries to return immediately. As all

the men were already carrying their allotted 300 rounds each there was no way the 80,000 rounds could be saved.

Lt Sparrow was told in no uncertain terms to stay with his transport section in future. He went looking for the abandoned tools.

It's 6.30 a.m. A thick morning mist hides the countryside. You're just finishing breakfast with battalion headquarters, for after yesterday's escapade you're to stay with the transport in future. An English gun roars a defiant challenge. "So begins the second day of battle," you say to yourself, putting down your plate and rising to rejoin your commando. You haven't gone fifteen yards when a staff officer passes, trotting hard, and calling to the Colonel; thirty yards and you're recalled by a shout. You get hurried orders: "Hook in and retire at once."

The sun's breaking through. All around guns are banging and shells clanging, but you don't notice them - you're too desperately busy. Tool waggons are sent to the forward side of the village to see if they can collect any of the tools; the rest are driven on to the road on which, as if by magic, a column of vehicles has already appeared. You take your place in it. A Taube flies overhead. Givry, two miles away, pushes its head through the mist. There's rapid rifle-fire behind. Ahead shrapnel's bursting over Givry—ten, twenty, thirty, forty puffs of smoke in the air at once. The German gunners must be working like demons, trying to block our road, but they're bursting their shells too high. It's an even-money chance of getting through. Your blood tingles with exhilaration. At this distance the pops of the bursts rouse the same effect in you as hound music in a cover. Involuntarily your legs tighten on the saddle. Your horse feels the pressure and prances gaily. Your blood's in mad exhilaration, your brain ice-cool at the prospect of this gamble with death. [TX00152B]

The Berkshire Battalion and the 1st King's Royal Rifle Corps passed back through the 2nd South Staffordshire and took up a position at Ihy, continuing later to half a mile east of Bavai, where they arrived at 18:00, one company being posted to cover them.

LCpl Bignell:-

About 5 o'clock on the Monday morning we had the order to retire. We retired a few miles but again took up position the same day. Subsequently we continued to retire and covered the retirement of other troops. At 8.30 the same night we got into a cornfield and slept in our overcoats and waterproof sheets, but a good many lost their overcoats in the trenches and so had to share with their chums.

Cpl Denore:-

August 24. Just about party of Germans came opened fire on them and number. We thought of following up, but a corporal brought us orders to retire. We joined the company behind the trenches, and town we could see was Mons.

After a while we joined up with the rest of the battalion on the road and went back the same route we covered coming up. All the time there was plenty of firing going on by Givry, and about midday we deployed and opened fire on a regiment of German cavalry. They dismounted and returned our fire, which was all rapid and was telling on them. Then suddenly they mounted and disappeared out of range. We continued marching back for about four hours. Then again we deployed and opened fire on more German cavalry, but this time they kept out of range and eventually moved off altogether

My platoon was sent forward to a small village, where we stayed all night firing occasionally at what we hoped were German cavalry. [TX00419B]

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 24th Stand to Arms before daybreak, Artillery much more accurate with their fire, & we were ordered to retire under very heavy fire, & marched back about 25 miles & bivouacked the night in a wheat field. very hot & tiring, some casting small kit & equipment.

Pte Barlow:-

Early next morning we had orders to retire, and thus commenced the great retirement from Mons. As soon as we left our trenches we came under shrapnel fire and we had to go about a mile over open country before we could get any cover at all. Some of our men who were carrying their packs under their arms threw them away. This we heard afterwards, cost us a lot of lives, as the enemy took the coats out of the packs and ambushed one regiment who thought they were English and their commanding officer gave orders not to fire. Out of that regiment only about 300 men and one officer were left. They were attached to us for a short time afterwards, until made up to full strength. We made for a sunken road where we lined up and started off on our retirement in columns still under heavy shrapnel fire.

Our company officer's horse bolted and came at a mad gallop straight through the ranks where it scattered the men in every direction. Its nosebag caught me and knocked me up a bank bruising my face but I got up and was thankful it was no worse.

We were back over the Belgian frontier once more - less than twelve hours after crossing and after a very hard day's marching we stayed for the night in a field of wheat, but were up early next morning and were attacked by an enemy patrol.

Soon after these were repulsed we made our way to a village and entered it and then found out that the enemy were all around us and we were in a very tight corner. We were told off to line all the streets about half a dozen men at the end of every street, and stop the enemy from entering. The Germans found out our manoeuvre and now started shelling the village.

At last a company of Hussars made up their minds to make a dash for it and they went full tilt for the enemy who fled in every direction, casting away their packs and rifles to get away quicker. We soon grasped the opportunity and followed them through in the breach they had made.

Cpl Tiesteel

When dawn came I remember looking back towards the railway station & seeing the Battalion marching across the fields and Lt Frizell with his Maxim gun & several boxes of ammunition just starting to follow the Battalion as we joined him & helped to get the ammunition away. So started the retreat from the Mons area.

It was a splendid sight we saw that morning as we marched away. The RHA galloping across the open fields, then taking up position and covering our retirement. Our Company under Capt Bert. We did outpost on the high ground that night. [TX00147E]

Lt Sparrow:-

Suddenly the column ahead turns off the road and proceeds across country. You follow with your lot, leaving Givry and its halo of bursting shells on your right. There's musketry and gun-fire in our rear, and had one but known it a salvo of four shells has just landed plump into the trench where you spent yesterday evening. The drivers are getting rattled. "What the hell do you think you're doing, flogging that horse? Walk, damn you, walk!" Any more of this damned nonsense of getting rattled and you'll shoot, you know you will. The ripple of panic flattens out. Here, you! Hold my horse whilst I light my pipe. [TX00152C]

Pte Wright:-

Tuesday 25th August 3.30 am We were aroused from our wheat beds at 2 am and are now standing by for further orders. From information received I rather fancy the German force had the best of it yesterday. We

were as I have written before entrenched to wait and then repel the advancing German forces. Unfortunately the enemys artillery found our trench and would have blown us all to hell when we were ordered to retire just as I reached the road which was in a nullah and gave a little protection to shell fire I glanced back to see the portion of trench where we had been blown sky high. Our troubles did not end there we were under shell fire for a good while after that while retiring across an open field and I rather fancy that we have to thank the 2nd in Command for keeping us out of that. [TX00882H]

The Bridge on the Sambre

The action at the bridge over the Sambre was the 1st Battalion's first serious engagement with the enemy. Reports on what happened are very confusing and it is difficult to reconstruct exactly the sequence of events. However it appears to have had four phases:-

- ● The loss of the bridge by the Hussars.
- ● The intervention of B Coy who stopped the German advance
- ● The reinforcement by C and D Coys and driving the Germans back across the bridge.
- ● Holding the south side of the bridge by A Coy until retirement next morning

PHASE 1 - THE LOSS OF THE BRIDGE

We start at about a half mile east of Bavay where the Battalion paused after their withdrawal from positions before Mons. This is to the north of the Forest of Mormal. Here they sheltered in a cornfield from 20:30 on the 24th to 03:00 on the 25th.

Lt Sparrow describes the approach through Longueville:-

The country is open, hedgeless. The view extends far to right and left, but, wide as it is, wherever you look you can see waggons, carts, and pedestrians making for the road you are on. The whole countryside is emptying itself on to it. The little groups you behold are rivulets hastening to join the main stream on the road, which soon becomes a spate of refugees, pouring along like a Highland torrent. [TX00153A]

Gigantic in size and loaded to incredible heights with household goods, [the wains] completely dwarfed our own waggons and made one realise afresh the eternal truth that you can't beat Nature. Swarms of children perched on them, women clung to them, whilst enthroned on the highest bundle of all, with umbrellas for sceptres and black bonnets for crowns, sat black-robed grandmamas, Queens of this Carnival of Misery. Here was Brobdingnagian Nature mocking the Lilliputian slickness of our army trains. Nature rebuking Man. The stream gathers strength with every mile.

Soon two currents are flowing southward along the brown road. On the right, bewildered but orderly, a twenty-mile column of military waggons, well-horsed and closed up; on the left, this broken torrent of dusty misery. Wains drawn by great percherons, waggons tugged by oxen, tumbrils pulled by mules, pony-carts, donkey-carts, dog-carts, hand-carts; rusty victorias and landaus, perambulators, bicycles, tricycles, barrows, and shandry-dans coagulate and concertina painfully along this *via dolorosa*. On the one side rises the rumble crunch of iron-tyred wheels; on the other the noise of creaking axles, the rustle of black Sunday silk, and the draggle-draggle slip-slop of weary feet pinched by tight, Sunday, buttoned boots. Every woman is

laden, so is every man. But there is something oriental in the staggering bundle Madame carries in a sheet and the few knick-knacks Monsieur has wrapped up in a duster, and in justice to Monsieur there weren't many of him of fighting age. For the most part, the males were either boys or grandfathers. Essentially it was a stream of women, the deep-bosomed, broad-lipped child-bearers of the Low Countries. "Worth twice the men,"? as already we were murmuring. They and their families—*Les réfugiés*.

Why were they abandoning their homes in this way? Were we dreaming? Had we really stepped across into Barbarism? The idea of it being necessary seemed so utterly incredible. "They remember 1870," say some. Yes, but was 1870 really so terrible? If so, how have we never heard of its barbarism? Have these old men in their flat yachting caps been putting the wind up the others with true stories or with gross exaggerations? Yet they themselves must believe their tales are true, otherwise they would never leave their homes. Or, again, is it a sort of hysteria that's caught them all up? It may be that, for men and women are moving like so many somnambulists, their faces wooden and expressionless. Only the children seem fully alive. Or yet again, is it by order? Are they the victims of some grand scheme of devastation that has unfortunately forgotten to burn the crops and thus stultified its own object? "Pourquoi fuyez-vous? Why do you fly?" we demand. "Nous retournerons tout de suite." But, warned by some truer knowledge than our own, they simply stare at us, incredulous, glassy-eyed. So the two currents flow on, ours at 100 yards a minute, theirs at a jagged two miles an hour. Only the dogs look happy, pulling at their loads.

The maps show we are approaching La Longueville. There's a Longville in England, not so far from one's own home. It is just beyond the Belgian version that we turn on to a stubble to bivouac for the night. The connection between the two names fills one with a sense of proprietorship. One feels oneself the host making ready for one's guests, the battalion which comes in an hour later, dog-tired. The horses are tied to their waggons with the harness still on their backs, for such are the orders, and there they stand in the star-lit darkness, munch, munch, munching the sheaves of oats which have been collected off the field for them. For yourself, you get your servant to arrange half a dozen of these sheaves as a mattress, pull a couple over your body as a blanket, and fall sound asleep. [TX00153B]

L/Cpl Bignell recalled:-

Subsequently we continued to retire and covered the retirement of other troops. At 8.30 the same night we got into a cornfield and slept in our overcoats and waterproof sheets, but a good many lost their overcoats in the trenches and so had to share with their chums.

At 03:00 they were stood to arms and ordered to act as rearguard for the Brigade as they continued their retreat south through the forest, heading for the Pont sur Sambre. As soon as the rest of the Brigade had departed the 1st Battalion followed them through the forest, across the bridge and to the village of Maroilles where they went into billets at 18:30. They were followed by the 15th Hussars whose job it was to hold the bridge against the pursuing Germans.

The road from the bridge to village was over a causeway with deep ditches on either side. Not only were there the infantry on foot but also a long train of army waggons, motor lorries and ambulances not to mention a flood of refugees with bicycles, handcarts and bundles over their shoulders..

Lt Sparrow describes the approach to Maroilles:-

We approach Pont-sur-Sambre, which is still gay with bunting. Just south of the bridge there is an *estaminet* which, when we were marching up, had sported from an upper window a particularly large Belgian flag. Will it be there still? It is. But, by Jove, even as we are underneath it the flag is drawn in by invisible hands. The act gives one a queer feeling. It symbolises the Reality from which we are running away. Prudence, such as that just displayed by the owner of the flag, is cowardice, you feel; it is sensibly realist, you think. Which is right, then, your thoughts or your feelings? The flag has stated a problem and life is no longer clear. Sometime, if one gets through the war, this problem will insist on being faced, fairly and squarely, but for the present it can be ignored. For at the moment all one is aware of is the shadow of these thoughts, which pass swiftly as that of clouds across a clear lake, and as such appear simply humorous. The incident is no more than a gargoyle on the vast cathedral of History that the war is piling around us.

We march on and on. The battalion dinners in the field cookers have been boiled twice over, and will be almost inedible. But what could a man do? Who'd have thought that the march would have gone on so long? There'd have been a nice to-do if the dinners had not been ready should the battalion have gone into bivouac or billets about two o'clock. And what's the time now? Close on 4 p.m. Ah, well! You were almost bound to be wrong, whatever happened. Not that that's much comfort.

Here's a small village, Maroilles, and this is where we are to billet for the night. Allah be praised! Quick! Get the harness off the horses; we'll present the C.O. with a *fait accompli*. But it's no good. Soon the battalion comes in, dead beat. The C.O. casts a glance at the horses. "Put that harness on at once," he orders, "and please note you're not to take it off again without permission." [TX00153C]

No sooner had they arrived in Maroilles than a rider arrived and announced the Germans were already in the lower part of the town. This turned out to be an error as he had mistaken some Belgian troops for Germans.

Lt Sparrow:-

Scarcely has this order been obeyed than a hubbub arises in the southern end of the village. A.S.C. lorries are racing back, the spare drivers brandishing and firing their rifles into the air like Spahis saluting. Ally Sloper's Cavalry with a vengeance! The road swirls with their dust. "Uhlans!" they shout. "We're surrounded." Whistles and commands. The troops creep out of their billets, leaving their boiled-to-shreds dinners to cool, fall in and hobble off to man garden walls and cottages. You yourself hook in, pull your carts under the shelter of such walls as you can find, and tell off your assorted muskateers to positions of defence. And then almost immediately you are told you can fall out. It's a false alarm. The cavalry are French.[TX00153D]

Captain Hudson of the King's Liverpools arrived just after the Berks and described the scene:-

Arrived in Maroilles abot 7 pm just in time to see the most extraordinary panic. A motor cyclist and a motor car came in and reported that the Germans were in the lower part of the town. The streets were at the time blocked with supply wagons, mechanical transport and ambulance wagons. First of all a swarm of refugees arrived, then the whole of the wheeled transport panicked and fled. I never saw such pandemonium. Maxwell Scot our Brigade Major arrived and asked how it was to be stopped. I suggested a bugler sounding 'No Parade' which we did with wonderful calming effect and order was soon restored.

L/Cpl Bignall seems to have mixed up the loss of the bridge with the panic caused by the motor cyclist:-

But while in the town almost before we got to our billets we were surprised by a party of Germans who had broken through. We were therefore sent out immedi-

ately to drive them back and it was during that fight that we lost several of our officers and men.

Pte Barlow: recalled the panic-

Nothing happened after this of any importance on our retirement until our Brigade arrived at Maroilles. We were told a patrol of Uhlans had got into the town. We were ordered to fix bayonets and rush every street but we soon found out our mistake as it was a patrol of Belgian cavalry. We came back to where our mechanical transport were and they had loaded their rifles in case of an attack. When they had orders to unload there were a few spare bullets flying about as a lot of the men had never handled a rifle before. We retired to the school to billet for the night just as a heavy thunderstorm started.

At this point the Germans seem to have overcome the 15th Hussars and were making their way along the causeway.

PHASE 2 - B COMPANY HOLD THE LINE

At 20:00 the Berks were ordered to send a party to relieve the Hussars holding the bridge. B Coy under Major R S Turner were turned out and it took them an hour to fight their way through the confusion only to find that the Germans had forced their way across the bridge and were deployed on the north bank of the causeway, between the bridge on the east and an inlet of the river to the west. When the 1st Berks approached the bridge they found that it had already been captured from the Hussars who had been charged by the German at around 21:00. B Company deployed on the British side of the bridge and reconnoitred, with a view to finding a means of recapturing it.

The situation was far from clear and as they approached the bridge Major Turner went forward to meet some troops who claimed to be French. However they wounded him and took him prisoner.

Pte Young recalled afterwards:-

On the night of Tuesday 25th August 1914 we were detached as Machine Gun Section on outpost duty to D Company at Marouls. It was dusk when we arrived at "Canal Bridge". The Company was challenged and Major Turner went forward for recognition and was taken prisoner by Jerry who held the bridge. The Germans opened fire point-blank and we dispersed off the roadway onto fields at the side.

Pte Barlow was with B Coy:-

B Company were put on outpost duty and were soon engaged with the enemy as the latter had taken a bridgehead with a rush. We were called out in the night to reinforce this bridge and got out just in time to hear what we thought was a German charge. They were making a noise like a pack of jackals thinking to frighten us, but we were having none of that. Major Turner, who was in charge of the outpost went out to reconnoitre the ground in front of him and ran into the enemy who said they were French, but as soon as he got to them they severely wounded him and took him prisoner.

We had to advance from the town to the bridge down a road which was raised from the level of the ground and I think this saved us a lot of lives, for as we advanced we were met by a cross-fire from our Fifth Brigade on our left and the enemy on our right. As soon as this happened a lot of men made a rush for the banks which were being peppered with bullets as they were all going low. We soon rushed the bridge and took it, holding it until relieved by the Kings Royal Rifles and we could see, when we retired, that the

banks were covered with dead and wounded where the men had made a rush for shelter, but had run into a trap.

Sergeant Frogley of Reading was very impressed with the performance of his officers:

On the 24th we were charged in our trenches on three occasions. Our men stood their ground gallantly and fired accurately and the losses the Germans took must have been tremendous.. They came upon us like a swarm of bees and must have outnumbered us by twenty to one. We fell back to Maroilles in excellent order, peppering the Germans all the time. The fighting continued to be rapid and our losses were at this point pretty considerable.

It was here that the treachery of the Germans strongly asserted itself. Major Turner, another of our gallant officers was in charge of a bridge when under cover of darkness several soldiers were seen to be approaching. One of them who spoke English well called out that they were French soldiers with the result that they were allowed to proceed. But no sooner had they got close to Major Turner than one of them fired and killed him on the spot.

Pte Wright was in B Company and was forced to shelter in one of the ditches in four feet of water.

Maroilles. Now this is a sad chapter in my diary and I am at loss to explain it fully. On Wednesday 26th we arrived at above mentioned town and prepared to partake of a well earned rest when we were alarmed and fixed bayonets and ran round to the other end of town – false alarm. About 8 o'clock my Coy proceeded to one of the bridges which commands an entrance to the town one section of my Coy was advance guard and I was connecting file. Before we reached the bridge we were warned by cavalry that the enemy had chased them in from the open country, and were now occupying the bridge and had a gun placed in the centre. My CO however pushed us forward. It was very dark and the smoke from the heavy guns hung all about. Well, we got to about 50 yards from bridge, that is 15 in front, me 30 yards, Coy 100 when the front men stopped and I heard the approach of some wheeled cart and the corporal sent me back to ask whether we should approach any further. I had hardly turned round when the men I had left challenged and fired on the enemy. I cannot write more now the happenings of that night if I live through the war I will write.

He wrote the rest of the story when he was at Chauny

Now I've missed a day or two from my diary so I will write a few lines now that we have a few minutes to ourselves. Well, a brief sketch. The night we i.e. "B" Coy found outpost. The 13 men in front of me opened fire with a quick return from the enemy. I got under cover as soon as I possibly could, I dropped into a ditch on the left hand side of the road thinking that there was very little water there I found myself in about 4 feet of it however and was practically covered my equipment and clothes becoming wet through. I resolved to stay where I was. All this happened in a few moments. The enemy and what is worse my own Coy keeping up a rapid fire over my head. Then the Germans opened fire with a small gun. I have thought since that it might have been a Sexton or Champion which fires a 2" shell, this gun firing into an extended company and 150 yards must as one can guess cause terrible havoc and lying where I was I thought it was all over with them but they were still going strong with the firing and I resolved to get out and work my way round and join them as I knew that if the enemy advanced down from the bridge they would no doubt see me. Sometimes there was a lull in the firing then I could hear them talking. I crept out and made my way back across the meadow on the left of the bridge. As I was crossing I ran right through the firing and I saw the flash of the small gun and I dropped flat where I was this time the shell burst in one of the houses in rear of the Coy and I could hear the screaming of the women and children who were there. I did eventually get back into the main road and looking about found the rest of

the Battalion coming towards us. [TX00882J]

Lt Sparrow was told what was going on and afterwards recounted:-

Soon after, at twilight, a messenger comes from a cavalry squadron to say their picquet guarding the bridge over the Petit Helpe is being hard pressed. One of our companies is fallen in and wearily plods back to its assistance. We others wait behind, all rather silent, every officer troubled over his respective command and worrying how it will get along, if it is faced tomorrow with another march like today's. Darkness falls.

And then orderlies from battalion headquarters pass hurriedly up the street, ordering companies to fall in. The transport is to stay where it is, ready to move at ten minutes' notice. Rumour flies about. Eventually it crystallises into the story that the cavalry picquet had been driven off the bridge before our company arrived, that in the darkness and on the road up, our company met a body of infantry who shouted they were French and wanted to speak to the officer commanding, that the Major went up, had a light flashed in his face, and was shot. Bloody, bloody swines! [TX00153E]

Major Turner later recounted his story:-

On the night of August 25th, 1914, I found myself, somewhat dazed from the combined effects of the butt end of a German rifle, which had come in contact with my chest, and an English bullet, which had grazed my face, being dragged along a road outside Maroilles, between two German soldiers, and alongside the dead body of their Captain who had been shot through the heart. Directly we were inside the outpost line I was searched, but nothing was taken from me, except my sword and knife - the latter was given as a prize to the soldier who had knocked me down. I was next taken to the Headquarters of the Prussian Regiment, which was in a large house in the village. Here I found a number of officers, twenty or more at supper, and was invited to join them. They were quite civil, several speaking to me in English, and their Colonel, a tall, smart-looking man, called to me to come and sit next to him, and assured me that everything they had was at my service;

After a pipe and a chat, I was sent away in charge of two sentries to a stable, where I was to pass the night with some soldiers. I had not been there many minutes, however, when a fusillade broke out from our side of the river (it must have been the battalion attacking the bridge-head) and several bullets passing through the walls of the stable, a hasty stampede took place, the sentries hurrying me along the road, amidst a shower of bullets, till we reached the shelter of a wall, behind which we spent the remainder of the night. Shortly after daybreak came the first disagreeable experience of my captivity. A German sergeant came up and put some questions to me about the positions and numbers of our troops. As I declined to answer he struck a violent blow at my face, which, if I had not dodged, would have knocked my teeth down my throat. My sentries remonstrated with him, and he presently withdrew, growling out curses. A little later I was summoned to appear before the General, who I found standing in a clearing outside the station, surrounded by officers. Up to now, wherever I went I had been accompanied by two sentries holding me tightly by the wrists, but from then this course of treatment was discontinued, and they merely walked alongside me. The General looked me over, but beyond asking my name he did not speak to me, and I was marched off to the station, where I remained in the waiting room for some hours.

D Coy had gone into billets at the school with a small party including Cpl Tiesteel on guard duty. He recalled Col Graham moving up to see what was happening with B Coy:-

It was raining and we were glad to get into billets where we could have our tea and wrapped the blankets round our wet clothes & lay down to sleep. We did not even open the sacks of bread.

D Coy I think were on outpost. We had only been in an hour when we were ordered to fall in at once and go and support the outpost company. Off we went and after marching down the road for about 400 yards we were split up I remember being told off to take my section down a lane which ran off the left of the road, with orders to extend & lay down, challenge anyone who came near us from any direction and fire if they did not answer. All was quiet for a while. Seeing someone coming towards me I let rip. "Halt who goes there" The reply came "Colonel Graham! Why are you so jumpy corporal?"

PHASE 3 - REINFORCEMENT FROM C & D COMPANIES

B Company sent a runner back to inform Col Graham about what had happened and he ordered C and D Companies up to support B Company.

The position was very obscure when D was ordered to advance on the bridge by the road. The advance was in file, with C, which had now come up, alongside in the same formation. The road was only about twelve feet wide, with ditches on either side about ten feet wide and three feet deep. Along this defile Major Finch and Major Maurice led an advance which from the first appeared to be a desperate venture. Men began to fall at once under a fire, from the bridge along the defile, increasing in severity. When fifty yards had been covered, the advance was checked. There was some disorder, and men sought cover by lying down on the sides of the road. When they had been again collected, an attempt was made to continue the advance at the double. The enemy's fire was now so heavy that very little further progress could be made.

By now Col Graham had arrived on the scene and rallied the troops. He later drew a sketch map of the deployment leading up to the bridge. Pte Young recalled:-

Colonel Graham, CO, arrived on the scene with reinforcements and rallied the boys by remarking "Come on Berkshires, think of your reputation and Maiwand" A voice quite close to me retorted "We haven't got a dog so we can't have Maiwand."

Lt Sparrow was disgusted at some of the attitudes shown by the transport section:-

So now the rest of the battalion moves off to retake the bridge at any cost, and you are left behind, sick with envy, loathing the transport and especially the selfish callousness of the drivers, who in their weariness put themselves first and their animals a very bad second. The officer has to fight for the souls of his men against their own bodily weaknesses. The old Fathers of the Church, with their definition of the seven deadly sins, knew a whole heap of psychology. Only the officers seemed able to give the men this help against their worst side; as a whole, the N.C.O.s lacked the moral fibre necessary for such a task. [TX00153F]

Lt Sparrow appears to have joined D Company leaving his section behind. D Company, under Major Maurice, with Captain Shott, Lieutenant Hanbury-Sparrow, and Lieutenant Fulbrook-Leggatt, was ordered up to the bridge, which it reached about midnight. Lieutenant Fulbrook-Leggatt, with No.13 Platoon, was ordered to

protect the left flank, north of the Maroilles Road, B Company being then on the right. On this platoon a considerable rifle fire was opened by the Germans at the bridge three hundred yards away on its right flank. The platoon was then called in to rejoin D on the road, and took position at the head of the company, in fours, facing the bridge.

Captain Shott went forward to reconnoitre the position and he was killed by a German with a revolver after he had responded to a request in English for a map. The German was bayoneted. His body slipped into the ditch and it was thought he had been only wounded but drowned in the water.

Cpl Denore recalled the incident:-

About 6.30 p.m. we got to a place called Maroilles, and my platoon spent the night guarding a bridge over a stream. The Germans attacked about 9 p.m. and kept it up all night, but didn't get into Maroilles.

About forty-five of the company were killed or wounded, including the company officer. A voice had called out in English, "Has anybody got a map?" and when our CO stood up with his map, a German walked up and shot him with a revolver. The German was killed by a bayonet stab from a private. [TX00146]

Cpl Tiesteel had been expecting to celebrate Maiwand night that evening but the cry was 'Tofrek' Just Before the ground where the Germans were holding out an inlet of the river replaced the ditches over a length of around 100 yards on the left. From the causeway in the dark the bank of the river looked very much like the bank of the ditch, but whereas the ditch was only two or three feet deep with water the river was much deeper and there was no field for the men to scramble into for shelter on the other side. He recalled:-

Later we were withdrawn back to the road. We had only gone about 100 yards when someone opened rapid fire on us. We opened out. The next thing I remember was Major Finch & Lt Fulbrook-Leggatt, swords drawn, leading a charge to the cry of "Come on men, remember Tofrek" Lt Fulbrook-Leggatt received the DSO his bravery that night. Major Finch deserved the VC. It was the second time he had saved the regiment with plenty of bullets flying about.

We made for the left of the road, not dreaming that there was a river below the bank. I remember most of us slipped down up to our waist in it and I believe it was in that river where Capt Shott was drowned after being hit. It was a proper death trap. I believe that men who were missing were lost in that piece of water after being wounded.

Cpl Wickens (D Coy):-

Aug 25th Letters issued, received 3 from N. [his sister Nancy] 1 from Mother. retirement continued at 2 am. Royal Berks furnishing the Rear Guard, on the move all day without Rations, arrived at Monrolles at 6.30 P.M. raining in Torrents. billeted in a school room, tea served up for which we were very thankful after our tedious march, managed to get about an hour's rest. alarm sounded while we were drawing rations, & we were on Parade again before 9.0 P.M., no time to issue Rations over to Platoons, so they were left behind. Our Coy were on Outpost, & came in contact with the enemy, had to charge a bridge 'D' Coy on the right, 'C' on the left of the Road, my Section No 1 were leading the Company we had a good few casualties killed & Wounded, Major Turner, & Captain Shot, the latter not being heard of again had a narrow escape, a bullet going through the woodwork of my rifle less than

6 inches from my left hand. The KRR. relieved us at this point, & we proceeded to another position & were about all night. The wounded being taken back to Monrolles where a temporary hospital was made. the enemy eventually bombarded the Town & hospital & the majority of the Wounded who through lack of sufficient ambulances being available it was impossible to move away were afterwards captured & taken prisoners, this being the first of our Unit to be captured by the enemy

Drummer H Savage [9971], who was wounded in the affair, gave his account to the Berkshire Chronicle:-

The bravery displayed by Major Finch is really splendid. He seemed to fear nothing and his daring was remarkable. Twice in quick succession I saw him coolly walk onto a bridge under very heavy fire and with shells bursting around him in very large numbers. With the approach of the Germans you could hear his voice ring out 'Follow me, men' and brandishing his sword you saw him rush forward and give those of the enemy with whom he came into contact, more than they bargained for.

Corporal Brindall died like a hero. In the darkness the Germans were holding a canal and in charging them a lot of us fell from a bank into the water, which runs very deep. Several of the men could not swim and were drowning when Corporal Brindall, under heavy fire, plunged in and in turn rescued a number. He had just completed his task and was emerging from the water when a shell struck him, killing him on the spot.

PHASE 4 - HOLDING THE BRIDGE

It is not clear exactly how the situation developed. It would seem that the Germans were driven back across the bridge by the Royal Berks and they continued to harrass them from across the Sambre. According to the diarist they retook the bridge at 01:30 but it seems more likely that all they did was to drive the Germans back to the north side and hold the position. However Pte Wright is quite clear that they did in fact recapture the bridge:-

I joined "C" Coy and stayed with them for two or three hours. Then came the most exciting part of the evening, namely the charging and the retaking of the bridge. I don't think any of us who took part will ever forget that. For my part I seem to have gone mad my ears were ringing with the noise of the firing and cheering. I did find myself on the bridge in the second charge there wasn't many of us about 40 of us no more until the work was finished then many more.

Finally, the three companies B, C and D were ordered to withdraw, which they did in good order, carrying their wounded with them. A Company had been brought up and took over guard duty for the night. Cpl Denore recalls spending all night guarding it as a member of A Company.

In a letter to General Smith Dorien dated 18-12-1919, Sir Douglas Haig wrote about the action:-

Another party of the enemy issued from the Foret de Normal against Maroilles, at 6.45pm. A Troop of the 15th Hussars, which had been holding the bridge over the Sambre, 2 miles N.W. of Maroilles until it could be relieved by Infantry was driven by a considerable force of all arms of the enemy. A Company of the Berkshire Regiment, followed later by the rest of the battalion, was dispatched at once to retake the bridge at all costs. The approaches from the south side led across a narrow causeway. This was found to be commanded by a field gun, and being flanked by bad ditches and

marshland it was impossible to deploy. Two attempts to retake the bridge were repulsed. About midnight the 1st KRRC were ordered forward to resume the attack. As nothing more could be done in the darkness the Berks were withdrawn and the 1st KRRC prepared to carry the bridge at dawn. Before the plan could be carried out orders were received for the general retirement to be continued at daybreak. [TX00145]

Cpl Tiesteel was glad to be back in the village:-

It was a pitch dark night & when we were back in the village we lay down in the street for a couple of hours before continuing the retreat.

When we began to look around our our company there were several well known faces missing and all kind of news about what had happened to them. Major Turner: wounded and a prisoner, Capt Shott: missing., Sgt Graves: badly wounded, Corporal Lovell: killed, Corporal Ward: wounded, many more missing.

We had the satisfaction the next day of seeing the Germans mowed down like corn, but their numbers were so great that our losses were, again somewhat serious. Our wounded were here placed in a church which had been converted into a hospital. The Germans, knowing that they had been conveyed to the building in less than half an hour shelled the place and blew it to atoms. I know that several of our men went in but we have never seen them since. They were undoubtedly killed as they lay there. [TX00147F]

It would seem that LCpl Bignell was also wounded in the affair and was one of the men referred to by Sgt. Frogley. His account continues:-

I was taken into a hospital which eventually I and the other occupants who could do so, had to leave hurriedly as the building was being shelled by the Germans. I happened to be at one end of the hospital which was a church whilst shells fell thickly through the roof at the other end. Several of the wounded men were killed. I was then cut off from the remainder of the body but had the good fortune to get into touch with a French convoy which ultimately brought me to the base.

At dawn the Germans withdrew and just after the Royal Berks continued their withdrawal southwards.

Cpl Denore:-

August 26.-The Germans withdrew at dawn, and soon after we continued retiring, and had not been on the march very long before we saw a French regiment, which showed that not all of them had deserted us.

We marched all day long, miles and miles it seemed, probably owing to the fact that we had had no sleep at all since Saturday the 22nd, and had had very little food to eat, and the marching discipline was not good. I myself frequently felt very sick. [TX00419D]

Lt Sparrow was back with his Transport Section:-

Very early in the morning, whilst it is still dark, the transport gets orders to move off. The battalion is not yet back. There is no news of it, although the sentry says he heard firing.

You send your horses down to water, determined that at least they shall start the day with a good bellyful before they set off. nut, as the proverb says, you can take a horse to the water, *but* you can't make him drink, not, anyhow, at that hour of the morning. One and all the maddening, idiotic brutes refuse. How can you tell them that by evening they'll be half-dead with thirst? You can't, of course you can't. There's nothing for it but to hook them in, unwatered.

Then the usual crop of troubles springs up. Two horses are found to have loose shoes; another has developed gripes through eating cold grass; the mess cart isn't ready, and one of the water carts isn't full. Then the sergeant cook reports he has *no matches to light* the fires with, and there is nothing for it but to provide him with one of your own precious boxes, for he who drew up the mobilisation tables had provided none, seeming

to expect us to light fires by rubbing sticks. This is then followed by the question whether the cooks should not be left behind to feed the battalion, ditto the red-cross cart, problems you have to decide to the best of your judgement. You have worked yourself up into a state of thoroughly irritable tension by the time everything is ready for you to give the order, "Walk, march!" and you set off to join the main column that goes, two waggons abreast, rumble-crunch, rumble-crunch, rumble-crunch in the darkness. [TX00153G]

CASUALTIES

The casualties were:

Officers Missing: Major A. S. Turner, (POW) Capt. H. H. Shott, D.S.O. **Wounded:** Lieut. V S Hopkins (slightly). **Other Ranks: Killed 2; Wounded 35; Missing 22.**

Capt Henry Hammond Shott is buried with 16 Royal Berkshire men and a German in Marouilles cemetery. The 16 were:-

8145 Pte Francis Henry Gough
 9772 Pte Walter Brindle of Marlborough
 7708 LSgt Frank Lovell of Mylor Bridge, Cornwall
 9986 Pte George Henry Allin of Camberwell
 9969 Pte James Edward Beaver of Binfield
 6625 Pte George Clarke
 7902 Pte John Charles Gatfield of Bagshot
 7336 Pte Wilfred Glead
 8282 Pte Ernest Victor Harper
 8058 Pte Thomas Alfred Hatton of Reading
 7152 Pte George William Hazard
 9808 Pte William John Richard Hoare of Great Bedwyn
 7801 Pte James Richard Lovelock
 8904 Pte William Henry Matthews of Aldershot
 9901 Pte Charles Streamer of Winkfield
 7768 Pte Arthur Turner of Wokingham
 7148 Pte William Whiting

The bodies of the following were never recovered and they are commemorated on the La Ferte-sous-Jarre Memorial:

9838 Pte Ernest Walter Ackrill of Westcott
 7474 Pte John Garlick of Reading
 8689 Sgt George Samuel May of Battersea
 8243 Pte Roy House Perry of Faringdon
 10195 Pte Robert Porteous of Custom House

Several of the wounded had to be left behind.

Cpl Tiesteel:-

The wounded were left in the school when we left at 2 am. We continued the retreat day and night with very little rest but did plenty of digging each night. [TX00147]

We will leave the last word to Col Graham writing home to his son Jack a few days later.

On Tuesday the 25th we reached Marouilles about 5. There was a scare and I was sent to look for Germans west of the town. It was pouring a deluge. On my return I was ordered to take over a bridge from the 14th Hussars. It was pitch dark when I moved out and

half way there met the cavalry retreating, so I had to assault in darkness a place I had never seen. The map shows my line of approach. I found Germans strongly posted o o o o.

My first assault failed. I succeeded in gaining the X roads [on] my second venture and so prevented the Germans coming over the causeway. I lost rather heavily. Hopkins shot through leg. Major Turner and Capt Shott both missing. Killed, I fear. Sgt Graves and 7 others killed, 53 wounded. It was regular hot work what with rifle fire in front and guns on my right flank. Reeves, Maurice and Bailey [?] invalided, so I am very short of officers. [TX00458C]

26th August 1914

The Germans withdrew at dawn and the Berks resumed their march soon after. They arrived at Venerolles at 19:30 where the battalion bivouaked for the night.

Lt Sparrow:

Very early in the morning, whilst it is still dark, the transport gets orders to move off. The battalion is not yet back. There is no news of it, although the sentry says he heard firing.

You send your horses down to water, determined that at least they shall start the day with a good bellyful before they set off. *nut*, as the proverb says, you can take a horse to the water, *but* you can't make him drink, not, anyhow, at that hour of the morning. One and all the maddening, idiotic brutes refuse. How can you tell them that by evening they'll be half-dead with thirst? You can't, of course you can't. There's nothing for it but to hook them in, unwatered.

Then the usual crop of troubles springs up. Two horses are found to have loose shoes; another has developed gripes through eating cold grass; the mess cart isn't ready, and one of the water carts isn't full. Then the sergeant cook reports he has *no matches to light* the fires with, and there is nothing for it but to provide him with one of your own precious boxes, for he who drew up the mobilisation tables had provided none, seeming to expect us to light fires by rubbing sticks. This is then followed by the question whether the cooks should not be left behind to feed the battalion, ditto the red-cross cart, problems you have to decide to the best of your judgement. You have worked yourself up into a state of thoroughly irritable tension by the time everything is ready for you to give the order, "Walk, march!" and you set off to join the main column that goes, two waggons abreast, rumb1e-crunch, rumble-crunch, rumble-crunch in the darkness.

It is the magic hour before dawn, when trees and cottages take on the shapes of strange romance, looming up in the blackness like palaces, where lives the fairest maid in France waiting for you to save her. Wayside smells assume a new power, bringing to vivid life forgotten incidents of your youth—the smell of the mud when you cleaned out the monks' old bathing pool, or how you felt when you went cubbing for the first time, riding all by yourself over the hills, wondering if you had on the right kit, or again the smell of your nurse's best blouse and how you loathed the frill on it. Nothing can give life to memory like smell. It brings up not only the object but how you felt about it and the love, the hate, or the fear it aroused. Thought can't do that; it can only throw a searchlight from the present on to the past. It can't get rid of the years between as smell can. Scent must evoke some memory process that is altogether independent of the rational mind, a lower process, something that the dog feels when it noses around. One can imagine a semi-idiot being able to remember accurately through smell. "H'm! Scent," as the old science master used to say. "We don't know much about scent. It's a very queer thing." It certainly is.

But after the sun has been up a while there is only one smell, that of sweating horses. Sweat pours off them, collecting dust, drawing flies, hardening leather and salting sores that start where the unaccustomed breast

harness frets, frets, frets away the tender skin, or where the laziness of one of the pairs in pole draught throws an uneven strain on the harness of the willing horse. You had selected your animals with such pride that first night of mobilisation, as they arrived in their thousands on the lamplit football ground, and now the best were going. The magnificent Clydesdales who had probably come from some brewers' drays couldn't stand the hardship and were dying like flies. Other town horses had never learnt to lean on their collars, but leapt into the harness. Thinking their waggons would move as easily as on a London street. They strained themselves or developed galls. The wisdom of having specialised military harness is very doubtful. For whilst it is perfectly true that animals will go at least as well without blinkers or with breast collars or in pole draught, yet it is equally certain that they are very liable to injure themselves in the first few days before they have settled down to the new conditions, and when, as in the present case, the campaign opens with hard marching, these injuries may well immobilise the transport. It so happened that in 1914 the small arm ammunition of battalions was carried in shafted waggons which one horse could pull at a pinch. These waggons have since been abolished and pole draught limbers, which must be drawn by two horses, substituted. Yet one can only say that had these latter conditions prevailed in 1914, several waggons would have had to be abandoned by the battalion. For galls developed in every possible place, and when the smallest one appeared, then bluebottles and flies swarmed and ate great holes into the unhappy beasts.

In this state they had to be worked till they dropped, for the waggons had to be got along somehow. When the animals could go no farther they had to be shot, rather than let them fall into the hands of our pursuers.

This was perhaps the most senselessly savage order ever issued by the staff. For in most of the farms on the way were excellent draught horses which we were forbidden to buy or commandeered, and to which the German would certainly help himself if he required them. It was heartrending to have to lead out some limping, trusting animal, to see the sudden look, half-horror, half-reproach, come into its eyes, and their slow glazing in death, whilst on the opposite side of the road were, like as not, half a dozen draught horses out at grass, snorting with surprise at the shot. Ugh! When the German cavalry retired before us after the Maine, we found they had turned their worn-out mounts into fields.

As the sun reached its zenith, so did the thirst of the transport horses increase. But it was impossible to halt the column or pull out to water. Unless, and this very rarely happened, there was water within a hundred yards of where they chanced to be when the column halted for its hourly breather, they had to do without water till the end of the day's march. Their thirst took more out of them than ten miles on the road. The maddening part was that sometimes the column would be halted for two hours, whilst the ammunition column was watering, but nobody ever sent down word to such small fry as infantry transport, and one waited momentarily expecting the march to be resumed, and the precious chance was lost.

If a shoe was cast, and the waggon had to pull out, it was lost for the day. It might be an hour before a gap again appeared in the double-banked column into which one could wedge the vehicle, and, like the young lady who "wanted to go to Birmingham but they took me off to Crewe," it might be swept anywhere by the current.

And then there was endless trouble with the men trying to steal rides. Bad though some of the cooks were in this respect, that brute of a French interpreter was the worst. It was up and down the column all the time driving them off. In a way it was hard to be angry with the cooks. The last to turn in and the first to get up, they had little enough sleep. But, on the other hand, if they didn't know what the war was about that was their fault. There was no excuse for being Kaspars. But the poor dumb brutes, whose sufferings they were increasing by their selfish weight, could not know its meaning. How gallant some of them were! The stocky cob shaped like a miniature Clydesdale, that with tongue

out of the corner of its mouth would pull the mess cart up any slope. (That, by the way, survived to spend an honoured old age at the Regimental depot.) Or the strawberry roan mare in one of the cooks, that for a pat would do the work of two, and for a blow the work of none. What happened to her? Or the numberless ill-shaped hard-doers who'd work till they dropped. It is time that somebody told of their martyrdom.

You ride up to the interpreter, who once again is stealing a ride. Your hand is on your holster. "Don't let me catch you again on a waggon. I mean it—see?"

All that day the purr of distant gunfire rolls in from the west it is the Second Army Corps fighting for its life at Le Cateau, only you don't know it. The sound sends a pleasing thrill through you. A distant column of smoke shows where our abandoned stores have been set alight in Landrecies. One or two taxi-loads of Belgian soldiers that have escaped from Namur show up at a cross-road. There's interest every yard of the way. If it wasn't for this ceaseless worry about the horses, you would be happy. Oh, to get back to your platoon, where life could be a straightforward hunt for honour! As it is, the master cook is telling you the dinners are done and what's he to do about it; a horse has gone dead lame; your last spare has just been put into a limber to relieve one whose gall would be healed in a day or two if only you could keep the if it, which you can't; and your own charger will have to go into draught to-morrow. *It's enough to turn a man grey. When will this damned retreat stop?*

March, march, march, hour after hour, till in the late afternoon you come back to Vénérolles, whence you set out a week ago. The village is in confusion, the inhabit-ants are either loading waggons or have fled. But you see the sturdy back of your late host, Monsieur le Make Flamand walking up the village towards the enemy. He is going to stick it out. You turn your horse and ride after him. You are a little hurt by the coldness with which he answers your greeting. How are Madame and grandchild Alfred, you enquire. "Réfugiés," he answers tersely and turns his back. (Monsieur Flamand was alive in 1930. He endured the whole occupation at his village, as did Madame, who evidently thought better of her flight and turned back. When asked how the Germans behaved, he replied: "ils n'étaient pas mauvais.")

The day's march is nearly over. Three more kilometers and you are at Etreux, where the brigade billeting officers are chalking on the doors. Having finished your immediate duties, you sit on a low coping, eating a roll of bread, and await the brigade. Here at last is its leading battalion, so exhausted it can hardly crawl. Walking at its head come the C.O. and his adjutant, and the old man is so weary that only his courage gets him along. Behind him creeps the battalion at the slow, lumbering pace of an agricultural labourer. Half the packs are missing, three-quarters of the great coats gone; woollen cap-comforters -- absurd name—are the headgear of many, whilst not a few have got rid of all their equipment and carry only a rifle and cotton bandolier. Altogether it's a distressing and alarming sight, this column where no four are abreast and no two in step.

For above all this physical fatigue, there is the overwhelming impression that spirit is exhausted. Spirit has failed to rise superior to the body. It is the same as what you saw at Mons, only worse. And now there's not even discipline to give spirit the shadow of form. The senior officers have walked to set an example; they have walked themselves out, and used up in physical fatigue all their stores of inner energy which are wanted now, now, now, to be poured on to the men, to knot together by invisible strands the cells and organs of the battalion body.

Your impression of these battalions—for now a second is going past—is heightened by your recollections of the four strapping German prisoners who, lightly laden, march daily and gaily at the head of the transport, to remind everybody of the tireless grey columns of pursuers. Whoever was responsible for keeping these four in this position made a bad mistake. He'd much better have left there the cavalry officer who wept for twenty-four hours after capture.

Ah! Here's your battalion coming. You report to the CO and lead it off to its billets. And there is grey fear in your heart, so that you dare not look at your thoughts. [TX00153G]

Cpl Denore:-

August 26.-The Germans withdrew at dawn, and soon after we continued retiring, and had not been on the march very long before we saw a French regiment, which showed that not all of them had deserted us.

We marched all day long, miles and miles it seemed, probably owing to the fact that we had had no sleep at all since Saturday the 22nd, and had had very little food to eat, and the marching discipline was not good. I myself frequently felt very sick.

We had a bit of a fight at night, and what made matters worse was that it happened at Venerolles, the village we were billeted in before we went up to Mons. Anyway, the Germans retired from the fight. [TX00419D]

Pte Barlow:-

After fighting all night in a drenching and without any rest, we started our retirement again and did the longest day's march of the retirement. It was on this day we first sighted the French Army who took up a position between us and the enemy and we had the welcome news that we were to be the first line reserve to the French.

We were trekking all that day and passed through the Brigade of Guards who were entrenching just outside of Venerolles where we did our field training before going into action. Just as we were passing the Guards an enemy aeroplane came over and the Guards Brigade opened a rapid fire on it and fetched it down, the artillery finishing it off with a well directed shot.

We went down behind the village and rested in a field that night in a drenching rain.

Cpl Tiesteel:-

The wounded were left in the school when we left at 2 am. We continued the retreat day and night with very little rest but did plenty of digging each night. [TX00147G]

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 26 The Company finally retired, & continued marching all day without rations or rest, covered over 25 miles, & arrived back at Venerolles about 8.P .M. tired out, managed to get some tea, but it was only after a good deal of trouble we could get those already laid down to have some. raining hard all the time, spent the remainder of the night bivouaked on the wet grass with only Coats and Waterproof Sheets

27th August 1914

The Berkshires had been able to retreat in such good order because of the stand that had been made at Le Cateau by General Smith-Dorien's First Corps.

The retreat continued on the succeeding days. On the 27th at 06:00 they moved along the Rue Nationale in the rear of the Divisional train via Guise to Mont d'Origny where they entrenched.

Lt Sparrow:-

Is this the line where we are to turn and fight? No!

Another dreadful march starts in the small hours. You talk to a driver—a reservist. He explains that if only the war had broken out a month later he would have escaped service. Outwardly you are sympathetic, inwardly terribly shocked and hurt. A little later the transport sergeant enters into conversation with you. "I don't think," lie says, speaking very slowly as if he were

finding difficulty in putting his thoughts into words, "that, if it wasn't for sheer love of fighting, the men would have much heart in this war." "Love of fighting!" you exclaim bitterly. "Love of fiddlesticks!" "Ah!" says the sergeant consolingly. "It would be different if we were going the other way." You don't believe him; you tell him he's wrong, but he still sticks firmly to his view: "It would be different if we were going the other way."

You get to Origny in the evening, the battalion crawling in on your heels, and lo! the officers' mess cart is missing. The mess sergeant has taken it off unbeknown to you to buy food. Twilight falls and it is still missing, and the officers axe hungry. Suddenly you perceive the Brigadier, the C.O., and one or two others gazing through their glasses towards St. Quentin, a few miles to the west. They see signs that make them think the Germans are there. The weary troops are fallen in, and with the few shovels saved from Mons and the entrenching tools of their equipment, set to dig trenches, two sets of trenches, one lower down the slope for night, one higher up for day. We shall be surrounded by morning, they say.

The second-in-command comes up. With many winged words he sets you to find the mess cart, so down into Origny you ride. You are in luck. You see a small fire inside street with figures seated around it, and a cart. You ride up. It is the mess cart and the waiters. They are hopelessly lost. The sergeant has told them to stop there whilst he goes to try to find the battalion. Come on quick. Can't wait for him.

You are back with the battalion. One of its company commanders is sitting on the roadside. The mess-cart episode, after a day of lame horses, cast shoes, and bleeding galls, has filled you with the sense of utter incompetence. You are a failure. You've let down the battalion, as the weary second-in-command said. So you fling your-self down beside the company commander and cry in despair: "What are they trying to do with us?" and he, in dead-weary tones, answers: "I think they are trying to kill the British Army."

A night mist is climbing from the river to the road, slowly blotting out the stars. Presently you hear the tramp, tramp, of a marching column, and out of the mist emerge, grey in the darkness, four great-coated figures, rifles slung and bayonets fixed. They pass you and move towards the outposts. They are followed closely by a company in fours. It is a company of tall men, and you notice the wire has been removed from their caps. But it is not that that impresses you. What stirs you so strangely is the port of these men and the self-reliant confidence that you hear in the low tones of their voices. They pass and are swallowed up in the darkness. Their rhythmic tread fades away, leaving behind hope and confidence.

"Who are they?" you whisper to your companion. "The Guards," he whispers back. [TX00153H]

The Berkshire Chronicle of 7th May 1915 picks up the story:-

That day, (the 27th) the Berkshires were on the march from 6 am to 2 pm and then had to cross the river and entrench as it was reported that a strong force of Germans was in front of them. However the night passed without incident.

They resumed their march at 3.30 continuing their weary progress till well into the evening. The line taken by the First Army Corps was along the Oise towards La Fere. The pursuit by the enemy had slackened while some welcome support from the French helped to keep back the pursuing force.

Cpl Denore:-

August 27.-At dawn we started on the march again. I noticed that the cure and one old fellow stayed in Venerolles, but all the other inhabitants went the previous night.

A lot of our men threw away their overcoats while we were on the road today, but I kept mine.

The marching was getting quite disorderly; numbers of men from other regiments were mixed up with us.

We reached St. Quentin, a nice town, just before dark, but marched straight through and dug ourselves in on some high ground, with a battery of artillery in line with us. Although we saw plenty of movement in the town the Germans didn't attack us, neither did we fire on them. During the night a man near me quite suddenly started squealing like a pig, and then jumped out of the trench, ran straight down the hill towards the town, and shot himself through the foot. He was brought in by some artillerymen. [TX00419E]

Pte Barlow

We started off early next morning soaked to the skin. We did not spot the enemy again until we reached Villers Cotterets close to Soissons

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 27th Marched off at 2 a-m dicipline (sic) march until about 3 p.m. 1 hours rest, put on Picquet shortly afterwards walked & put on Outpost all night, managed to get a small portion of stew at midnight

28th August 1914

The next day saw a long trying march to billets in Amigny. They were on the march from 04:30 to 19:00. They were mixed up with countless refugees fleeing before the German advance and the men of the battalion who had had little to eat and very little sleep were very dishevelled; many were discarding their equipment.

Lt Sparrow:-

At the close of each day, a Taube aeroplane had flown overhead, marking down the troops as they turned into their bivouacs. Always it was greeted with curses from the weary troops, who attributed all their miseries to its all-seeing eye. But on the evening after Origny-for we were not surrounded there and never had been in serious danger that night-the men in bivouac on the stubble greeted the Taube with something more effective. They shot at it, and the aeroplane turned away, flashing in the evening sun as if it were on fire, whilst every marksman shouted that he had fired the lucky shot. There was a1together a better tone.

The march itself had been uneventful though long. Except for the armies the roads were nearly empty, but here and there would be encountered knots of sturdy young fellows in their best black suits, the conscripts of 1915 marching to Beauvais. They were broad-shouldered and thick-set lads, and not the least like the puny creatures one had always supposed the French to be. But otherwise there was nothing in sight except the long trains of waggons and the serpent columns of retreating troops. And in the deserted fields the heat shimmered round the stooks of yellow corn.

When Ulysses was preparing to put out the giant eye of Polyphemus, he and his men sharpened a stake and hardened the point in the fire. Some such hardening process this hot sun was putting us through. It had sweated the softness out of us just as the fire had sizzled the sap out of the green wood, and now it was drying to firmness our muscles and sinews, and with them our whole nervous system and moral fibre. The reservists suddenly began to find the mile a less terrible distance.

But there was another reason why the troops felt better when they had got into bivouac. The Russians had landed in Belgium! A staff officer had given the news in the morning whilst we were on the march. And now God forgive those who had ever let themselves doubt our generals or feel mistrust of our allies. God forgive them. For we had lured the Germans into a trap. A mind greater than Napoleon's had been at work. "Nous reculons pour mieux sauter," the French newspapers had been saying for days. And some of us had thought

the phrase a manner of speaking, so to say. God forgive us.

When next day we did not move till after midday, and when we found our direction was north-west to Chauny on the Oise, we were sure the news was true. The retreat had come to an end. This was the line upon which we were to hold the head in Chancery whilst the Russians struck at the vitals of the grey beast of Germany. Backs straightened and fours made some attempt to keep abreast. For the first time since Mons, the transport was in its proper place in rear, and riding at its head and looking down the column one had to admit the sergeant was right-things were very different when we were going the other way.

News comes through of a French victory at Guise, and even as Hannibal after Cannae picked up a sackful of the rings of the equites of Rome, so had the French collected two waggon-loads of pickelhaubes. And as if to confirm it an English cavalry patrol comes swaggering over the Oise bridge with Uhlan helmets on the points of their lances. Finally, and best of all, comes a message from Joffre "The British Army by its devoted exertions has saved France." It is true that some of us felt a bit amazed on first hearing this whole-hearted praise, but here the message was in black and white, and Joffre could form a better opinion than ourselves of what we had done. So after a moment of blank astonishment we accepted the thanks in a spirit of proud gratitude.

Oh, Wibble-Wobble, Wibble-Wobble, how much finely tempered ardour hast thou not corroded! Caine order, counter-order; blow up the bridges, don't; prepare them for demolition, don't; do so, remove the charges, standby. What morale could stand before proofs at such vacillating indecision? In the evening the transport is ordered to retire for a night to a village three miles in rear and await orders. [TX00154A]

Berkshire Chronicle:-

On the evening of Friday the 28th, the whole of the BEF was assembled along the Oise from La Fere to Noyon, weary indeed after its six days of fighting and marching but wholly free from the dispiritment of beaten troops. What a week it had been, especially to men new to the horrors of modern fighting! Yet as Mr Buchan reminds us: "*though they had been forced from the Belgian frontier and had retired day after day even the men in the ranks understood that they had foiled the efforts of an infinitely greater army which had bent all its energies on their destruction.*"

Cpl Denore:

August 28.-Again at dawn we started on the march, and during the first halt another fellow shot himself through the foot.

The roads were in a terrible state, the heat was terrific, there seemed to be very little order about anything, and mixed up with us and wandering about all over the roads were refugees with all sorts of conveyances prams, trucks, wheelbarrows, and tiny little carts drawn by dogs. They were piled up with what looked like beds and bedding, and all of them asked us for food, which we could not give them, as we had none ourselves.

The men were discarding their equipment in a wholesale fashion in spite of orders to the contrary; also many of them fell out, and rejoined again towards dusk. They had been riding on limbers and wagons, and officers' chargers, and generally looked worse than those of us who kept going all day.

That night I went on outpost, but I did not know where exactly, as things were getting hazy in my mind. I tried to keep a diary, although it was against orders. Anyway, I couldn't realize all that was happening, and only knew that I was always tired, hungry, unshaven, and dirty. My feet were sore, water was scarce, in fact, it was issued in half-pints, as we were not allowed to touch the native water. The regulations were kept in force in that respect so much so that two men were put under arrest and sentenced to field punishment for stealing bread from an empty house.

Then, again, it wasn't straight marching. For every few

hours we had to deploy and beat off an attack, and every time somebody I knew was killed or wounded. And after we had beaten off the attacking force, on we went again - -retiring. [TX00419F]

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 28th On the move again at 2 am had tea during a halt to enable the Transport train to pass but no rations issued Continued marching all day until ¼ to 4, was given 1 hour's rest, with tea 1 biscuit & a small piece of bacon, our proper rations having gone astray. Marched again after rest until about 7 or 8 pm. & billeted in a barn for the night, & managed to get a few hours of sleep, practically the first for 4 days, & on the move the whole time, no time to wash or shave, cannot find out the name of the place this billet.

Lt Sparrow

Like Casabianca we wait in the early morning, ourselves and an officerless detachment from the Second Army Corps whom one has requisitioned as escort. It was there in the village when we arrived and we fed it from our cookers. It's broad daylight, or would be if it wasn't for a morning mist. A cavalry brigade jangles through with a short-legged little brigadier perched on a seventeen-hand hunter. One wonders how he ever gets into the saddle. But still no orders for us, and, still like Casabianca, we wait. Wait an hour, an hour and a half, longer. Then up comes a breathless cyclist orderly from the battalion. We're to retire at once. The battalion's miles ahead down the road. So off we move, and it gradually dawns on the Transport Officer that his command is the rearguard of the British Army. By how many minutes, he wonders, had Casabianca's fate been missed? [TX00154B]

29th August 1914

At Chauny next day the battalion temporarily took position to guard the bridge over the Oise, which was prepared for demolition. This was on the 29th August.

Berkshire Chronicle:

It had been proposed to hold the heights of Champagne, but owing to the increasing pressure on the retiring French armies, this was found to be impossible and accordingly, after an all too brief rest the retreat of the British forces began afresh late in the afternoon of Saturday August 29th proceeding first towards the line of the River Aisne from Soissons to Compiègne and then towards the Marne about Meaux.

The Berkshires, who had billeted in a small village, left their quarters at 1 pm, being detailed to hold bridges on the canal. The necessary measures were taken for the destruction of the bridges after the troops had passed, orders being received to blow up the bridges if they were attacked. The Berkshires successfully performed their part of the trying task and rejoined their brigade.

Cpl Denore:

August 29th.-A despatch was read to us, from General French, explaining that the B.E.F. was on the west of a sort of horseshoe, and that the retirement was to draw the Germans right into it, when they would be nipped off. That afternoon we went to a place called Chauny to guard the river while some R.E.'s blew up the bridges

It was a change from the everlasting marching, and we managed to get some vegetables out of the gardens and cook them. A few Uhlans appeared, but got away again in spite of our fire. So far as I could tell there wasn't a single civilian in the town, and all the houses were barricaded; while outside of them were buckets of wine - pink, blue, red, whitish, and other colours. We were not allowed to drink any. [TX00419G]

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 29th Received a letter from Nancy. Ordered to Parade to move, which was temporarily (sic) cancelled by

(sic) was ordered to stand by ready to move at a moments notice. made the most of this opportunity to write a P.C. (post card) but have no idea when I shall be able to post same; Germans reported retiring fast, mostly cut up by the French who got behind them, the reason for our retiring being to enable them to do so. Congratulations on our Conduct in two wires received from the King. We have just heard that during the last 9 days we have marched 179 miles, fighting Rear Guard Actions

Left our billets in the afternoon & marched to Chauney trenched for the night in the yard of a Factory, on the banks of a canal, nothing seen of the enemy. two bridges blown up to check their advance

Pte Wright:-

29th August We are protecting bridges tonight and I am one of a reconnaissance patrol very exciting. I borrowed a cycle from a not overwilling civilian and rode round keeping up connecting with another Coy who are about a mile and a half from us. By the way, I was not far from Fred Orchard and although we did not see one another I managed to get a note from him and send answer. Fred was blowing up bridges along the canal. [TX00882L]

30th August 1914

The march continued to Couchy le Chateau having linked up with brigade at Le Vivier around 19:00.

August 30 Just as we were leaving Chauney about 4 a.m. -two girls were found and taken along with us.

Although all the bridges were blown up the Germans were after us almost immediately. God only knew how they got over so soon. Their fire was heavy but high the few we saw were firing from their hips as they advanced. We fired for about half an hour. Then the artillery came into action, and we retired about two or three miles under cover of their fire. Then we waited till the Germans came up and we began all over again, and then again and then again all day long. It was terribly tiring, heart-breaking work, as we seemed to have the measure of the Germans, and yet we retired.

During the evening the Guards Brigade took over the rearguard work while our Brigade went on to Castle Isoy, and bivouacked and slept for about six hours. [TX00419H]

Lt Sparrow

Coucy-le-Château is surely the fairest town in Northern France. It is perched on a hill upon whose terraced slopes are vineyards, and the road winds around the foot. And there under the hill a horse could go no farther. But what was worse, there was none left to take its place. One had known for days that it was only a matter of time before a waggon would have to be abandoned, and now the time had come. But the realisation was none the less bitter for having been foreseen For it would be the first waggon in the brigade to go. It proved that you were the worst of the transport officers. You were nothing more than a conceited, irritable failure, lacking the firmness and strength to make your drivers do their duty. If you and they had really seen to things, this humiliation never would have occurred. There is a halt at the moment, and you sit in misery on the low wall of a vineyard, eating grapes.

They are sour, sour as your thoughts. But then a fairy godmother comes along in the form of the Field Ambulance. They have a spare horse, several in fact, and they will lend you one. You accept it, not wholly gratefully, for you feel so angry at this fresh proof of your own inferiority as a horse-master.

Yet within an hour these surging thoughts have flattened themselves out. You reflect that the C.O. need never hear of this further evidence of your incompetence. Whilst there's life there's hope, the hope that some other battalion of the brigade will have lost a waggon before your next horse fails. [TX00154C]

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 30th On the move again at 2 AM. looking for looting

parties all day without success continued marching until about 8 pm. & bivouacked in a field for the night at Coury-Le-Chateau.

Pte Wright:-

Sunday 30th 1914 Wrote a card to Daisy and proceeding on march don't think the war will last long now roll on a good slap up at home and some decent food. I trust they are all doing well. Sha'n't forget Sunday 23 for a long time. [TX00882M]

31st August 1914

Fighting a rear guard action the battalion reached Bandry via Soissons.

Berkshire Chronicle:-

On August 31st most of the Battalion were on outpost duty all night, after a heavy day's marching..

It was very gratifying to his comrades when it was announced that Pte W Ross, 9691 had been granted the Medaille Militaire by the President of the French Republic in recognition of gallantry during the operations between August 21st and 31st. Pte Ross was also mentioned in Sir John French's first Despatch. He was later raised to the rank of lance corporal and some months later was wounded.

Cpl Denore:-

August 31.-Again we were rearguard, but did little fighting. We marched instead, staggering about the road like a crowd of gipsies. Some of the fellows had puttees wrapped round their feet instead of boots; others had soft shoes they had picked up somewhere; others walked in their socks, with their feet all bleeding. My own boots would have disgraced a tramp, but I was too frightened to take them off to look at my feet. Yet they marched until they dropped, and then somehow got up and marched again.

One man (Ginger Gilmore) found a mouth-organ, and, despite the fact that his feet were bound in blood soaked rags, he staggered along at the head of the company playing tunes all day. Mostly he played "The Irish Emigrant" which is a good marching tune. He reminded us of Captain Oates.

An officer asked me if I wanted a turn on his horse, but I looked at the fellow on it and said "No thanks"

The marching was getting on everyone's nerves, but as I went I kept saying to myself, "If you can, force your heart and nerve and sinew." Just that, over and over again.

That night we spent the time looking for a Uhlan regiment, but didn't get in touch with them, and every time we stopped we fell asleep; in fact we slept while we were marching, and consequently kept falling over. [TX00419J]

Lt Sparrow

Anyhow, where are we bound for? Soissons and the line of the Aisne? We pass it, only stopping for a bathe in the river, where a man gets cramp and is drowned. Some say we were meant to halt and fight there, only the retreat had been resumed before the orders had been circulated; others declare that it was an impossible line, as the hills on the north bank are higher than those on the south. Anyhow, we are still marching south on French maps- for we have marched off our own-and the signposts point to Paris. "We are," declares authoritative rumour, "to be the garrison of Paris," and "Have you brought any mufti in your base kit?" demand the more lighthearted.

But in a strange way we are no longer particularly interested in our fate. The countless new impressions and sensations of the past three weeks have blunted the mind, so that it is no longer capable of registering all that it perceives. This daily marching southwards has become our normal outlook. The mocking cry of "Back to the Pyrenees" no longer appears a taunt, but

rather assumes the vague, shadowy shape of Destiny. In due course something will turn up to stay our backward progress, but it is all in Karma. We best serve the will of Heaven by marching, and tightening up our march discipline as we go. And so when one comes to look back to this stage of the retreat, one finds nothing but a few isolated impressions, marking, like flags that marked the sunken guns of Passchendaele, days that have been submerged into the forgettery of the mind.

There's that tiny cottage, for instance, where three of us billeted. There's Grand-père, Grand'mère, the daughter-in-law whose husband has been mobilised, and the baby. You take the baby on your lap, and the daughter-in-law asks if you are married and what you are when you are not mobilised. Then someone asks the old couple if they could provide anything to eat as a change from this bully beef of the rations. No, they couldn't, they say at first, and then the two old folk whisper together in the light of the feeble oil lamp. Yes, they say at last, they could; they will kill one of their rabbits if-and the old man says this in a tone of touching humbleness - if we wouldn't mind them sharing it with us. What night did that happen? [TX00154D]

Cpl Wickens:-

Aug 31st March commenced at 4 a m marching all day until 8 p m bivouacked for 3 hours

Pte Wright:-

Monday August 31st Arrived at Vins about 12 noon staying for two hours then to proceed where rank and file don't know. I rather fancy that as far as we are concerned the wars finished we are marching south in the direction of Paris lets hope so anyway. Saw Fred Orchard this morning and received a letter from Daisy dated 21st. The French had a victory about 10 miles from us on Friday and our people did fine work. The machine guns got to work in a large body of the enemy's cavalry who had with them a good many led horses, The firing stampeded the led horses then the "12" lancers charged them then the Sgt Greys charging behind altogether destroying 50,000 [sic] of the Kaisers beautiful cavalry who had lovely brass helmets which weighs about 14 ozs, By the way I killed a chap on the bridge at Maroilles and brought away his helmet as a souvenir. I could have had his rifle as well but I thought it would have to be given up. I don't think very much of the German soldiers, their cavalry seem to do most of the work they seem to be what we should call mounted infantry. As far as our regt is concerned they are about the only branch that we have been engaged with except of course the artillery who we could not see, speaking of the artillery I don't think they are so very grand either on Sunday 23rd during the morning whilst we were digging our trenches I stood and watched them shelling our cavalry 15 Hussars who repeatedly [sic] advanced and retired they only got one casualty one officer wounded in arm. Now seeing our artillery cut them up every time they gets within range I think I can safely say ours was far superior although three of our guns were put out of action (4 casualties K 6 horses) behind our trenches. People thought what good shooting it was but considering the enemy knew the position and exact range it was not so over wonderful and I do not think they have ever done so well since where the ground has made things more even. Once more we have to march on. [TX00882N]

Villers Cotteret

1st September 1914

The march resumed at 03:15 on the 1st being protected by the 4th Guards Brigade. They, the 4th (Guards) Brigade, acting as rearguard of the 2nd Division, had fought an action against very superior numbers in the forest N.E. of Villers Cotterets, and about 13:00 the 5th and 6th Brigades were called back to cover their retreat.

Two companies of the 1st Royal Berkshire were deployed on either flank of a battery about a mile south of Villers Cotterets. Here they were attacked by the pursuing Germans, whom they beat off with a loss in the battalion of one officer and one man killed, and twenty-three other ranks wounded. They withdrew to Thury arriving at 20:00

Berkshire Chronicle:-

The British retirement was the signal for renewed activity on the part of the enemy. At first it was not closely pressed, but small rearguard actions were continually fought. The Berkshires were engaged in one such rearguard action of a very severe character on Tuesday September 1st at Villers Cotteret. There in the difficult country of the Villers Cotteret woods we won what has been designated as a tactical victory. The 4th Guards Brigade - Grenadiers, Coldstreams and Irish - suffered heavy losses in the close quarters fighting among the woods in which they repeatedly charged the enemy with the bayonet. The 6th Brigade were sent back to cover their retirement and in the subsequent rearguard fighting the 1st Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment lost about a dozen or so killed and wounded, the shell fire being very heavy.

A body of the [70th Battery] RFA was in danger of being cut off by the Germans and, seeing the difficult position in which they were placed, a contingent of the Berkshires by an adroit movement, made their way around to the left of a wood and kept up a rapid fire until four teams came up under cover of the wood. A distance of between 500 and 600 yards had to be traversed and, making a dash for it, those in charge successfully took the four guns out of action. The Germans were at the time making rapidly for the guns and could not have been more than 300 or 400 yards away. Several of the gunners had been shot down before the Berkshires arrived on the scene and two of the team horses had been killed. The Berkshires fire was so hot that the Germans suffered very heavy losses.

Little wonder, after performing such feats as these that the fame of the Berkshires has spread over the whole world. Little wonder either that Brigadier General Davies said that every man who took part in the saving of the guns deserved a Victoria Cross. Many brave deeds were performed by officers and men of the regiment. It was his skill and courage at Villers Cotteret on September 1st which brought Capt L H Birt under the notice of his superior officers and led to his being awarded the DSO Here it may be mentioned that that gallant officer was killed in action on January 5th.

Sgt Taylor of Reading wrote in his diary:-

The enemy artillery opened fire upon us about 800 yards away using shrapnel. They were knocking branches off the trees we were standing under. Two platoons went forward and rescued some of our guns while shrapnel was falling like rain upon them.

Pte Barlow

We reached Villers Cotterets close to Soissons where my company was sent out to cover the retirement of the heavy guns. One platoon took up position on the railway, the remainder were told off to entrench themselves in the woods to the rear of us.

We saw the enemy artillery coming down a road with a tall hedge on our side. We reported to the commander of a field gun just to our rear, but he said it was our cavalry retiring. He soon found out the mistake as they came through a gate into a field no more than 80 yards in front of us and unlimbered. Our gun fired one shell at them but it dropped short. Before it could get another shot the enemy was pouring a hail of shrapnel and high explosive over and the gun had to be abandoned, but a team came and rescued the gun under a very heavy fire - about the finest bit of work I had seen so far. Other guns soon got the range of the enemy's battery and put them out of action, but not

before they had caused heavy casualties to my platoon. as we retired to the woods which were about 800 yards across open country.

We were relieved by the Guards Brigade and again retired about another six miles where we rested for the night. After this we did not run into the enemy on our retirement and we were told one day we were being taken to Paris.

Sergeant Meades of Reading was also an eye witness to the rescue of the guns:-

We had been firing at the Germans for about two and a half hours; then we were told to retire, which we did through a wood; but before we had gone many yards General Davis came along and said "Turn about men! you must go and save those guns at all costs" There were only about 50 of us to go and save six field guns. We made a series of short rushes under a heavy shrapnel fire from the enemy until we were up to the guns. The Germans were about 800 yards away. We were getting a very few hurt but we could see the Germans going down in scores. Every shot of ours told; it was impossible to miss them because they came on in masses six to ten deep.

We could see our artillery shells simply mowing them down; but still they came on. Presently we had the order to abandon the guns, but our young officer (Lieut Hibbert) said "No boys, we will never let a German take a British gun" Then our chaps had fired all their ammunition, but we kept on. Then the South Staffords came up and reinforced us on our left flank. We afterwards saw gun teams coming up to fetch the guns. Away went nos 1, 2, 3 and 4 guns. I was between nos 5 and 6 guns. I saw the team coming up for no 5. Then a chap behind me started yelling. I crawled back to him and found he was shot through the thick part of the leg. I dragged him back out of the way and then crawled back to my position. I found only no 6 gun there and I thought it strange there being none of my men there. Then no 6 gun team came up and took their gun away, but had to leave the wagon. I then stood up and had a look round. You can imagine my surprise when I found there was not a soul near me except the Germans and they were only 300 or 400 yards away.

I thought to myself they must all have retired and it was time I did, so I had a few more shots at the Germans and stood up again. I was just going back when I felt myself hit in the knee; it brought me down to my knees. Then I stood up again and, finding that I could walk, retired. I got back to the wood where the staff and main body were. The last gun had got through and everyone was cheering like mad. Then I went lame. I stopped and watched the Guards going out to attack the Germans. They drove the Germans back again. Then the Scots Greys and the 12th Lancers made a charge: it was a grand charge. I could see some of the Germans dropping on their knees and holding their hands up. Then as soon as our cavalry got through, the Germans picked up their rifles and started firing again. Our cavalry turned about and started back. It was no use the Germans putting up their hands a second time. Our cavalry cut down every one they came to. I don't think there were ten Germans left out of about 2000. I can tell you they had all they wanted that day.

Then I found I could not walk so I climbed on to the limber of a gun carriage and stopped there till I got to the hospital which was about seven miles away. Of course that finished my bit of fun. I heard afterwards that our cavalry made a second charge and captured eight German guns.

Sergeant Meades was later repatriated and became the first soldier to be treated at the hospital in Leeds where he was made a real fuss of. The MP for Leeds, Mr Middlebrook came to see him and emptied the contents of his cigarette case into Meades' hands. [RM 26/9/14]

No officer is listed as having been killed this day but

two ORs were:-

7376 Pte Ernest Saunders of Maidenhead

7948 Pte William David Snow of Hillingdon

Cpl Denore:-

September 1.- We continued at the same game from dawn till dark, and dark till dawn-marching and fighting and marching. Every roll call there were fewer to answer - some were killed some wounded, and some who had fallen out were missing.

During this afternoon we fought for about three hours near Villers-Coterets, I think it was, but I was getting very mixed about things, even mixed about the days of the week. Fifteen men in my company were killed, one in a rather peculiar fashion. He was bending down, handing me a piece of sausage, when a bullet ricocheted off a man's boot and went straight into his mouth and out of the top of his head.

We got on to the road about 200 yards only in front of a German brigade, and then ran like hell for about a mile, until we passed through the South Staffs Regiment, who were entrenched each side of the road. I believe about six of the battalion were captured. Still we marched on until dusk, then on outpost again, and during the night the South Staffs passed through us. [TX00419K]

Lt Sparrow

Then there's Villers Coterets and the kennels of the Menier (Chocolat Menier) staghounds, where the watercarts were filled up and the huntsman gave up part of his last hours of freedom to showing you his marvellously equipped buildings, his litters of puppies, the pack itself and last but not least the all-round-the-body hunting horns. He himself has hunted in Leicestershire, and you two discuss the difference between English and French hunting, whilst periodically he breaks into groans at the thought of the ruined season ahead, and shakes his fist towards the Germans. But how you came to have so much time or what hour of day it was, you have not the least recollection.

But it must have been in the morning, for later in the day the transport column saves two miles or more by cutting across country. From the forest behind the sound of gunfire rises. There's a village to halt at where the line of your battalion has already been chalked on the doors, and there a cyclist orderly finds you. "Ammunition wanted at once." A blur. Then S.A.A. carts being galloped across a root field, and you riding a heavy draught five-year-old with a bad collar gail, and your heart is full of glorious joy. You imagine yourself heading a cavalry charge. A hard trot through a village whence the refugees are pouring. You must have looked as happy as you felt, for one of the men points you out: "Holá-regardez!" and waves his cap. Next the brown road and young Lance-Corporal Y and two men in retreat. "Where's the battalion?" "Just ahead!" Then, looking solemn as an owl: "D'you know 'C' company's been cut to pieces, sir?" "Cut to pieces!" You're perfectly certain the fellow's grossly exaggerating, but they will use these damned clichés till they hypnotise themselves into believing they've happened. Make a mental note that if you possibly can-and the future allows you to do it-you'll run him in for "stating a falsehood to an officer." "Larn" him to be more careful of what he says.

Ah! Here's the battalion just this side of the forest, fallen into fours and on the point of moving off. No, the ammunition isn't wanted, and your five-year-old "caballus" has pulled up dead lame. Twilight is falling.

Presently the head of the brigade comes to the point where the transport turned off across country. You tell the C.O. "Go and tell the Brigadier," he says. You run up and do so. "The billets are over there, sir." "Where?" he answers in utterly despondent tones. "I haven't the remotest idea where we're supposed to go." "It's only about a mile across country," you say in coaxing tones, though you think it may be a bit more, but it's no good going on down the road in the wrong direction, as he seems half-inclined to do. "Oh well,

you lead the way," he says at last.

Half-an-hour later and you are still on the fields. "Are you sure you're right?" the Brigadier demands. "Yes, sir," you reply. Evelyn Wood, you remember, describes a somewhat similar situation in *From Midshipman to Field Marshal*. A guide must never show doubt, he says, or something to that effect. It's providential you read that book at school and remembered that particular passage, for a quarter of an hour later the Brigadier again demands: "Are you sure you're right?" and five minutes later declares: "I'm sure you're wrong." As a matter of fact, you are absolutely sure that the only mistake you have made is in grossly underestimating the distance, for you have sufficiently good night-eyes to see the crushed grass of the wheel-marks. But doubt is a terribly demoralising thing, and had it not been for this particular book you might have allowed yourself to be stampeded. Evelyn Wood told you to resist, so you brace all your inner forces and reply firmly: "I'm sure I'm not."

So for a few minutes longer the column plods on, and though you won't admit it you yourself are puzzled about your complete underestimation of the distance. Perhaps you've led the whole brigade wrong? In spite of yourself craven fear and doubt creep in. You have the feeling that a man has when he insists on going back to see if he has forgotten something which he knows perfectly well he has remembered. And then through the darkness comes the voice of the Brigadier. "I'm not going any farther. You can go on by yourself and see if you can find this road you speak of." You point out the wheel-tracks, but the Brigadier's in the mood when he won't accept them as proof. So off by yourself you go, weakly and cravenly letting yourself fall a prey to doubts that you know have no real substance. A hundred yards on and you're challenged. "Who are you?" "Who are you?" "Is there a road there?" "Yes." "Is there a village farther down?" Yes, the sentry believes there is, about two miles away.

So back in triumph to the Brigadier.

The village is reached "Here's our billets, sir!" you open your mouth to say when, God's truth, you suddenly realise it is occupied by some other troops, and of our own transport there is never a sign. It's vanished as completely as Aladdin's palace.

The silence of the Brigadier is terrible. You know full well exactly what he is thinking, whilst you yourself feel you've been bewitched, regularly flummoxed.

And then, before the Brigadier can really get out what he thinks, your eye catches sight of the chalked billet notice that you had seen before. Allah be praised! It is the same village, and, what is more, there's the name of your regiment still written on it. You're saved, so what the hell does anything else matter?

Again there's the first reinforcement drawn up to meet us on the side of the road, a hundred pairs of curious eyes regarding us as we emerge in flesh and blood out of the mist of legend. You hear their adventures, which have been queer enough in all conscience, but how auxiliary they seem compared to our own. For our retreat has made us proud and egotistical, and although your greatest friend commands the newcomers, your selfcentredness makes you think that there is now a great gulf of experience between you, only to be bridged on your part by goodwill.

One or two more incidents remain standing out of the mist. There's the time you nearly got left behind, which happened in this way. You turned into your billet with the knowledge that for the first time for a fortnight you were to have a full night's rest, for the battalion was not to move off till eight o'clock in the morning. In your dreams the owner of the billet comes and says the Battalion is moving. You murmur he's wrong, for you know it is still dark. Again he comes to disturb your sleep and again you send him away, and yet once more he appears. There's another officer sharing your roomy you have just remembered that - and he is roused sufficiently to look out of the window. By God, the fellow's tight. Orders have been altered; the battalion's down here in the inky well of the Square. Quick though you are in tumbling into your boots and equipment, it's moved off before you can get down, the

prey to a thousand fears that the transport is still in its lines, orderless. But, thank Heaven, as you emerge from the door you can hear it rumbling down the street, and you run after it, cursing in your thoughts your servant for lint having woken you. But he, poor youth, vows and swears that he roused you and that you answered, and you have to leave it at that. [TX00154E]

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 1 March commenced at 3 a.m. until about 12, granted an hours halt, for rest & dinner but only had a 1/4 of an hour, as the enemy came up too close.. Our Coy being put on Outpost duty straight away', afterwards retired about 1 mile & extended to cover the retirement of the Guards Brigade. Our Artillery being in position close behind us under fierce Artillery fire of the enemy, & retired 100 yards to line the edge of a big wood almost immediately afterwards their shells were completely sweeping the whole of the ground where we were first extended. Our Artillery being forced to retire as they had the range so accurate.

Remained at the edge of the wood under shell fire for about 2 hours & so saved the guns, did not have many casualties Pte Snow being killed; eventually commenced retiring through the woods, & continued on the march as fast as possible until 11 p.m. & bivouacked the remainder of the night in a field without Coats.

2nd September 1914

Next day at 03:45 the retreat continued through Panchard, where the battalion had an inconvenient loss in the shape of nine hundred and twenty greatcoats, which were turned off the ambulance wagons on which they were to make room for wounded from the Guards Brigade. The weather was at present very hot, but the loss would be severely felt with a drop in the temperature. After some argument they were ordered to carry on to Trilbardon where they went into billets at 20:15 at Les Olivettes Farm.

Pte Barlow:-

We noticed on the milestones that we were only 30 kilometers away [from Paris] but we were halted in a field one day and told that we had drawn the enemy into a favourable position and were going to take the offensive. We lightened our load as much as possible, handing in our packs and everything that we could possibly do without and commenced to advance in the same direction which we had retired only to find that the Germans had been turned and were going back as fast as they came.

Cpl Denore:-

September 2. At 2 a.m. we moved off, and marched all day long. It was hot and dusty and the roads were rotten, but as we got mixed up with hundreds of refugees we were obliged to keep better marching order. About 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. we reached Meaux. I believe we did about twenty-five miles that day, but no fighting. We bivouacked outside Meaux, but I went into the cathedral when we halted near it, and thought it was very beautiful. Also, I saw some of the largest tomatoes I have ever seen in my life growing in a garden. I was rounding up stragglers most of the night until 1 a.m.. and at 3 a.m. we moved off again. [TX00419L]

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 2nd Forced march commenced at 2 am & continued all day, 10 minutes being the longest halt allowed, & sometimes marched nearly 8 miles straight off without an halt. Finally had an hours rest about 1/2 past 4 pm. to let other Brigades get in front, then continued marching again about 8 miles arriving in

billets about 10.30 pm. Tea up & rations issued made it well after 11 before obtaining any rest or sleep.

3rd September 1914

The march resumed at 03:40 on the 3rd with a halt at Meaux. At 12:00 after a half hour rest they carried on to Pierre Levee, bivouacking 3 miles SE of the village. They had a good night there.

Cpl Denore:

September 3. The first four or five hours we did without a single halt or rest, as we had to cross a bridge over the Aisne before the R.E.'s blew it up. It was the most terrible march I have ever done. Men were falling down like nine-pins. They would fall flat on their faces on the road, while the rest of us staggered round them, as we couldn't lift our feet high enough to step over them; and as for picking them up, that was impossible, as to bend meant to fall.

What happened to them, God only knows. An aeroplane was following us most of the time dropping iron darts; we fired at it a couple of times, but soon lost the strength required for that. About 9 a.m. we halted by a river, and immediately two fellows threw themselves into it. Nobody, from sheer fatigue, was able to save them, although one sergeant made an attempt and was nearly drowned himself. I, like a fool, took my boots off, and found my feet were covered with blood. I could find no sores or cuts, so I thought I must have sweated blood.

As I couldn't get my boots on again I cut the sides away, and when we started marching again my feet hurt like hell.

We marched till about 3 p.m. - nothing else, just march, march, march. I kept repeating my line "If you can, force, etc." Why, I didn't know. A sergeant irritated everyone who could hear him by continually shouting out "Stick it, lads! We're making history"

The colonel offered me a ride on his horse, but I refused, and then wished I hadn't, as anything was preferable to the continuous marching

We got back that afternoon among the refugees again. They were even worse off than we were - or at least they looked it. We gave the kids our biscuits and bully, hoping that would help them a little; but they looked so dazed and tired there did not seem to be much hope for them

At 8 pm we bivouacked in a field and slept till dawn. Ye gods, what a relief! [TX00419M]

Lt Sparrow

Meaux, deserted and dead in the grey light before dawn. Street after street of poor houses, evacuated and empty. There's not a soul about, and the signposts point to Paris.

The fact that everybody somehow managed to keep shaved throughout the whole retreat. [TX00154F]

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 3rd March commenced just before 3 am, 1/2 hours halt just after 7 am heat intense again & had to halt for an hour soon after 10 am, troops being weak & exhausted, march continued again, & in the heat of the Sun until 3.30 pm. bivouacked in a field & remained there the rest of the day & night, being the longest period of rest & sleep we have obtained for over a week. Took advantage of the opportunity to attend to sore heels & a blister about 2 inches long on which I had marched for the last 4 days.

Pte Wright:-

Sept 4 Thursday [Actually Sept 3rd]. Three days since I made any entry and during that time we have marched many miles and been in one more engagement in which the enemy were beaten off; they must have lost

a good many whereas our C very few. We are now about 26 miles from Paris and I expect we shall see more fighting before we get there if that is our destination which I think is about the mark. Roll on, I could do with a good feed not to forget a sleep. I am almost asleep writing this but we must expect it in our present trade will write more if I have any more time today. Heard this evening. Russia burning down Berlin. German troops leaving France via Belgium. 2 army corps of Germans captured by Rus also 32 guns as we were in action with them two days ago they must have shoved a jerk in it. [TX00882P]

4th September 1914

The CO reported to Brigade at 09:20 that the battalion was ready but it was not until 16:00 on the 4th that the Brigade was ready to move off. They arrived at Mouroux at 18:30. Here re-inforcements in the shape of an officer, two sergeants and 92 other ranks joined them.

Lt Sparrow:-

And lastly, there's the arrival of the second reinforcement, and, joy of joys, an officer who knows all about horses. You are allowed to go back to your platoon and land over to him. The transport drivers look sympathetic, and one or two even slightly sorry; you gather from their faces that they consider you have been returned to duty for inefficiency. But what do you care! You've at last got your wish and have got back to the road where a man can at least seek honour and glory, instead of anointing galls with waggon grease, back-raking for colic, hunting cooks, chasing drivers, and all the manifold unpleasant jobs of the past three weeks. That's the difference between you and them. They're thanking their lucky stars that they are on the transport, and you've been cursing your fate. Infantry transport! A poor reward for being a hunting man! [TX00154G]

Cpl Denore:-

September 4th - I was sent with six men on outpost to a small wood on our left front, and I had not posted the sentries more than half an hour before an officer found two of them asleep. The poor fellows were afterwards tried by Courts-martial and shot.

About 3 p.m we all moved off again and came into action almost immediately, although I believe it was a food convoy that, was mistaken for German artillery by our artillery. Anyway, no one I knew was hurt. It was said, however, that Jerry rushed his troops along after us in lorries.

All through the night we marched, rocking about on our feet from the want of sleep, and falling fast asleep even if the halt lasted only a minute. Towards dawn we turned into a farm, and for about two hours I slept in a pigsty.

I noticed the same thing about that farm that I'd noticed about most French farms. That was although they seemed more intensively cultivated than English farms, the farm implements were very old fashioned. [TX00419N]

The two men noted by Cpl Denore were Drivers J A Parsons and William Roach of the RFA. Their death sentences were later commuted to two years hard labour.

Sgt Taylor:-

Had a good wash - a unique experience of having two washes in twelve hours. Food good. Rested til 2 pm then moved about seven miles to deceive enemy. They shelled the place we had just left, wasting about 200 shells.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 4th No order to move, letters came up overnight,

but were not all issued, allowed to send P .C. Ordered to move about 2.30 pm. artillery were firing while we were on the move expected a long march with Outpost to follow, but was surprised when we turned into an Orchard about 6pm., this being the lightest march we have had since we have been out here. Our first Reinforcements joined us here, having been in the Country just on a fortnight. These were left at Aldershot when we moved out. They were put into different Coys to make up strength & replace those sick & wounded. Tea served up just before dark, but no rations issued as they were not at hand.

Rifle fire was going on during the night, & quite expected the alarm to sound & orders to move, but was left in peace.

Pte Wright

Friday Sept 4th The Germans having reached within 10 miles found Paris impregnable so retiring towards Germany. My Brigade general reserve so up to the present having a fairly good time lying within sound of the firing.

5th September 1914

Early next morning at 02:45 they set off again, this time for Chaumes which was reached at 11:30. They bivouaked for the night.

Cpl Denore:-

September 5. Early on this morning reinforcements from England joined us, and the difference in their appearance and ours was amazing. They looked plump, clean, tidy, and very wide-awake. Whereas we were filthy, thin and haggard. Most of us had beards, what equipment was left was torn; instead of boots we had puttees, rags, old shoes, field boots - anything and everything wrapped around our feet. Our hats were the same - women's hats, peasant's hats, caps, any old covering, while our trousers were mostly in ribbons. The officers were in a similar condition.

After the reserves joined we marched about twenty miles to a place called Chaumes. It was crowded with staff officers. We bivouacked in a park, and then had an order read to us that the men who had kept their overcoats were to dump them, as we were to advance at any moment. Strangely, a considerable amount of cheering took place. I discovered that the company I was in covered 251 miles in the Retreat from Mons, which finished on September 5, 1914. [TX00419P]

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 5th Roused at 1.30 am. Tea & Bacon with 1 Biscuit, all we had left, & moved off just after 2 a.m. poor Refugees we saw today were all converging & bound in one direction, have encountered numerous (sic) small parties for some time going in all directions, but never so many as today. The majority being in Carts & Wagons filled with Straw & hay, Waterproof Cover Sheets, Bedding & boxes some with three horses & some with Oxen in harness, taking everything they possibly could with them, some taking their cows, pigs & poultry not a cheerful sight to see the poor women & children turned out of their homes & probably find them totally destroyed on their returning home again, but they appear to bear it well, & some of the younger ones seem to be enjoying the experience, Changes have taken place during the last fortnight, On our upward journey we were greeted enthusiastically (sic), usually being given Water, Beer or Cider, & Apples, Pears, & Plums no one is allowed to break the ranks, so those on the outside usually came off best, & occasionally we were able to buy bread, but most of the villages we pass through are practically deserted, although we are not on the same route as when we advanced. The large Town of Meaux (about 25 kilometres from Paris) being almost deserted, only a few stragglers being left, & no water to be obtained while on the march. The Cathedral had been undergoing repair & the scaffolding still remained in position.

Today we were more fortunate & managed to obtain a

few Apples & Pears during a temporary halt in one little village, Continued marching until about 12 when we turned into a meadow for an hours rest. I was served with Tea from our Cookers. Paraded again at 1.15 pm. rumours of 9 or 10 more miles to do before halting for the night, Had just started when we were halted by one of the Staff Officers, & ordered back to our rest Camp for another 3 hours Rumours being current that having dodged the Germans our Brigadiers are not troubling to hurry the further retirement must be fairly safe as Sergts were allowed to leave the Camp during the afternoon, a thing unknown before, Ordered to Parade at 4.30 p.m. to move into billets, which was afterwards cancelled, & we were allowed to remain & Bivouak for the night, other Battalions of our Brigade having to move a little farther on to billets, all looking forward to a peaceful night, & a long sleep for once, but was disappointed (sic) for just as we had settled down comfortable for the night, I was ordered to turn out my Section to draw rations & equipment & a few pairs of boots which landed 3 hours first we had seen. This being the end of the Retirement

Pte Wright was still confused as to whether they were still retreating or chasing the retreating Germans.

Saturday Sept 5th Still slowly advancing enemy getting disorderly and loosing very heavy. We are now all round them and its only a matter of time before we corner them altogether. [TX00882R]

6th September 1914

At 06:30 on the 6th they started off north-east to Chaubuisson Farm which was reached at 08:30. Here they paused as a portion of the I Corps reserve. At 17:30 they moved to the road junction a quarter of a mile north of Chateau de la Fortelle where they bivouaked for the night.

Lt Sparrow:-

The roads are bordered with apple-Trees, the sun is hot though the nights are cold, and the battalion, marching at a great pace that only thoroughly fit men could keep up, is still going south. Paris is over our right shoulders.

And then the mind is once more a blur. [TX00154H]

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 6th Advance commenced, no more retiring marched about 2 am, in Reserve to French Army, Artillery duel proceeding; but none coming our way, Laid in a field all day awaiting Orders, marches about 3 or 4 miles in the evening & bivouaked the night, the easiest day we have had since coming out.

Pte Wright

Sunday Did not march far today Germans loses very heavy indeed on one ridge not 400 yards from our camp lies about 1,500 all killed by artillery cross fire that's only a few of them you can see them all lying where they fell within two acres of ground. We lost 15 men one officer as the Germans retire they are poisoning the cattle and all drinking water plundering and burning villages corn ricks etc, it will be hard for us advancing under such conditions as the one cry during the heat of the day is "water". I wrote two cards home on Saturday. [TX00882S]

7th September 1914

The next day (7th) they set off at 13:30 on a 14 mile march to Le Poteau near St Simon. The second batch of reinforcements joined under Lt Isaacs with two Lance Sergeants and another 92 other ranks.

This was the farthest point reached in the great retreat,

the inevitable depression of which was now turned into the joy of advance.

Sgt Frogley [6076] summed up the last part of the march:-

We continued retiring in good order until we reached Chateau Thierry which is a distance of nearly 300 miles from Mons. It was here that I was wounded. We had accomplished the distance roughly speaking in fifteen days and had marched in eight days a distance of no fewer than 197 miles. I should like to pay my tribute to Brigadier-general Davis who is a sound and kindly commander.

An unnamed officer paid tribute to the ASC:-

The greatest praise is due to the Army Service Corps for the most excellent way in which rations and supplies were brought up. During the whole of the retirement there was only one day when we missed our jam ration.

Cpl Tiesteel:-

Came the day when we stopped retreating. I forget the name of the village we stopped at but we had been told all sorts of yarns. Our Company Officer, Captain Birt, said "You see men, it is this way. We are simply doing rear guard actions so as to draw the enemy on to the French Army Reserves who are very strong in numbers, and have not been in action yet & therefore will be very fresh. Once the French attack we will become General Reserve to the French General Reserve. Think what that means! We may never fire another shot throughout the war. Tonight we hope to be in the outer parts of Paris where we must be by 12 midnight."

Had we but known that within a few hours we would be the pursuers & not the pursued I wonder what we would have thought. At that time we were dog tired. We had marched over 200 miles in 10 days with a full pack and 150 rounds of ball ammo. The only sleep we had had was during the minutes of halts during the day marches. Night time we were either on outpost duty or digging trenches for Gerry to have next day.

The beautiful fruit we saw during the retreat we dare not touch owing to such strict march discipline. We were told - Seven days no 1 (when they tie the no 1 prisoners to the wheel) was the least punishment you could hope to get if you were caught. Anyway you cannot beat discipline and strict discipline at that. You do know what you are about. [TX00147H]

Berkshire Chronicle:-

On September 3rd the British Force reached the Marne and crossed it by the bridges from Lagny to Meaux, blowing them up when the rearguards had crossed the river. Two days later (September 5th) the British Force was concentrated to the south of the lower course of the Grand Morin. The long retreat from the Belgian frontier was at an end.

The Berkshires, though tired with constant marching, had been free from the harassing fire of the German artillery for the past three or four days, though it had at times been close to them.

The quarters at which they had been billeted, farm buildings and the like had been fairly comfortable; indeed they had quite pleasant memories of one charming chateau where they halted for breakfast for an enthusiastic Tommy says "The lovely gardens were thrown open to us and we had a really good feast of eggs and fruit" It must have been a real godsend.

When at last on September 5th the 6th Brigade reached a town about 20 miles from Paris, where they halted in a public park, they did not then know that the long retreat was over, for orders had been given to resume the march at 1 pm. This however was cancelled for Von Kluck had made his fatal move.

There were many tired Berkshire Tommies that night for the battalion had covered 179 miles in 10 days.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 7th Rouse at 5 am Breakfast 6.30 move to Chateau grounds for shade at 9 am & remained until 12, able to obtain a wash for once quite a treat, also to wash our feet. Aeroplanes were coming to earth gracefully about 25 yards away. Move without dinner, & continued marching until 9 P.M. 2nd Reinforcements joined us here.

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Diary of Cpl Walter Wickens transcribed by Delyse Joy Brown 2002

Diary of LCpl Harry Wright

Continued in section 181.

