

Volume 5 Section 181

Holding the Line

1st Battalion

The 1st Battalion had been bloodied and had reached the furthest part of the retreat. The next few weeks are illuminated by extracts from the diaries of Capt CHT Lucas, Cpl Walter Wickens [7557] and Sgt William Taylor [8908]. Also letters from Lt Col Graham and many other eyewitnesses. Continued from section 171.

From Retreat to Advance - The Aisne

St Simeon

7th September 1914

On the 7th September the 1st Battalion reached the furthest point of their retreat. They were near St Simeon on the left bank of the Grand Morin. They had been placed in 2nd Division's general reserve and had been re-inforced back to their embarkation strength.

Lt Hanbury-Sparrow continues his account:-

There's the same sort of scene next day or the day after - an advanced guard messing about with a cavalry and Jaeger rearguard on the Petit Morin. It's evening before the Guards have cleared them out, and your brigade marches through to take over the duty of advanced guard. There's a halt for some unnecessary reason or another at the little river itself, and you have a talk with a Guards subaltern. "What's the bag?" you demand. "A thousand," he replies. "Not counting the pick up. Not counting the pick up," he repeats, evidently well-pleased with his wit. The wit may be all right, you reflect, but is the rest? What's the good of all this assing about with rearguards and calling it a victory? Aren't we letting the Germans get away with it? Whatever you may say, we're advancing at about a quarter the pace at which we went back. Isn't it downright dangerous to be satisfied with what we're doing?

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.

Harry Wright wrote up his diary when he was aboard a hospital ship having earned a 'Blighty' He recorded:-

Monday 7th Sept.

Outpost duty last night and today marching behind 1st Div

as reserve. Germans destroying and pillaging everywhere as they retire. [TX00883]

La Boue

8th September 1914

On the 8th at 0500 they turned around and began their advance in the wake of the Guards Brigade who were in action all day and captured 13 machine guns taking 1200 prisoners. They bivouaked for the night at La Doue

Cpl Tiesteel:-

To get on with the day we did turn on the enemy. We set off after having some food (by the way we had plenty of food owing to the company getting weaker, we were still drawing the absent ones rations)

We had only seen one German prisoner up to this day, but towards the evening when we were halted outside the church in Meaux, the priest came along with the sgt and 4 men of the Guards & went into the church. When they came out there were half a dozen German soldiers under arrest.

It was getting dark and raining slightly when we moved on.

Lt Sparrow

But if on this day there was too much caution in our handling, the first order we receive the following morning is of the opposite variety. We are to storm the line of the Marne at once, just as we are, without pontoons, boats, or even life-belts. Leaving the battalion under cover, the officers, with many adjurations not to show themselves, move forward to spy out the land. There's a convenient hedge ahead to which you make with a couple of friends, and look out from its shelter.

Before us lay the sort of position that makes a man draw in his lips wryly and say "Um!" or perhaps "Er!" It's funny - that's the only way to regard it on such occasions. At our feet, perhaps five hundred feet below, and looking broader than the Thames at Henley, flowed placidly the Marne. It was crossed by a single narrow, dead straight bridge at the far end of which was a sand-bagged and loopholed guard-post. Immediately on the far side of the bridge lay the small town of Château Thierry, and beyond it the country rose in a series of gentle undulations to a height exceeding that on which we stood.

The bridge itself brought back to you a picture of the long-haired young General Buonaparte storming the bridge of Arcola - or was it Lodi? - with uplifted sword, fevered eyes, and surging grenadiers behind him. But what he did - and you'd always understood it was something pretty desperate in the way of courage - was a fair picnic to the present undertaking. ("Keep behind cover, there," the second-in-command is shouting.) For, as far as you can see, there is no other way across except this bridge. Personally you've made up your mind you're going to try swimming. But how

many of your platoon would be good enough to get across with their rifles and ammunition? Half a dozen at the outside. Even that, though, would be a less forlorn hope than to struggle through the ghastly shambles there'd be on the bridge. Except for that guard-post, it all looks so peaceful, yet probably grey figures are lying behind every bit of cover, only waiting for our advance to open fire.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 8th Germans retiring, Rouse 5 am Breakfast 6. move at 6.30 & continued on the march until 9 PM & then had to spend the night on picquet.

Harry Wright

Tuesday 8th

Came up to firing line today. Guards captured 8 machine guns and about 200 prisoners.

Charly Sur Marne 9th September 1914

Starting at 05:00 on the 9th the Brigade advanced across the Marne at Charly-sur-Marne unopposed. There was much sign of pillage but the bridge had not been destroyed. According to officers from the King's Liverpool who had spoken to the inhabitants of Coprou, the Germans had got everything ready for defending the bridge and had then got hopelessly drunk and 50 of them had surrendered.

Lt Sparrow:-

It seems incredible we shall be ordered to attack such a position frontally. Yet there seems no doubt of it, for our guns have just started to open fire on Château Thierry itself.

The shrapnel bursts. A cloud of cavalry emerges from the top end, the figures spurring and goading their horses up the hill. Our shrapnel's already lengthening on to them. My... God! They're French!

Presently we are passing in column of route over the bridge. The sandbag barricade at the far end is beautifully made and finished off with loopholes. It's a perfect specimen of the art of the field engineer.

But over beyond, what a different scene! Château Thierry has been sacked, pillaged, looted. The furniture bundled outside the houses and the cellars emptied. Incredible piles of empty bottles, flung into the streets, are trustworthy enough witnesses of this. Last night, or the night before, there must have been a frantic carouse and orgy. Tables and chairs and bottles show how drinking-parties sat outside every house and drank till they could drink no more or there was no more to drink. You can imagine how they must have roared "Puppchen," or "Ach, der lieber Augustin, Augustin, Augustin," whilst periodically thunderous shouts of "Nach Paris!" shook the air and shaky hands wrote the words in chalk upon the doors. You can still hear the faint echoes of Homeric laughter over linen being fouled or women's under-clothing indecently displayed. In fact, here in this scene of pillage the Germans have left a faithful picture of all the piglike stupidity of which they are capable.

The 1st Battalion were detached from the Brigade to act as right flank guard and met slight opposition. They bivouacked at 1905 at Couprou.

Cpl Tiesteel:-

C Coy were on outpost duty the night before we crossed the

Marne. My God what a night. I believe the Battalion's other three companies were billeted in a large farm. It was a very dark, wet night & we were hungry, wet and fed up. I have no doubt Capt Bishop will remember that night. The hay ricks which we dare not touch and the field cooker which had been looking for us all night only to reach us in the early hours of the morning with the tea stone cold. Still we got something to fill the inner man, boiled bacon, bread and cheese. We were glad when we were withdrawn and joined up with the Battalion again.

What a sight we saw next morning. It appears that the Germans had dug themselves in across the fields and pulled the hay ricks down to lay on in the trenches during the previous night, never dreaming we were marching on top of him almost. I heard that at dawn our artillery were blowing him to bits at 700 yards range. We saw plenty of dead and wounded Germans laid out all along the road as we marched along.

We were in Reserve that day. I heard it was the Guards & the Artillery who had done the damage. They had taken plenty of prisoners & machine guns and ammunition.

We crossed the Marne with little difficulty, the only casualty I believe was RQMS Lapworth whom I did hear fell in. The REs had thrown a bridge across quite near the one the Germans had blown up.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 9th Rouse 2.30 AM. move about 5.30 just a drop of tea, no water, it being very scarce, covering rough ground all day, cross country, passed through Charly which had been in possession of the Germans for the last 6 days, & the Crown Prince reported having slept there the previous night; Town practically undamaged, but everything looted, inhabitants were still residing there, & we were fortunate in obtaining water & some fruit, marching until 8pm. half rations issued.

Harry Wright:-

Wednesday 9th

We are going out to meet the enemy this morning as advance guard to the Brigade. I wonder if our good fortune will continue today – please look end of note book, Harry.

Wednesday 9 [pm]

Slight brush with enemy today. Marching through woods most of time.

Hautesvesnes 10th September 1914

The 10th saw the Royal Berks in action again. they led the 6th Brigade with a section of the RHA and the 50th Battery of the RFA. at 0915 as they passed St Gungdulph they spotted a German transport column moving on Chezy on their left front. It was estimated as one battalion with 4 guns. The Berkshires pushed forward to the north of Hautevesnes with the artillery to the SW. The artillery came into action and almost immediately another German column was spotted moving northwards.

The Germans took up position in a sunken road and were supported by four guns north of Brumetz. The Berkshires advanced with the 1st KRR on their right and two companies of the South Staffords on their left. The direction of advance was towards St Gengoulph and by

11:00 the Germans were pinned down by the British artillery fire and about to be enveloped by the infantry. Four to five hundred of them surrendered, but some of the Germans had slipped away by Chezy only to be captured by the 3rd Division later.

Lt A T Syngé of the Kings Liverpools recalled:-

A column had been noticed travelling along a road parallel to us and had been taken for one of our own. Suddenly we discovered that it was German. The guns were hurriedly brought up and got the range at once

About eleven o'clock we were called up and saw the Germans were in a cutting about 1200 yards to our front. The whole brigade started advancing across the open towards them. At the bottom of the hill we got into dead ground, and forming up there we fixed bayonets and proceeded to advance up the forward slope. When we came over the top however we found that they had had enough and the remnants to the number of about 200 were all standing with their hands up and waving white flags. They seemed absolutely broken and only too glad to be taken prisoners and after some of the things I saw in the cutting I don't wonder at it. Our guns had just smashed the place to bits.

The position was captured at 12:45. When they were about to deploy for further action against the hostile artillery the battalion found themselves under heavy shell fire from the left. According to Capt Percy Hudson of the Kings Liverpool, This fire was coming not from the Germans, but from British artillery which was being misdirected. At the same time Capt Potter of the Kings Liverpool was shot through the ankles. At this point Major General CC Munro the GOC of 2nd Division passed by and reprimanded Potter severely for not standing up when he was addressing a General. Instead of continuing the action however the march continued at 16:45 and they reached Chevillan at 18:30 where they bivouaked.

In this action the Royal Berkshires lost one officer (Lt A H Perrott) and one man (9823 Pte P A King) killed and 23 wounded. Both the dead were buried in Oulchy le Chateau Churchyard. The battalion had captured 365 prisoners and 546 rifles. They buried 57 dead Germans.

Cpl Tiesteel:-

The following day we took part in the fighting and as well as having a number of men wounded, we lost our Adjutant, Lt A H Perrott. He was hit in the head by a piece of shell and although our MO Capt O'Keefe did all he could to save his life, he died where he fell. I remember seeing his body carried into the village where he was buried as we were marching out. We came to the slope and marched to attention as he was carried past us. Everyone in the Regiment felt his loss as he was a splendid officer and one of the best sportsmen of the Regiment.

Lt Sparrow recalls how his men fought a group of Germans and took many of them prisoner:-

We are marching at some speed with the two leading platoons deployed, for a message has just come in from the neighbouring French Fifth Army to say that fifty-six heavy guns are ahead, jammed on the road by masses of retreating transport. We, in a state of mingled eagerness

and trepidation, are going out for this prize, when almost simultaneously two things happen. The first is the sight of the scouting officer tumbling down the right-hand spur with the startling news that a column of German infantry is just over the far side, marching parallel to ourselves, and the second the sudden apparition of two German cyclists on the valley road only a hundred yards in front. Their approach has been masked by the spur, and they are as surprised to see us as we them. Even as our vanguard is flinging itself down to open fire, they bend over the handle-bars and pedal for life - ten yards - twenty yards - the first bullet smacks past them, thirty yards - the whole platoon is firing, forty yards - Go on, brave hearts, you'll win through! Forty-five yards they're off, all in a heap. Alas! Alas! But it was bound to be. My God! They've not been touched! They're a milestone and firing back, one on either side. By the Lord Harry, they're stout fellows, but did you ever see anything like the shooting of our men? For half a minute the unequal fight continued. Then, to our amazed admiration, the one on the right-hand side - as we looked at it - of the milestone jumped up and, standing sideways to us, semaphored to someone we couldn't see. Flick, flick, flick went his hands faster than we could read, his elbows never straight. Our men can't hit him, though there are forty, and they professional soldiers, firing. It's absurd, ridiculous. Their officer, who is standing up, is cursing them. "Look at you! Good shots, aren't you?" he jeers in mocking indignation.

The German is down. Has he hurled himself or been hurled by a bullet to the ground? You can't tell from the way he fell. But there is a sudden silence. Next minute the order comes to fall back to Haute Vesnes. You shake yourself out of the awe into which this short-lived drama has plunged you, turn your platoon about, and march back. As you enter the village, you look over your shoulder just in time to see a scurry of field-greys swarm up the opposing ridge and disappear half-way up into a sunken lane that climbs diagonally across its front.

Once more we deploy. Whatever the military reason of our withdrawal, there can be no doubt it was very sporting, for it has allowed the enemy to start fair. Both sides are now in position and commence an infantry fire at fifteen hundred yards. The bullets sigh their treacherous songs over our heads. The overture lasts a full hour nobody advances, and if we are waiting for superiority fire we shall stop here all day from the look of it. We're not hitting any more than they are, and after a while you order your platoon to cease fire, for to go on is merely to waste ammunition. You are sick of these dolorous whistles that terminate in such unexpectedly vicious smacks as the bullets hit the ground. But what, meanwhile, of the fifty-six guns?

At last, however, after what has seemed an interminable delay, one of our batteries opens and soon has its shrapnel bursting into the lane. You order your platoon to reopen fire.

A white flag appears. "Go on shooting, don't stop," for we hold that the German is as notoriously treacherous as the tiger, and whilst we feel no moral indignation about this characteristic, we are resolved not to be caught by his siren song of the white flag. A second white flag appears, then a third; in two or three minutes there are a dozen stuck up along his front. He stops firing; we continue; so, pulling down one or two, he resumes. "Cease fire," you order your men, for this long-range firing is useless, and they are still not shooting when the advance starts by rushes. The officer commanding the next platoon, which belongs to another battalion, curses you for not giving him covering fire. Very well, if he wants it, he can have it, though you feel certain it is quite useless. Now it is your turn to rush. On your way you pass two men of the next regiment who are on their hands and knees in a small hollow. You curse them and tell them to go on. They reply indignantly they've been hit. Have

they? It seems incredible, for the soft wail of the bullets is lost in the jangle of equipment of running men. But you suddenly realise your own men feel you a brute for going for these fellows and your mind is sharply illuminated by the knowledge that to them a wound, no matter how slight, terminates all moral obligation to go on. In a flash you grasp the truth that discipline cannot go farther than public opinion allows, and full of chagrin, uncertain whether the two men have made a tool of you, or you of yourself, you hurry your men forward. Line after line is rushing down the hill and collecting in the dead ground at the bottom. There have been no more casualties and, indeed, the Germans seem to have stopped firing. Reforming your platoon on the road, you are on the point of advancing straight forward up the bank when you become aware that the whole line is moving off to the right, evidently with the intention of taking the enemy in the flank. You follow, angry with yourself for not having thought of such a manoeuvre.

You wonder who did. You appreciate the unknown is a better tactician and feel vaguely jealous.

Presently the line forms half left with yourself somewhere in the centre, and the advance is resumed. Your heart is beating hard, for there will be a charge, and the thought fills you with dread. You'll have to lead and you neither want to be killed nor to kill anybody. Officers, you feel, shouldn't engage in the rough-and-tumble- that's for the men; theirs is the thinking part. But the men won't charge unless you charge too - you've seen enough already to realise that - and if you lead, will the men follow? In craven mistrust you fear the worst, and your heart goes thump, thump, thump with apprehension, but at the same time you are frightfully inquisitive to find out what a charge is really like.

But before the critical moment can come, there's a small plantation to be gone through; a few of them may be in that. Revolver in hand, you start to force your way through the thick undergrowth and brushwood, then, prig and poseur that you are, put it back in your holster and draw your sword instead. You do this because you want to show everybody what a well-schooled and careful shot you are - to carry a loaded revolver through such dense scrub really isn't safe, and you want everyone to see you appreciate the fact. However, if everybody is in the same plight as yourself, totally unable to keep open their eyes through these slashing and lashing twigs, for, try as you will, you haven't the will-power, your model action has probably passed unobserved. Head down, you burst your way through the far edge, look up in agonised apprehension and -

Glory! Glory! Alleluia! They're surrendering. They're crossing the odd hundred yards between ourselves and the lane, walking wisely. That is to say, their gait and gestures command us to control our excitement and withhold from massacre. Numerically far the weaker, yet at this moment their will is the stronger.

The sudden reaction from inner tension has left your mind in a state of limpid clarity. You rally your scattered platoon - as far as you can see you are about the only officer that does - and fall them into fours. Higher up the hill a large bunch of prisoners - perhaps a hundred - are being plundered by a disorderly mob of men, the Germans actually assisting their captors in their spoliation. With your formed platoon you drive off the looters and recover some of the public and private property, including a pair of exquisite little field-glasses - there were a lot of them about - which you annex for yourself. (Easy come is easy go - the R.A.M.C. stole them from you six weeks later.) Then, looking round for an officer of theirs, you perceive a tall sergeant-major of the Jaegers, and succeed in making him realise you want the prisoners fallen into fours. He gets them into line and gives the order. It is slackly obeyed, and then he lets fly. You and your men have the interesting experience of hearing a

Prussian sergeant-major really telling off his men. It is impressive, and although you know your own men don't know German any more than you, yet you are glad they are hearing this torrent of savage abuse. You hope somehow they'll apply it to themselves, for after all this Jaeger is saying no more than you would often like to say, and they must realise that. Is he calling them Bastards? "You can call your men anything except that," you had once been told, "for that goes home too often."

The reprimand's finished. An order: "Guttural-Gut!" Click-click of their heels, like guardsmen. "Quick march!" Yes, but where?

For, having got them on the move, you don't know what to do with them. In your exhilaration you'd forgotten all about those fifty-six guns. Of course the advance will be resumed instantly and your company will be where it was when the day started, in the van. And where will you be? In the rear, if you don't look out, guarding prisoners. You could kick yourself for your beastly officiousness, which as a just retribution will deprive you of the chance of honour.

But there was no need for apprehension. The advance is stopped for the day. We are all, victors and prisoners alike, to fall back to Haute Vesnes - the third time we shall have seen that blasted village this day. What were there on the slope when this order was received, perhaps five minutes after the surrender? Two battalions certainly, probably three. Yet nobody has given the order to fall in. They're swarming over the captured lane like a lot of sightseers. A disorderly mob of men, comparing and exchanging trophies and experiences, straggles down the hill, and in their midst are formed bunches of prisoners.

Disaster comes in the hollow. Shells scream and burst. Confusion reigns. Your own men are none too steady. But your German prisoners never look up; their nerves appear of iron as they march steadily through the fire, and your own men rally on them. The battalion adjutant passes, galloping to straighten confusion, gallops into a shell and is killed. But you don't see that, for you, to show that Englishmen can be equally cool, are talking to the fair sergeant-major, and he, threshing ears of wheat between his hands and eating the grain as he marches on, tells you in bad French that they have had no proper meal for three days, "et c'est trop." And whilst he is talking the shelling stops. It's been our own guns, a horse artillery battery on a flank, opening in error. Then one of your own men comes up. One of the prisoners, he says, has just told him that they'd expected us to advance straight ahead up the bank, thinking they meant to surrender, and then they were going to take us by surprise and fire rapid. Is it true? Can it be true? Had you really nearly led your men to disaster by wanting to go straight ahead? You don't know what to believe except that you'd nearly made a complete ass of yourself. "It's not a pleasant thought," as an instructor had said at Sandhurst, "to think that men might lose their lives through your inefficiency."

So into Haute Vesnes with your prisoners. The divisional commander is there, his hand on his grizzled jaw, ineffectively concealing the grin of delight that will come through. But you, when you see it, feel more like weeping. Does he really think we've done well?

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 10th Marne Rouse 2 a m, March 3 am, Advance Guard enemy encountered. In the firing line over 3 hours, (no trenches), enemy retired after showing white flags, advanced after them & came under Artillery fire from our 3rd Division by mistake, they having seen the prisoners which we captured our Batt taking about 100, our Brigade capturing about 800, sustained a badly bruised knee from shrapnel which dropped quite close, another lucky escape,

had a few casualties Our Adjutant (Lt Perrott) died from Wounds. retired back to a small village called Bussaries, & obtained water & fruit, & was fortunate to buy some envelopes, the Cookers appeared some time after & were greeted with cheers from the Batt, mid-day tea being served up soon after, a luxury we were not expecting that day, marched about 3 or 4 miles during the aftern0on & bivouaked the night.

Harry Wright

Thursday 10th

Just been in action with the enemy. Lasted about 3 hours. Adjutant killed. Can't say for certain how many we have lost but a good few. Sorry to have to write that we where fired upon by our own men by mistake in it we lost 4 killed and a good many w. That's as far as I know as I am writing this just after the engagement and there may be a good many more still lying out there oh what a war. (St Gengoulph) The Germans lost very heavily one position which was behind the rails of the railway was an awful sight about 300 k by our shell fire our artillery got the range nicely.

Cugny 11th September 1914

The advance continued at 05:00 reaching Cugny les Crouttes at 18:00 on the 11th.

Capt Hudson of the Kings Liverpools recalled:-

Monthusart Farm, where we found they were putting the whole of our brigade and a lot of gunners and two Generals, was 'awful'. Indeed we had to put the men into dog kennels, big places with yards. It poured incessantly and was an awful night. I went out to put outposts on the road and nearly got drowned by walking into a stream in flood.

Lt Sparrow:-

Yet, as one marches past these martyred houses, the impression slowly forms that this outrage on civilisation is not the product of genuine bestiality. Perhaps it was the admired sandbag barricade that lent support to this idea, but you suddenly realised the German had no inner centre. He was just a "bloody chameleon" reflecting in his actions what he thought he ought to be doing. For some extraordinary reason he had suddenly got it into his head that he was a mediaeval "Lanztrager," and nothing would satisfy him but that the ass must behave as he thought they had behaved. Every chuckle-headed idea he possessed on such subjects as virility, supermen, and Nordic stock had suddenly come to a head and urged him to live hard and drink deep. Hence this disgusting mess which met your eyes. Maybe it was a "cavalry night," or rather his idea of it. But it was just as likely he would see himself to-morrow as a strict Calvinist or a Teutonic knight carrying the gospel on the point of the lance. Anyhow, you could be perfectly certain he'd be behaving according to whatever he happened to think he was at the moment. But as he had no central core you couldn't possibly guess what that would be.

Why, if the troops were really as out of hand as the litter and refuse would indicate, would they have made such a job of the sandbag barricade? Or wouldn't we be seeing tokens of rout all the way up the long hill that we are now climbing? But what do we see? Half a dozen of their cumbrous iron lances, a couple of empty packs - how much more sensible they appear than ours - and an empty waggon. "Voilà tout!"

We are near the top now, and, leaving the road, the battalion, still in fours, proceeds straight across country. Presently we come up with and pass some French cavalry vedettes, huge men in rusty breastplates and brass helmets,

who appear to be propping up with their lances the weary, overloaded Rosinantes that they bestride. Most of those emaciated steeds must have been carrying at least sixteen stone of men, armour, and saddle-bags. Truly this race of peasants can be the worst horse-masters in God's creation. Their gun teams, when we saw them later, were just as bad. But one cannot get away from the fact that there is something very oriental about the Frenchmen. They have the same dual character as the Persian, who keeps his draught animals in beautiful condition and works his pack ponies till the back grows to the never-removed saddle or the hoofs drop off, or both.

Still in column of route, the battalion moves across country. The C.O. may know what he's about, but whatever is in his mind has not been imparted to the subalterns. We appear, however, to be doing advanced guard behind a cavalry screen, and it is only at the end of the day that we realise that the farthest advanced cavalry were those French vedettes we had seen hours before. For this battalion of ours has been wandering in fours right ahead of the rest of the Army, and it hasn't so much as smelt the slot of a Hun.

How or where we spent the night has passed out of memory, but early next morning we have debouched from Haute Vesnes and are moving on a country lane down a small valley that is shut in by two spurs. These spurs, which jut out from the Haute Vesnes ridge, descend to a larger valley along which a road runs. Beyond this valley the ground again rises in a fold parallel to the Haute Vesnes ridge. Thus the little re-entrant we are in runs, so to speak, across the grain of the countryside, and our view is shut in by the blinkers of the foothills on either side.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 11th Rouse 2.30 AM. marched all day, cold & dull in the morning, rained in torrents all the afternoon no Coats or waterproof sheets, so naturally got wet through, eventually turned into a field which was more of a mud pond, but was moved almost immediately by the Brigadier into Billets in a barn, packed like Sardines, but glad to get out of the rain, made fire outside, so were lucky enough to dry our clothes after a struggle & much waiting about.

Harry Wright

Friday 11th September 1914

Marching all day failed to come up with enemy. French engagement captured convoy 5 miles French losses 4,000.

Monthussart Farm 12th September 1914

They crossed the Vesle on the 12th. That night billets were at Monthussart Farm.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 12th Rouse 4.30 AM. March at 6 Bitter cold & rain, no mid day halt, & no rations until we turned into a field for same about 6.30 tea & rations issued, still raining, moved off again, & turned into a large farm about 8 pm & slept in wet clothes in a Cow shed, having to turn the Oxen out to obtain that shelter was thankful for same, no tobacco or Cigarettes among the troops. some reported on the Supply wagon, which is eagerly awaited. Roads Awful.

Harry Wright

Saturday 12.

Got wet through last night now about to go into action with the main body of enemy we have a fairly large force and working with French more about same afterwards if my

good fortune continues. [TX00883]

Viel d'Arcy 13th September 1914

On the 13th the brigade set out at 03:30 carrying their packs. They had to halt at Vieil Arcy until 04:30 whilst a pontoon bridge was constructed across the Aisne at Pont Arcy. The artillery and the brigades heavy battery were directed at the heights on the north bank of the river. At this point the weather broke and everyone was soaked through by torrential rain. As the temperature also dropped from great heat to bitter cold on one day there were great lamentations about the abandonment of greatcoats on Sept 4 in the heat during the retreat from Mons. They withdrew to billets at Viel d'Arcy via a very bad road at 18:45 having progressed about 2 miles in the day.

Pte Thomas Benson (8987) of Eastbury was killed on the 13th.

Cpl Tiesteel:-

We did not get in touch with the enemy until the following Sunday morning. We always seemed to be in for it on a Sunday.

Lt Sparrow:-

THE curtain of forgetfulness that falls sharply at the close of the last scene is lifted for one moment the next day. There's the white garden wall of a chateau and the wall is scarred. At its foot on the grass roadside are close on a dozen German wounded - caught by French artillery, rumour says - all stretcher cases except one, who has his head swathed in bandages that frame a helpful countenance and a cheerful smile. He is busy tending the wounded and, by Jove, he leaves a good impression.

That's all for the moment, but again the curtain rises and reveals night-time and the inside of a farm kitchen that is crowded with officers. Most of them are sitting round the bare table, listening to the black-bearded patron, who is telling of the Germans that have been there only the night before. You yourself are lying in front of the fire, turning yourself from time to time to dry and drinking rum, for you are soaked not only with rain, but also with the water of the farm pond, into which you have stepped in the dark. Consequently you don't hear what he is saying. You'd like to know. For the German is obsessing your thoughts. You cannot make out what this amazing creature is really like, and you are inquisitive to the last degree about him.

That is all of the day's march the quickly-dropped curtain allows you to see, yet somehow it must have left a deep impression on the mind, for later you had nightmare after nightmare and always you were fighting along the road you had traversed this day. You recognised it all right in your sleep.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 13th Rouse at 4 am Breakfast no more rations, move about 6 am still cold & looks like rain, marched about 4 miles, roads in a dreadful condition, then formed up in a field, Germans reported having blown up bridges to check our advance. We are to wait until same are repaired or pontoons thrown across the river to allow the Artillery to advance with Infantry. on short rations which we saved from the previous night, though we were all hungry enough to eat

it all last night, may be here all day, or may have to move any minute wind bitter cold & had no protection had one or two showers, managed to get a little straw to sit on, to save sitting on the wet ground, tea served to be up at 12, if we don't move first, Moved in the evening, marched about 2 miles & obtained billets, but was put on Outpost so did not have pleasure of billets

Harry Wright

Sunday 13th

We were victorious again yesterday and succeeded in driving the enemy about 20 miles towards their own frontier they are about boxed up now as they have to cross a river which is in flood and runs through a valley the French who are on the opposite side of the river are working with our big guns on this side and bombarding the enemy. They have been doing this for several hours now and must be working terrible havoc below. We are in a field under cover and waiting our turn. I don't fancy this army of the Kaisers will last much longer the prisoners seemed surprised when they were told that they were fighting practically everybody and thought that Germany was only fighting France and England and that Russia was on their side also. They have a horrible dread of the British army as they have always been told that Britain had a good navy but no army worth troubling about of course that's what they tell us. [TX00883]

La Metz Farm 14th September 1914

On the 14th the pontoon was completed and the brigade could advance once more. They had crossed the river by 0500 and moved on to Moussy on the other side of the Aisne canal where they found 5th Brigade holding a line from north of Verneuil, south westwards towards Soupir. They had been protecting the advance of the 6th brigade who now passed through and took the initiative. The Royal Berkshires held the centre of the advance with two companies of the 1st KRR on either flank. and the South Staffordshires in support.

They were heavily shelled from the heights above Braye as they moved up steep spurs and valleys towards the ridge carrying the road known as Chemin des Dames. On the right little progress could be made but at 1030 The Royal Berks were able to move up the valley of the Aisne et Oise Canal under strong artillery support and with their left protected by the KRRs. They had the Kings Liverpools on their right who had come in between them and the other KRRs who were pinned down on the Moussy spur.

The centre and left were able to make progress but the right remained pinned down but by noon the Royal Berkshires were at the foot of the spur leading down east to Braye and facing tiers of trenches which made further advance impossible. The Germans had counter-attacked on the right pushing back the KRRs to a line abreast of Beaune but with the assistance of the Worcesters from 5th Brigade they were able to hold on about half a mile in front of Moussy. They all began digging in overnight with the rain still pouring down.

The Berkshires had lost one officer (2nd Lt Reginald G B Perkins) and four men (7594 Sidney Bartlett of Wallingford, 8093 Pte George Carter of Cookham Dean, 9585 Pte J M Coleman and 9905 Pte William Kinchin of Reading) killed; two officers (Lt U S Hopkins and 2Lt TRD Wiggins) and 37 men wounded.

Cpl Tiesteel:

We, C Coy, were Battalion reserve the day we crossed the Aisne. We were marching along in fours in rear of the Battalion and along the canal when about 8 shells burst in the air about 100 yards in front of us. We very quickly made for the bank of the canal & extended along it.

After about 10 minutes the order came, *advance in sections in single file 10 paces interval*. Keeping well under cover of the canal bank we advanced about 100 yards when we got on to the road, turned to the left where Col Graham was giving orders to each party as they came up. It was just a few yards from the canal bridge & he sent us up a sunken road to the right to reinforce A Coy. Lt [Perkins] was killed here.

I remember passing Capt T C Hunt on the way & he directed us to extend to our left across a field where we got a good view of the shell holes which had just been made by the German shells. It was a very mixed firing line which we joined. It comprised some of A, B & C coys, also some Royal Engineers.

D Coy were I think, well away in advance of us on the right of the road & were trying hard, along with some other troops, to advance up a rather high piece of ground. We saw them make several attempts to gain this high ground but it seemed to us that the enemy's artillery fire was too strong for them.

Darkness came on and we were withdrawn by Lt E A B Orr who seemed to the writer, and a few others when we began to talk about the days doings, the coolest man seen in action so far. We rested in Metz Farm that night for a few hours.

Lt Sparrow:-

After one or two attempts to rise, the curtain goes up with a bang, literally with a bang, for from just over the hill came the sound of explosions deeper-toned than any we have heard hitherto. It is the morning of September 14th, a drab, sunless morning, and having crossed the Aisne some hours before we are halted under cover of the hill on which stands the little village of Moussy.

Our orders are quite clear. We are to billet in Braye, which is a village, as we can see from the difficult-to-read French maps that are all we've got, that nestles under the ridge of the Chemin des Dames. But the van has bumped into another enemy rearguard, and we are halted whilst a brigade of artillery gains superiority of fire. We anticipate another Haute Vesnes, though perhaps on a slightly larger scale, and the only thing in the slightest degree ominous is a warning by the C.O. that if we are shelled on our advance we are to push on, for, as he justly points out, it is much the safest course.

Immediately on our west hand lies the Oise-Aisne canal crossed by a small bridge at the large Ferme de Metz, and this is to be our right boundary. Beyond it is a country road running north and south, along which a few refugees are hastening.

After a cannonade of some duration we move down towards this bridge, and see for the first time shells exploding in enormous clouds of black smoke - eleven-inch, as we

afterwards learn. As we approach, a young woman dragging a child by each hand rushes out of the inn and with terrified countenance scurries down the road.

The first platoon doubles across the bridge. Its officer won't go far before he is desperately wounded. A second platoon follows. Then another. Soon it is your turn. You get across safely, shake out, deploy, and double your men somehow unharmed through the bursting shells. (our position is between the road and the canal, and mindful of the C.O.'s advice you double on without a halt until you come to a field of roots and there drop to get back your wind. There are still a few refugees on the road.

Bullets are coming from quarter left, long-range from the sound, but though you search with your glasses you cannot see a sign of a Hun. Their field-grey gives marvellous invisibility. But they can see you, that's very evident. You are carrying a large dark green rucksack bulging with a blanket, a ground-sheet, a sweater, and a mackintosh - for you believe in sleeping warm at night and you are hard fit. But it has this disadvantage. They can see it. It is only when you press yourself flat into the earth that the bullets cease to sing their song of death around you.

What are you to do? You can't lie here doing nothing. You give your men as a target some bushes four hundred yards away, and bid them set their sights at a thousand, hoping to spray the ground that conceals the enemy, but the measure is ineffective in keeping down the enemy fire.

Advance then with a rush! Down! Again! Down! Still no sight of an enemy, still this fire. You are on the crest of a small billow of ground. Fifty yards ahead the canal, bordered by leafy trees, turns left-handed and crosses your front. Advance by section rushes to the canal! Get on, Corporal, damn you!

You are on the edge of the canal, concealed by its border of trees. The Germans are no longer firing at you. In fact, their infantry seem to have ceased fire altogether. For the first time since the advance started you are able to look around undistracted by acute fear.

Just ahead of you, a large spur running down from the main ridge of the Chemin des Dames terminates on the canal. The road on your left crosses the canal at this point by a small bridge just wide enough for a waggon, and climbs the spur. In the exact centre of the canal are moored a long line of barges, and the exactitude of their alignment makes one immediately deduce Teutonic work.

Why have the enemy stopped firing? They must know we're here, and although they can't see through the leaves we are not likely to be in dead ground. You strongly suspect a trap. They are waiting for us to get on the bridge, and then they'll mow us down with machine-guns. A sergeant volunteers to try it, but you are so convinced of your correctness that you refuse to allow him. No, we'll swing one of the barges across. Within a minute of your arrival on the canal you have reached your decision, flung off your equipment, and are on the point of swarming along one of the mooring ropes to get into the barge when a fresh lot of men arrive on your left and without an instant's hesitation rush across the bridge. To your amazement not a shot is fired, so, putting your equipment on again, you follow with your platoon.

The armies of Ancient Greece always edged off to the right as they advanced, each man striving to get his exposed right side under his neighbour's shield. So you were taught at school, but perhaps there is some deeper cause than shields, for men always tend to edge that way in battle, even as the lot who've just crossed the bridge have now done. Anyhow they are now occupying your frontage, so there is nothing for it but to bring your platoon up on to their left. The crest of the spur now forms its right boundary, its

left descends into a dingle, wooded at the bottom, and is out of touch with anybody.

Indeed, it immediately becomes clear that this body of troops - four subalterns and about a hundred men of three different companies - are already well in front of the rest of the line. Not so far ahead a German field battery is firing rapid salvos which scream over and burst we don't know where. A good half-mile away on the Chemin des Dames a long trench can be clearly seen, deep dug, to judge from the amount of spoil earth. The troops on our right and left rear seem to be held up. The sound of heavy musketry rattles from the woods, but not a bullet has come our way. Are we about to be ambushed? The line comes to a nervous halt.

After a brief interval, however, it is set in motion again by the C.O., who appears with his adjutant from nowhere in particular, waves us on with both hands, and again disappears.

It is desperately exciting, this new advance into the unknown. The contour of the spur soon makes it impossible to observe what is happening in our rear, and trees conceal all movement on the left flank, just as the crest hides from you all movement on the right. The spur itself, covered with low trees and scrub, is shaped rather like the leg of a gentleman sitting in a chair with his foot stretched out. Just by the knee there are caves and a quarry, and somewhere close above it, on the lower part of the thigh, is concealed the battery, the report of whose guns sounds louder with every step we take, though we are in dead ground to it. We are well up the shin by this time, and only a few score yards away from the guns.

At the moment we are not so much afraid of the enemy as of the responsibility. We are afraid of making a mistake and being subsequently blamed. And, when all is said and done, the situation is so unusual, to say the least of it, that it's hard to know what is the right course. The infantry both on our right and on our left are heavily engaged and seem completely stuck, but here are we advancing without a soul to oppose us into the very heart of the enemy position. We are out of touch with everybody. The nearest force to us is this enemy battery, which surely must have an infantry escort. Ten minutes ago there were certainly infantry opposing us. Where have they gone?

And not only this. Field Service Regulations hang over us like a thundercloud, cautioning advance guards against committing the main body. Aren't we in danger of doing this if we go on and try to take the battery? Doubt overshadows us all. Just by the caves, where there are a number of artillery telephone lines that an N.C.O. cuts, the right of the line comes to a halt, and you perforce follow suit with your platoon.

With your field-glasses you examine the long trench on the Chemin des Dames. Not the smallest sign of life can you detect in it. If it were not for the utter improbability of it, you would be prepared to swear that it was empty. You look back. So far as you can see, the battlefield behind is stagnant, will-less, lacking all drive and force. But this does not disturb you greatly, for you still have the uttermost faith in the Brigadier. You hold, and to-day you hold still more strongly, that he was the finest trainer of troops since Sir John Moore. You have the uttermost confidence that his master mind will soon be making itself felt. So to pass the time you open a tin of bully beef and eat a biscuit or two. You are the junior subaltern on the spur and have no cause to worry yourself about higher tactics.

The biscuits finished, you walk across to have a chat with the senior subaltern. "Is there anything in front of us?" you ask. To your surprise he answers: "Blank (another subaltern) has just patrolled, all round the battery." You look at

Blank in incredulous admiration, and he nods in confirmation. This news clears the air. You are sure we ought to go on, and are just about to tell your superior officer so when a tremendous burst of musketry breaks out in the woods a mile or so to the left. "It's the Guards." You scuttle back to your platoon, anticipating instant orders for a concerted effort.

"It's the Guards." The news spreads like wildfire amongst the men, bringing them confidence, but also - you can sense it - a relaxation of will-effort. The Guards will do the work, so therefore they themselves will not have to do it. That's their manner of thinking. It will no longer be so easy to get the men to move when the time comes.

The musketry fire on the left is now tremendous and awe-inspiring, but hour after hour passes and still the sound remains stationary. The Guards are making no headway. But, what is even worse from your immediate point of view, a few snipers, or rather their bullets, begin to show up. The battle behind is still utterly stagnant. Fight against it as you will, for your original elan has long ago departed, you are reluctantly becoming convinced that something will have to be done here, where you are, on the spur. Moodily you eat the rest of the bully beef, for you have finished the biscuits, and in consequence of the unadulterated meat begin to feel rather sick.

Yes, you will go and see the senior subaltern and tell him what you think. Three or four hours ago you walked. This time the snipers make it a crawling matter, nor have you gone far before a bullet that must have been a very near call cracks past your ear. Down you flop, and after a while move back whence you came to consider the matter afresh. Duty prompts you to take the initiative, brush these snipers aside - there aren't half a dozen all told, you're pretty sure - and take the battery by a flank attack. But it's a case of first man up will be shot. If you could make sure the men would only rise simultaneously with you on your word of command, you'd risk it. But will they in cold blood? You doubt it. It'll be you that will go. Ten to one on it.

For long you consider the proposition. In the intense state of self-centredness that this inner struggle creates, you cease to have the slightest reliance on anybody else. So concentrated are you on yourself that it never occurs to you that you may be wrong in your estimate of the others. You and you alone perceive the situation, you and you alone have the initiative, you and you alone have the physical guts to do it. Have you? That's the point - have you? Have you the power to execute this act of self-sacrifice which may be useless, for if you are killed at once the men may not go forward; which may be against orders, which may be militarily unsound? Have you the inner power to perform this act at the bidding of an opinion, an instinct, and at the highest an intuition.

You hesitate, hesitate, hesitate - doubtful, doubtful, doubtful. You don't know what you'll do. Ten black devils chant: "You'll be killed." Ten red devils curl their lips and sneer: "You're afraid of being killed." What will you do? One way or the other you must make the choice, now, at once, instantly. What's that? A shout: "Retire!"

The men jump up - how quick they always are to obey that order - and begin to run. "Walk, damn you, walk," you storm, and they walk. And not a shot is fired. Only the battery triumphantly increases its rate of fire. And so to the little bridge.

You've got your platoon in hand, but the others are going like a mob, walking down the towpath as if they never intended to stop until they had re-crossed the Aisne. You double to head them off, but, as you reach the end of the line, you find it's being done by the second-in-command,

who is turning the men across the fields. We take up a new position with a field of fire of only thirty yards. So much have we learnt already of the stopping power of modern musketry! As you are crossing the field, you look up at the abandoned position in time to see two figures in great coats dropping down into the quarry - the first Germans you have seen all day.

You are in the new position. Shrapnel bursts clanging overhead, flashing red, for twilight is falling. A voice comes from one of the men: "May we go back, sir?" "Of course not," you answer sharply. This won't do. What's to be done? This time your bowels and the bully beef give an imperative decision. You must go forward and do it there - the same as your great-great-uncle did at Talavera.

Darkness falls. We spend the night scraping out trenches with our little entrenching tools. There's always the problem on such occasions of deciding whom you shall make dig a place for yourself. " Chacun pour soi est une mauvaise devise," as is put in Prendergast's sentences. The men loathe being diverted from their own safety to attend to that of the officer, and God knows you can hardly blame them.

Note. Fifteen years later I heard for the first time that the senior subaltern had received an order to halt, though I do not know from whom it initiated.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 14th Nearly cold tea brought to us on Outpost, no rations, Move at 4 am raining hard all the morning, Marched about 6 miles & advanced on the enemy, under Artillery & Rifle fire for over 4 hours, took up a line of defence after retiring about a mile, exceedingly fortunate in getting back, we having advanced too far, & were within about 200 yards of the enemy, & were under Artillery & Rifle fire our Troops from the rear) & machine gun & Rifle fire from the enemy in front, several of our Coy afterwards reported missing Sergt Hughes my Platoon Sgt was among those captured, he having been sent on the other side of the hill to reconnoitre. Our Coy being billeted in a barn for the night after darkness had fallen.

Harry Wright wrote a more detailed account of their arrival at Le Metz Farm when he was on his way to England in October:

To talk about the first day the enemy showed their teeth at us it was Monday 19th September [actually 14th Sept] when in the early morning we left the village of Moussy and proceeded to Le Metz Farm speaking of we I mean the Regt. Well now, one thing I am going to write which always struck me as peculiar my Company "B" was always pushed to the front or the rear which ever it might have been when there was trouble about and we saw more fighting than any other Company in the Regt. Now this isn't any brag and I might say now and for always that what I've written has been so impressed upon my mind to lie there for the rest of my life in anything I may or will write of myself or what part I have taken in any actions. Where my personal courage was concerned I might say this when a soldier gets an order to do anything whether its to advance or to retire, or to walk through some misunderstanding to certain death you've got to do it, my motto has always been look after No 1 and when I have been sent anywhere I have used my own common sense and if I with several others are advancing over open country I make it my business to get all the cover I possibly can for myself and I shout at the men on my right and left and make them keep their proper distance as men like animals like in time of danger to keep together, and I've noticed myself when you get in a group you will always draw the fire upon yourself. That's only sense now we will get back to where we started.

Well the Battalion reached the farm and got under cover of the walls of the farmyard or house not without a few being hit with the shrapnel which had been playing around since we left the village. The C.O. then ordered my company to advance through the farm yard and out into a field which approached the enemy positions one section at a time in open order which is about 5 yards between each man. One section was in front of mine and then we followed at about 100 yards in rear. When we got through the yard it was like watching a firework display shells burst in hundreds all about us tearing holes you could bury 2 horses in easily. Still, we kept going losing a man here and there but not losing very many.

We advanced about 30 yards then fell flat down. It was no good us opening fire yet, we were too far away from them. After we had a blow we went on again taking advantage of any rise in the ground affording cover until we came to a field of mangles which was all in the open then we saw the enemy and opened fire on them. I began to feel a lot better then I don't mind saying that I did feel a bit shaky but it was raining like the devil so perhaps that made me shiver a bit. We'll let it go at that anyway.

I suppose we stopped in those mangles for about half an hour then poor me and half a dozen on my right hand had to make tracks for a canal which ran along our extreme right. Here we joined some other company of the Regt. leaving my own company up in the mangles. It was going across to these that we lost Lieut Wiggins and two men out of the seven that went with me. Well, we got to the canal and was shielded for a little while by an high bank then we crossed over by a lock and attacked the enemy through a wood.

After about an hours hard work we got to within fifty yards from their machine guns and thought we were having it all our own way when the enemy suddenly sprung up in thousands. They had been having a fine game with us. Fortunately our own artillery who had up to this time remained practically silent opened fire causing fearful havoc among them. Well, we had to fall back and they didn't forget to shell us or at least they tried to. I'll wager they had over 30 guns playing upon my party about 200 men. We had to retire about 200 yards down hill to a roadway affording a little cover, here we waited for reinforcements for about an hour. Then we advanced again and we hopped into it this time and had to again retire this time through a wood.

We got back to the mangles near ricks and waiting until it got dark then entrenched ourselves, it was in these trenches we remained eight days taking it in turns to find a picket 1 section 12 men and one NCO on the canal bridge as the bridge was on the level and in the open we had to always wait until dark before relieving one another. It was here that called for personal courage and we lost a good many men in the first week. The idea of this picket was to give warning to the battalion of any attacking from the enemy, you see the only way of crossing was by the bridge unless of course they built pontoons or temporary bridged the canal which was far too risky as it was all in the open and our field guns had the range we could have blown the bridges up of course but we meant to advance over that way sooner or later and they no doubt left them for the same purpose. [TX00884]

The death of Lt Perkins was reported later in the China Dragon:-

Born at Aldershot on the 20th May, 1892, son of the late Capt. C. G. and

Mrs. Gabriel Perkins, educated at Bath College, 1901-1909, where he won two scholarships and his "cap" in the 1st Rugby XV., and at the R.M.C., Sandhurst, 1910-11.

Joined 1st Battalion Royal Berks Regiment in 1911 at Dover. Rugby Football was always his best game, and as a three-quarter he played for the Regiment, the Berkshire Wanderers, the Aldershot Command, and once for Surrey.

He was signalling officer to the Regiment. When the Regiment went to the front in August, 1914, he was left in charge of the first draft of reinforcements, leaving with them for France on August 21st, 1914. He was mortally wounded while leading his men at the Battle of the Aisne on September 14th, 1914. He was removed from the field still breathing and laid in a barn, but he never regained consciousness and died the same day, and was buried in the French lines. [TX01591]

15th September 1914

The line of trench warfare had just about been settled. For four more years the British and the Germans were to face each other roughly where they had reached in September 1914. Battalion HQ was established at La Metz Farm and was hit on at least two occasions by the heavy shelling which continued all day on the 15th. On the left the two companies of the KRRs had joined up with the Guards Brigade who were slowly advancing. The Berkshires suffered One officer (2Lt APJ Hibbert) and 2 men (7949 Pte Ernest Baigent of Windlesham and 9942 Pte Henry Barry of London) killed and 8 men wounded.

They were not able to evacuate the wounded at first and

had to improve the trenches when it got dark. The rain continued to be torrential and the work was hard. They established a telephone connection to Brigade HQ in Moussy. Lt Perkins was buried after dark with a short ceremony conducted by the Rev Thorogold. At 21:00 they again came under heavy fire from the left. 2Lt Moore fell sick and went to base. At 23:20 officer reinforcements arrived from 3rd Bn in the form of Capt O Steele, 2nd Lt W Suckling, 2Lt C Beatty, 2Lt R G Gregson-Ellis and 2Lt B F M Warner. They were accompanied by 4 ORs as servants.

Cpl Tiesteel:-

We were up and marching out to take up position long before dawn.

Capt Birt DSO was in charge of our Coy and we held what was called The Quarries. We were in touch on our left with the 1st/60th KRRs who were holding Rifle Hill. Major Finch was with us and under his wonderful leadership, things went on alright

We did not move about by day but plenty of digging and work at night. The Germans were also working at night and we could hear his carts and NCOs very clear every night.

Lt Sparrow:-

Early in the morning the company is withdrawn into reserve behind Metz Farm.

He goes on to describe his feelings at the death of 2Lt Reginald Perkins:-

It would be midday before you woke in your bivouac behind the Ferme de Metz. After you have shaved, you go across



to join the other officers of the company, who are sitting under an apple-tree on the roadside. The senior subaltern, he who was on the spur yesterday, remarks after a while: "I didn't know Reginald had been so badly wounded." Now Reginald is your greatest friend, and you and he have for the past three years explored life together like David and Jonathan. You'd heard last night that he'd been wounded, and with a sudden pang of guilt you realise that you have pushed him out of your mind. Wonderful, perspicacious Reginald with his plain face. Only at the beginning of July had he betted you we'd be at war in a month, and you, not daring to trust such grand optimism, had taken him. He'd lost by three days and you'd let him off. All this flashes through your mind as you lightly chime in with: "Yes, I know he's pretty bad." The senior subaltern looks at you curiously. "You know he's dead," he says.

"Dead!" You're half-stunned, and stagger to your feet. Words will hardly come, but somehow you manage to ask where he is, and grope your dazed way to the cellars of the Ferme de Metz. Here in the first one are a group of wounded. Peppery little Sergeant Hickson, who had put you through the square, is there, shot through the stomach. He lies covered with a blanket, dying, though you don't know it. Indeed, all you think at the time is that he's extraordinarily stupid in understanding what you ask. Where is Mr. Reginald's body? That's all you want to know, A voice comes from behind - another of the wounded is speaking - the body is in the next cellar, and you pass under the stone archway with Sergeant Hickson's eyes mournfully following you as you depart. The next cellar is darker, but you can make out something covered with a blanket. Gingerly you pull it back and there is Reginald's well-loved yellow face, yellower than ever in death.

Hastily you put it back. All you know is you've got to be alone, alone, away from everybody, or you'll burst. You stagger across the midden and, led by some blind instinct, plunge into the farmhouse. There's a bedroom on the ground floor, the contents of the cupboards strewn all about. You throw yourself face downwards on the bed, and then your whole body feels as if it were being rent asunder. You want to cry, but the tears won't come and he physical anguish can find no safety-valve.

They are shelling the farm ere you leave. But before departing you search the litter on the floor for something to read. There's a pamphlet on the *Sacré Cœur*, the symbol that you've seen on so many houses, and for want of something better you take that. But it gives no comfort. It reads like the work of a pious prig out to 'suck up' to the Pope.

Then you resolve to hate - to hate the Germans who have killed your friend. But by the end of the day you realise that the cock won't fight. You haven't got the capacity to hate, and after what you have been through you feel you will never again have the capacity to love. Henceforth there will be nothing for you but a blind instinct that forces you to serve your country and yourself. God is your country, patriotism your religion, and those that do not feel so deeply as you are backsliders, incomprehensible and unsympathetic. Henceforth no Puritan bigot had ever a keener nose for backsliding. You are always on the look-out for it, always detecting it, and yet whenever you find it you are frightened, for it is something utterly incomprehensible, and like a savage you fear the Unknown. But, on the other hand, you love as a brother those in whom you fancy you detect the same trait of fanatical patriotism, and, because a soldier sees chiefly the boldest of the enemy, the Germans begin to become your model. You cannot understand those who run them down, for the virtue of their patriotism that you encounter outweighs in your eyes all their faults. You respected Reginald's power of independent judgment. But

now he's gone. Never more will you and he be able to sit in companionship the whole evening, helping yourself periodically from the tin of Carlyle tobacco, and accepting the picture on it of Carlyle. and Emerson smoking in contented taciturnity as the model of true friendship. All of that is finished for ever, and with it the last influence that might have given you a fundamental humanity. Henceforth your bigotry can only be checked by an undue sensitiveness to popularity and by snobbery. Life is the service of patriotism, and Death - what is Death? Why does a bullet kill? What happens in that instant transition from life to death? You are beset with curiosity and the knowledge that Death will gratify it robs Death of its terror. As long as you are at a distance, you are ready to volunteer for any forlorn hope. Far greater than the fear of Death is the fear of being taken prisoner and above all the fear of torture. For you quite believe the German is capable of that in order to extract information. Ever since you can remember, the dread of torture has never been far from you. So strong is it that sometimes you wonder quite seriously if there is not such a thing as reincarnation and if your fear is not some dim memory of how you ended your last life. Death, you feel, is as nothing compared to torture, until one night you suddenly look into its face and realise it is.

Lt Sparrow then recalls what it felt like to confront death while on patrol:-

It happened in this way. You had been out on patrol three nights running. The staff are convinced the Germans are about to retire, and we have to keep in touch with them. Each night you get bolder. The first night is a very ramshackle and nervous affair, and you only get as far as the canal a quarter of a mile in front. You realise your men are quite useless for this work, and the only way you can use them is as a supporting point, bringing them forward by a series of bounds a hundred yards at a time, after you have been over the ground in front. The only thing of interest you discover is a series of straw bivouacs and so many sods cut and arranged for fireplaces along a lane that it is clear a whole battalion has bivouacked at this point. The following night you cross the canal by a bridge on the left front of your company and proceed along the far side until you can return by the bridge you crossed during the attack. In the low ground on the left a large bonfire glows.

On the third night you go out to investigate this bonfire, cross the canal by the first bridge and, having proceeded for a further quarter of a mile, must be well within the heart of the German position, when one of your men develops an attack of nervous coughing, and there is nothing for it but to hurry back as fast as you can. Again you return by the right-hand bridge for fear lest the enemy have marked down the cough and are lying in wait to cut you off.

The following day you turn over in your mind a project of swimming down the canal and seeing if you can get any information that way. The snag to the scheme is that you don't know the German language, so that, though you would probably be able to get into a position to overhear, you wouldn't know what they were saying. You decide, therefore, to put away the idea for the moment, and to make another attempt to get to the bonfire, which is quite dearly the centre of a bivouac. So again you set off in the dark with three specially selected men, and, moving fast, for you know the country now like the back of your hand, soon reach the left-hand bridge. It has been raining that day, and you remember stepping into a puddle as you go across. The sky is Overcast and it is absolutely pitch-black. At the far end you halt, as you always do, and, revolver in hand, listen.

You can see nothing, you can hear nothing. You move your right foot forward to go on, but before it has touched the

ground you draw it back.

There's danger!

God knows what warned you. For you can see nothing and you can hear nothing except the breathing of your three men close behind. Again you peer all round into the blackness. There is Nothing, Nothing, Noth. . . . What is that on your left hand? And a moment later - Is he English or German? For it is a man all right, grey against a black bush, flat-capped. And he is a bare yard from you. Is it a patrol from the next battalion, or is it an enemy? You can't tell. You peer and peer; your eyes strain into the darkness and gradually discern two or three - you can't be sure how many - flat-capped men behind, and there is a bayonet within a foot of your chest.

You are absolutely sick with fright. You don't know what to do. You daren't fire lest they be English, yet not to fire is to risk that bayonet in your chest. Are they English? Are they German? Are they English? Are they German? The scales tremble, equally balanced.

Meanwhile your men behind have seen nothing except you craning into the dark, and they stand stock still, and all things are as timeless as Eternity.

For no reason in particular, the scales slowly tilt. They are Germans! Death seems certain. There's one craven hope. "If," you say to yourself, "I only fire at his side to wound, perhaps he'll be merciful and only wound me." The hand holding your revolver moves ever so little to take aim at his side.

A gasp from one of the rearmost figures snaps the tension. In an instant the three or four turn to their left and bolt. "Halt! Who goes there?" you yell, cursing yourself at the same instant for your fatuity in challenging, and simultaneously letting fly with your revolver. But, being still actuated by your former humane intentions of only wounding, you miss, though the one you aim at is only a yard away. It is French ammunition - we had had to throw ours away as it was flat-nosed - and the explosion shines like a Very light. In fact, pulling yourself together, you take aim by it, and in the instant glow of the second explosion you see a flying figure stumble.

"Back! Back!" you shout, and with your men you race across the bridge, pursued by a storm of bullets from a picquet. On the far side you fling yourselves down, and then you remember about getting an identification. Should you go back to the man you've killed, if you have killed one? But the men say "No!" They've had enough for one night, and so for that matter have you.

You get back to your trench and pour yourself out a good half mugful of rum - for there is plenty about and it has been maturing since the South African War - and drink it neat. But for months afterwards you sweated at the very thought of this encounter.

It is only the next day that you realise that the real nobility and spirit of the war has been lost to you. For you have killed a man, and through so doing have coarsened and degraded something in yourself. At first you don't speak about it, or else you say you think you missed also with the second shot, but later on you find yourself bragging that you got one. But this stage is not reached till many moons have passed, for it takes time for the germs of decay to accumulate.

We are relieved for one night by the Guards, and they report the repulse of a heavy night attack. But when you go out on patrol the following night, there are no signs of corpses amidst the stooks of corn. Are they, too, like other men? The thought trembles in the shadow of the mind, not daring to show its repulsive form to the light. The two little

bridges, you notice, are barricaded by farm implements, a waggon on the one and a horse rake on the other. During the past few days the Germans have bombarded the barges and sunk the lot. With every day's passing the lines get stronger. Even we have got a little trip wire up at last.

There's continual patrol work by day and night. Blank, he who had gone round the battery, looks up to see a German firing at him, ducks, and the bullet passes between his skin and his spine. Poor Irish Blank, he had been so certain that he was never going to be touched, and it's a great shock to him, and although he stoutly vows that six Germans shall die for it, he is sad and depressed when you see him in England later. He was killed soon after going out again. Your platoon sergeant takes out a patrol. Perhaps it was on the day you had sat on a court-martial trying men for self-inflicted wounds. Anyhow, you are in a savagely disillusioned mood and you give a bitter warning to the men as to what you'll do to them if they let the sergeant down. What you said must have been pretty stinging, because one of the men remarks: "You needn't say that to us, sir." Nevertheless, half-an-hour later the men are back and the sergeant isn't. He's wounded and a prisoner. You say nothing to the men. Bitter, contemptuous silence will hurt them more. But to the cold morning mist you cry: "Never, never shall I be a Socialist!" and you vow to reorganise your platoon on the first opportunity.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 15th Moved at 3.30 AM. & dug head cover from Artillery fire in a mangel field close to Metz Farm, tea before starting, rations issued after completing trenches, remained in the same position all day, advanced 1 mile at night under cover of darkness to relieve "B" Coy in front line trenches.

Harry Wright continued:-

The first night my Coy found this picket and was surprised by the enemy. They i.e. our people foolishly retired running back in close formation along the road. 13 started 4 reached us in the trenches 7 killed 2 badly wounded. They had no right to retire and the officer in charge raved a bit and sent another section taking me this time with Sergeant Crump in charge. We were also joined by another party from "D" Company I don't mind saying I didn't like it and when we came upon a dead body every now and again I certainly began to get shaky not that I was afraid but I don't care about working in a body or under any other NCO on these kind of games. I like to be on my own, to use my own brains in a tight corner as it was in this case I had to do as I was told, we marched all of a heap that's sections of fours about 20 of us the distance from the bridge to trenches between 4 or 5 hundred yards. When we got half way we came across the two wounded chaps one had a bullet wound in the shoulder and in the joint of the knee one hit in the seat the bullet going right through and out of the groin we sent them back with two men then walked slowly down to within 100 yards of bridge. Here we halted and laid down. Then L/C Hancock and myself crawled along until we got to the bridge. We could not see anyone our side of the river and it was too dark to see over the other side so we kept still for a few minutes. Hancock wanted to go over to the other side but I didn't like the idea. Anyway, after we had groused at one another under our breath he was for going over so although everything was quiet and I funked it not a little and was all of a tremble. He told me afterwards he was the same. We started to go over we got to the centre of the bridge very nicely then my hair stood on end for we could hear someone talking and then we started to crawl back steady inch by inch rifle to the front my bayonet scabbard kept getting under my knee and every noise was a nightmare. I reckon that German sentry was asleep for we got back quite close to the party behind before they knew

we were anywhere near them. One of our chaps challenged us at the top of his voice "Halt - who goes there" enough to wake the dead up and made me jump about a foot of course they knew then that someone was in front and kept sniping all night. Fortunately no-one was hit and we were relieved in the morning. We found out afterwards that the enemy were entrenched the other side of the bridge about 800 of them. The Kings Liverpool Regiment drove them out next day but were themselves forced to retire afterwards. [TX00884]

16th September 1914

The 16th dawned very misty which was followed by yet more rain. The rain cleared at 10:00 but the Germans on the high ground were very active and the Battalion were subjected to incessant and heavy shell fire. Mail arrived which cheered everyone up but there was no hot food, only lukewarm tea, bully, jam, water, cheese and bread.. Trenches were again improved but the wire to Brigade HQ was cut time and time again. C Coy were moved to a wood to connect with the 1st KRR. Pte William Smith (7002) was killed and 10 wounded.

It was at this point that Private George Ward (9641) was spotted leaving his post. It was to lead to his being executed on the 26th.

Lt Sparrow:-

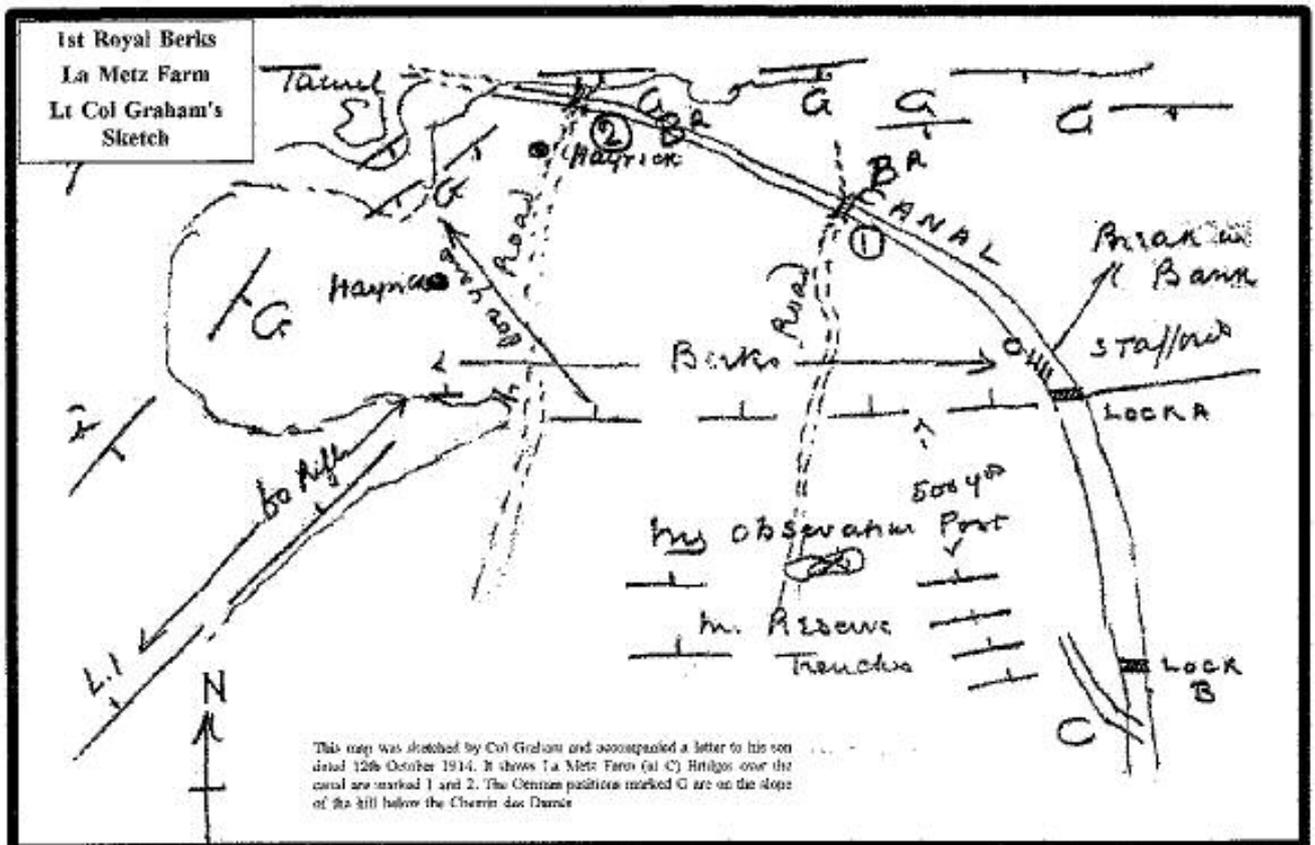
But first there were letters to be opened and newspapers to read. Here is the first authentic news of the Marne; we study it eagerly. The second-in-command pores over the D.T. and then looks up and says in tones that still contain

an element of scepticism "Joffre really does seem to think he's won a big victory." It is after mess and the candlelight throws strange shadows on his prominent features. It was here, too, that the first air bomb fell, made out of an old tomato can with a queer little propeller attachment. It went off like a damp squirt. We drill and train all day. A draft from the militia arrive equipped with the old-pattern grey great-coat. We absorb them easily, for we are beginning to realise the meaning of the phrase 'seasoned troops' When the battalion marches back to the Aisne, it is at the quick step. The discipline of Aldershot is back once more. But yet it is no longer the same. . . . Grim, conscious will has supplanted dreamy spirit, and holds the battalion in its firm grip. Instead of the regimental spirit, it would be more accurate to speak henceforth of the regimental will. For we no longer rely on unknown forces, but upon what we know ourselves. Left! Left! Left, right, left!

Of course the newly arrived battalion hasn't done a hand's turn of work on the trenches. But we don't much mind. We feel so strong in ourselves that we can afford to be tolerant to weakness. "Never," you boast to the morning mist, "will I funk again at hunting!" To think that you could think that you wouldn't!

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 16th No tea, rations issued while still dark, remained in the same trenches for over a week without tea, or anything warm to eat or drink, water being fetched from Metz Farm in rear of trenches & rations issued under cover of darkness each night, not allowed to move at all during the day under Heavy Artillery Fire the whole time, Rained every day or night wet through practically all the time, lying in water in the trenches, nights being cold, No Great Coat, Cardigan or Waterproof sheet, being nearly frozen at times & losing all feeling in feet. Aircraft constantly flying overhead locating our positions. remained in the same position until relieved at 1.20 AM on Sept 22nd



Harry Wright

It was here I lost an old chum of mine Private King, [7707 Alfred William King kia 16/9/14] one of the "coalboxes" large shell 120 lbs burst in our trench killing four and wounded 20 more. I can tell you we were a happy party at this time it didn't matter where you got to you had to be prepared to meet death or some other less punishment. Another death trap we had to run the gauntlet for was getting water. That could only be done at night and after a bit it got too dangerous to go at all. You see, we were being fired at all day and when anyone showed their head above the trench you got a volley of rifle and shrapnel fire so we used to wait until after dark and send two men with about 30 bottles down to the farmyard where, strange to say, although the house and farm buildings were burning and practically raised to the ground the pump in the centre of the yard was left untouched. If you have ever noticed anyone walking towards a light on a dark night you can understand that you could see anyone walking into that farmyard with all the sheds ablaze a mile off so after we had lost two men and a lot of bottles we had to give the farm up and get water from the canal beautiful water full of dead horses and Germans that gave a lot of chaps dysentery so we had to burrow through a large bank along at one end of the trench and let the water filter through into a large biscuit tin. We lost a good many men getting rations up into those trenches but when the stomach pinches you will do anything so we always had plenty of volunteers to fetch the grub up. Still, we were a sorry lot when we did get relieved what wasn't sick was pretty well scared to death and you couldn't blame them either. Its bound to get on your nerves sooner or later and we were all itchy-coo. When the sun came out the livestock in your shirt had point to point races and football matches.

17th September 1914

Shellfire was unabated on the 17th and 5 ORs were wounded.

The following item from Cpl Tiesteel cannot be dated accurately, but occurred somewhere about this time.

One incident I remember quite well, happened one afternoon about 4 pm.

About 500 yards to our front were three hay ricks & we had noticed the enemy cross from one to ther other, then disappear behind a rise in the ground. We of course reported this but got orders not to fire, so that we should not give our position away. Then along came a tall smart officer of the 1st/60th. *Had a shot at them yet Corporal?* said he. *No sir* said I *We are not allowed to fire unless we get orders.* A few yards away stood Major Finch. He came up and had a few words with the officer of the 60th & together they lay down by me, took my rifle and another man's and had alternate shots at these Germans who were crossing from haystack to haystack. They fired five rounds each and between them got six hits. The name of the officer of the 1st/60th was His Royal Highness Prince Henry of Battenburg.

18th September 1914

The Germans launched a light attack at 20:30 on the 18th and the shellfire continued together with the awful weather. The day was fine and more mail arrived but it got very wet again at night. Pte Albert Evans (9678) of Bitterne was killed.

Harry Wright

We had two more night jobs at this bridge but I never had the pleasure of getting the other side. On one occasion [18th Sept] we got to within one hundred yards and after giving them three rounds rapid retired. At another time when they were driven back further and we had entrenched the picket about 50 yards this side and stopped there all day in turn of course sometimes not seeing any of the enemy all day except occasional snipers we had a little fancy shooting all to ourselves. It was just getting dark between the lights when Private Bates a chap I knew in India spotted three of the enemy standing upon the skyline about 500 yards from us calmly smoking, we decided to have a go at them Bates and I. We took good aim and plenty of time both fired together one chap fell straight down one must have got away. The other started waving a white handkerchief he was evidently badly hit for whether he was afraid to go back or wanted to end his sufferings we didn't know for he shot himself as we distinctly heard the report and saw him roll over. We were not fired upon.

19th September 1914

On the 19th patrols were sent out but did not draw fire. 7 ORs were killed (Pte Charles Hillier (7604) of Bradfield, Pte William Jones (8596) of Paddington, Pte Edward Marriott (9757), Pte Herbert Milsom (9933) of Reading, Pte Charles Napper (9863) of Staines, Pte Leslie Tuckwood (9964) and Pte Thomas Wakefield (8242) of Curridge) and 35 wounded by the heavy shellfire and La Metz farm was destroyed by a direct hit; also shellfire destroyed two SAA carts and 10 horses. Pte James Wilkinson [8643] of Earley and Pte A J Shaw [10040] of Godalming died of wounds.

There was a sequel to one of the patrols which Col Graham recounted later in a letter written 13th October:-

I wonder if you remember Sergeant Denham? He was wounded on patrol on 19th September. The remainder of the patrol had to fall back. A few days ago [8th Oct] another patrol shot a German and in his pocket found Sergeant Denham's identity disc!

Harry Wright has missed out on his diary for a few days - he resumed:-

Saturday 19th

Now we have been in these trenches at Moussy five days. We commenced an attack here on Monday and finding the enemy rather too strong for us remained here holding this position. I don't think I have ever even imagined such a week possible for anyone let alone be in such a position myself but then I cannot explain it. We commenced an attack under what I shall describe horrible conditions and even as I write this it is in the jaws of death itself and finish for the time being.

He filled in the gap when aboard a ship for England

One night [19/9/14] we were relieved from the trenches and marched to the farm yard "Le Metz" and billeted in barns, these barns had walls 3 feet thick stone and no doubt looked safe enough for anything. We hadn't been in there more than two hours when the enemy commenced to shell the farm at first with shrapnel then with 120 lbs lydite and we got out of there in a rush a proper panic and went about 200 yards in rear of the farm and entrenched ourselves there but we weren't under cover even there. The shells

burst all around, killed about 25 and smashed all the ammunition carts and killed everyone of the battalions horses smashed the houses where the wounded were and in fact created little hell on their own here.

Private Jones of my company got promoted Corporal and recommended for the VC for carrying the wounded out whilst the hospital was under heavy fire. [TX00884]

20th September 1914

The Germans launched another counter-attack on the 20th at 10:30 casualties were 4 OR Killed and 24 wounded.

The dead were:- Pte L Crackford (9773), Pte Francis Steele (7618) of Maidenhead, Pte Joseph Bowler (7847) of Abingdon and Pte Ernest Talbot (7139).

Corporal V Prior was accused of deserting his post and subsequently court-martialled.

21st September 1914

The weather eased off on the 21st with only light showers. Most of the German activity was focussed on the 5th Brigade at Tilleul so the Berkshires had an easy day, although overhead there was a lot of aircraft activity.

A third re-inforcement arrived with Lt Nicholson and Sgt Painter with 91 ORs. Lt C P Wheeler was injured.

Harry Wright

Monday 21st.

I'll try again to write a little of the last weeks work by stating that we marched away from the trenches this morning "oh what a relief" and are now billeted in a village away from the scene of battle if not from the sounds. The address from a card picked up in the farm house where we are now staying is Mademoiselle Girvene Soumereu, Rue Gaillet-Aubert, Sainte Menehould: now that is written through mere curiosity. By the way, the battle ground we have just left was Metz Farm. I should say that we were engaged with the major part of the German Army as the extent of the firing line was considerable over 6 miles. Now its all over for a few hours I feel much calmer for I seemed all nerves in that trench and I don't let anyone say I am a coward either, no wonder we were relieved. Fancy 8 days lying in trenches wet through to the skin and shivering with cold day in and day out shot and shell all day and sometimes all night nothing hot to drink.. [TX00883]

22nd September 1914

On the 22nd the 1st Rifle Brigade arrived to relieve the Berkshires who thankfully retired three and a half miles to Oeuilly where one OR (Pte S Pearce (9715)) died of wounds. According to the Kings Liverpool officers:-

Arrived Oeuilly about 5 am and billeted in a filthy place, full of screaming women and French soldiers fighting for wine.

The official records also show 4 ORs as killed this day but there is no hint of action in the diary. They were:- Pte George Dunkley (8879) of Landport, Pte Frederick Harvey (8923), Pte George Looker (8601) of Abingdon

and Pte John Newell (9876) of Stanwell.

Lt Sparrow had the opportunity to re-organise on the 22nd

The opportunity comes soon, for the battalion is relieved by the Sixth Division, newly arrived from home, who take over the slovenly trenches that have been so painfully scraped with the only tools we possess, the entrenching implement that every soldier carries with his equipment. That tool alone has saved our lives from the daily bombardment which, started and terminated by the British Artillery, was carried on throughout the day solely by the Germans, for we are already short of ammunition. We march that night through Moussy, reeking with the sickly sweet smell of dead horses. The waggon lines of an artillery brigade have been caught here by the eleven-inch howitzers. And so to Bourg, where we reorganise.

Surely no battalion was ever so thoroughly overhauled. The C.O. is merciless in his determination to improve its fighting qualities. "I want to change three of my section commanders, sir." "Certainly; I'll promote whom you like." Or, "Where have you been the past fortnight?" "Please, sir," the trembling prisoner answers, "I've been with the Wessex or the Loamshires, or got down to Paris." "But you're paid to fight with this battalion! Twenty eight days' Field Punishment." Oh, he was pitiless, but as a result a vastly improved battalion returned to the Aisne a week later. In fact, the good effect of that overhaul at Bourg lasted throughout the war.

Sgt Taylor:-

Tuesday - Had a good day's rest which we had richly earned. Also a good wash and shave.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 22nd Marched about 7 or 8 miles, & billeted in a barn in the village of Oeuilly, arrived about 5.30 am after a tedious march owing to numbed feet & cramped limbs thoroughly exhausted, tea served up soon after arrival a great treat, remained all night, letters issued during the afternoon 2 from N 1 from Mother & 1 from George, a treat to have news from home.

23rd September 1914

On the 23rd September command of the 6th Brigade passed from Brig Gen R H Davies to Brig Gen R Fanshawe. Before he left he sent the following message:-

On relinquishing the Command of the 6th Inftry Bde to take up another appointment, I wish to convey to the officers and men my heartfelt thanks for all the assistance they have given me in both peace and war. I cannot speak too highly of the conduct of all ranks during the strenuous days and nights which have passed since the commencement of hostilities. Their behaviour and bearing have been the admiration of all those who have been in a position to notice them. I can safely say that I am handing over the command of Officers and Men who will never disappoint any successor in whatever arduous task he may have to give them. I feel that my relations with the Brigade have been as much those of a dear friend as of a Commander. I wish all ranks the best of luck and a speedy [rest of line unreadable] to be seperated from them before the end is reached.

Signed R.H.Davies CB

Pte Walter Rivers [7914] of Ardington died of his wounds

There were promotions that day. Cpl Tiesteel was made acting Sergeant as was Cpl Taylor. The promotions were later confirmed and backdated to this date.

Sgt Taylor:-

Wednesday - Another day's rest. Big guns going off all day not far away. I was promoted Sergeant

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 23rd Remaining in Billets, letters taken, not much time to write to all, but managed to get through except a P.C. to George. dysentry [sic] since being in the trench attending hospital for medicine. Inlying Picquet all night.

24th September 1914

The 24th was marked by the award of promotions to many man who had done well and were made corporals.

Sgt Taylor:-

Thursday: Another day's rest, the only excitement firing at aeroplanes.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 24th Still enjoying a rest though under occasional Shell fire but expect to move on as shells are falling close.

Harry Wright

Thursday 24th

Still having a quiet time in the village. Promoted L/C yesterday and placed in charge of 12 men means another 3d a day to my pay, come in handy later on. Wrote to D and M yesterday, should like to get hold of a little more news all we get is from an occasional paper which is about a month old and rumours which no one can believe. Up to the present we've got plenty of tobacco sometimes a serious shortage of matches. Food too has been well supplied sometimes at great risks. The weather these last 3 or 4 days has been a treat though cold at night and always misty. We went about 15 days without having a wash or shave since we've been here we've managed both and that makes a good deal of difference. [TX00883]

25th September 1914

An airman dropped a bomb near the billets on the 25th but it did no damage.

Lt G Belcher from 3rd Battalion arrived with his servant.

Sgt Taylor

Friday: Had orders to be ready to move at an hours notice. Enemy aeroplanes flying over us all day, one dropping a shell about 30 yards from my guard, but it never exploded.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 25th Still resting, Orders issued to be ready to move in 10 minutes time, expecting to be called out during the night but was left in peace.

26th September 1914

The billets were heavily shelled all day on the 26th. The battalion returned at 0545 to La Metz Farm to relieve the 3rd Rifle Brigade. Pte Ward was executed at 18:00 but no one was willing to refer to it. The diarist reported briefly:-

No 9641 Pte Ward shot by award of Fld G C M this date for cowardice on 14.9.14. Sentence executed at 6 pm. Body buried SW of Oeuilly village.

Sgt Taylor:-

Saturday: Artillery battle going on all day.

Cpl Wickens was in Oeuilly and must have been around when Ward was shot, he may even have been a member of the execution party, but makes no reference to it. Immediately after the execution they left Oeuilly to return to La Metz Farm:-

Sept 26th Ready to move at a moments notice all day. Left Oeuilly at 6.15 pm. & marched back to occupy the same trenches as before at Metz Farm, nights very cold, goodbye to tea or anything warm to eat or drink for a time, occupied trenches under cover of darkness & remained all night.

Execution

Private George Ward (9641) had enlisted on 11/12/1911 and landed in France on 12th September 1914, two days later he was with the 1st Battalion as they were guarding the flanks during an uphill advance towards Chemin des Dames. At around 0900 an enemy bombardment had opened up and the shellfire halted the advance. Ward was seen to get up from his position and begin to make his way to the rear. He was challenged by his NCO who was told that he had been injured by a shell burst and he was going back for treatment. For six days he disappeared and on the 20th he reported back to his battalion uninjured.

He was put on a charge of cowardice in the face of the enemy and came before a field Court Martial held at Oeuilly Farm on September 24th . The President of the court was Major G A Armytage of the 1st Kings Royal Rifles and the other two members were Capt T W Sheppard of the 1st Kings Liverpool Regt and Lt J H Woods of the 1st Royal Berks.

Two NCOs gave evidence. 7435 CSM G Smith said:

On September 16th 1914 B Coy of the 1st Royal Berkshire Regiment to which the accused belongs was entrenched in the rear of Metz Farm. A shell burst near the trench and wounded two men. Immediately afterwards I saw the accused walking towards the Farm. I asked him where he was going. He said he was wounded. I next saw accused at 10 am September 23rd at Oeuilly. The accused was not wounded.

3941 Sgt Major J Vesey was the other prosecution witness. He stated:

At Oeuilly on Sept 23rd 1914, about 12 noon the accused reported himself to me armed and equipped. Knowing him to be an absentee I placed him in arrest.

He had an officer to help with his defence but none was offered. The papers were forwarded to the Corps Commander for review and Lt General Sir Douglas Haig who was officer commanding 1st Army Corps. . Haig wrote on the 25th September:-

AG

I am of the opinion that it is necessary to make an example in order to prevent cowardice in the face of the enemy as far as possible. I therefore recommend that no 9641 Pte G Ward 1st R^l Berks Reg^t be shot.

This view was confirmed by the Commander in Chief, Sir John French on the 26th.

He was taken out to be shot on the evening of 26th September. Apparently he broke loose from his guard and tried to run. He was shot in the back and returned on a stretcher whereupon the sergeant was ordered to finish him off.

The CO of the Royal Berks reported back to 6th Brigade HQ on the 27th:

The sentence was duly carried out to effect at 6 pm on this 26th Sept 1914 at Oeuilly.

He was buried south west of Oeuilly village on the north bank of the Aisne but this area was later overrun by the Germans and his grave was never found after the war. He was however included on the memorial at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre.

His case had a number of unusual features. He was only the second man executed by the BEF and his execution took place in the evening. His time of death was recorded as 5.56 pm. Thereafter dawn was the selected time. Also his length of active service, only three days, was the shortest of the war. He was aged 20. [WO71/388]

Another Court Martial

At the same time as Ward was tried a second 1st Royal Berks man faced a charge of dereliction of duty. He was 4604 Corporal Victor Prior. Lt Hanbury Sparrow stated:

Corporal Prior on Sept 20 1914 was in charge of an observation post in front of Metz Farm. Two shells fell near the post, wounding one man. The post then retired. The accused was not the last to leave. A wounded man was left behind unattended to. No more shells fell after the post left. I saw the whole incident through glasses at a distance of about 400 yards.

in his own defence Cpl Prior stated:

On Sept 20th 1914 one of my men was wounded. The rest of my men retired. I also retired to a hayrick. My captain waved me back again. I stayed by the hayrick and did not return to my post.

He too was sentenced to death but in his case (in the same letter as referred to Pte Ward Haig wrote:-

In the case of 4604 Corp^l V Prior of the same reg^t the sentence be commuted to two years imp^t H L [Hard Labour]

This too was confirmed by the CinC. Prior was later returned to the 1st Battalion and was wounded. He was discharged as medically unfit on 9/3/1916. [WO71/388]

27th September 1914

The next two weeks were marked by variable weather, spasmodic shelling and the ever present danger from snipers.

Pte Harry Dexter [10066] was killed by a stray bullet on the 27th. CSM Frederick Jewson [6260] was also killed that day and has a special memorial at Braine Communal Cemetery. It is strange that no mention of his death is given in the battalion diary.

Sgt Tiesteel:-

We lost our CSM Jewson who had been hit by a German firing from a tree about 300 yards. I remember Capt Birt DSO pointing the tree out to me and saying CSM Jewson was hit in the stomach with a bullet fired by a German who was sniping us from that tree. I brought him (the German) down myself with my third shot. Poor Jewson died before he could be removed from Metz Farm. He was a splendid soldier and a very fine drill sergeant with recruits. CQMS King took over as CSM of the Company at Toulie?

Sgt Taylor:-

Sunday: Had a quiet day in the trenches. Cannot make it out because enemy have not answered our fire and I and six others were sent out as a reconnoitering patrol but see no signs of the enemy. They have even retired from the trenches they were holding

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 27th Position unaltered, warm during the day when the Sun was shining, but cold at night, still without coat, cardigan or sheet, but managed to secure two sacks while in billets, so am a little better off than when we were here before.

Harry Wright refers to Ward's execution:-

Saturday 27 My Birthday.

I'll bet they are thinking of me at home today, my wedding was on the 25th. Well, we arrived back in the same trenches that we occupied last week and this morning have been lying here all the day. For myself I cannot rest my feet and legs as far as the knees seem dead and ache something too bad to mention must see the doctor about them. I was in awful agony last night when hobbling along up here although it was not far. A young fellow of this Coy was shot last night after a trial by court martial for cowardice. Man named Ward I did not know him personally. The weather is much better up here this time. [TX00883]

28th September 1914

The day was fairly quiet and they were able to observe a great deal of German activity. They could see them digging double tiers of trenches east of Braye and trying to disguise them with brushwood. To the west of Braye men were moving in single file and disappearing into trenches and the wood below the ridge near Vileul de Courtecon.

There was some light shelling in the afternoon and Sgt

Adams was wounded on patrol near a bridge. Pte Dexter was killed by a sniper in No 13 trench. The 11th Coy RE were strengthening the British defences by adding extra wire entanglements.

Sgt Taylor

Monday: No excitement all day. not even any aeroplanes to fire at, only shell flying over us.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 28th Position unaltered not allowed to move during the day everything being done after dark two men per section fetching water from the farm, & parties being detailed to draw & carry rations from the same place, these being issued to the men while it was still dark.

Harry Wright

Sunday 28th

Still lying in the old trenches. Have been very quiet here all day although there is an artillery duel proceeding over our heads and the infantry on our right had a good quick battle when it got dark. This seems a more favourable part of the field to hold as the enemy have to cross a canal before they can attack us we can see them all day on the ridge in front of us marching about. Distance about 1350 yards too far for us to create any useful effect. Feet still very bad.

29th September 1914

Pte Thomas Binfield [8615] of Langley was killed by a sniper when he was in no 1 trench on the 29th

Sgt Taylor:

Tuesday: Sniper still on the go at every opportunity; tried to locate his position but cannot.

Harry Wright

Monday 29th

Still another day in the trenches nothing much to do but watch and think. I wonder how my wife is today she is nearing a very critical time I think we fixed the date October 2nd, I trust she is going on all right and that we shall be blessed with a son as we both desire. I wonder how long the Germans will hold out here. They tell us they have cut off their line of communication so if that's the truth we ought to be moving soon one way or the other. Sometimes I think the war will last a long time yet, but I rather fancy it depends with Russia a good deal, only we, the rank and file, don't get hold of much news and what we do hear we cannot depend on. [TX00883]

30th September 1914

The sniper was still active in the early hours and there was slight shelling, although the German's 8" gun was silent and seemed not be in action any longer. Pte Charles Holmes [7390] of Hungerford was killed.

Sgt Taylor:

Wednesday: - got relieved by C Company from the trenches and proceeded to a comfortable position in a farm, underneath the ground. Holes made by Jack Johnsons big enough to get a horse and cart in.

Cpl Wickens:-

Sept 30th Mother's birthday, but was not able to write to her

for it, the first time for years. No change in position, On Patrol at night with 4 men, 4 cardigan waist coats issued to my Section No 1 & managed to retain one for myself

1st October 1914

The shell fire intensified in the morning although the British trenches were not damaged. However Pte Holmes was killed. They began work on a second line of trenches in the evening.

Sgt Taylor:

Tuesday: Stood to arms at 4 am. Heard very encouraging news that we were likely to stop here [Le Metz Farm] for six months

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 1st No change Conversation general among the Reservists as to when they are going to draw their pensions, this being the first Pension day since being called up. relieved from front line at night, moved back 3/4 mile, digging Rifle Pits all night, & occupied Reserve Trenches just before dawn.

Harry Wright

Thursday 1st October

Yesterday being unable to walk I had to report sick & am now lying in hospital having a rest for a short time. I sincerely wish we were all out of here again. I have muscular rheumatism – not very bad but enough to knock me off my feet for a time. Well I can do with a blow. One of the S W B has just told me a yarn which is the truth as others here will vouch for. On Monday 28th Agt his company was attacked by Germans and surrounded after fighting until they were nearly all wiped out. They were forced to surrender only 29 of them out of 200. It appears that the Germans annihilated the coys outpost and then placed a machine gun so as to enfilade the Coy from both ends of the trench they took 19 prisoners with them the remaining 10 men who were all slightly wounded were locked in a barn and were let out two days later by villagers rather hot luck. They say they weren't treated very badly and that the Germans were practically starving. I suppose the misses is going on alright I cannot help worrying sometimes. [TX00883]

Wright was sent home after this and his subsequent experiences can be found in section 167-07.

2nd October 1914

Private Richard Miller [9949] of Wandsworth managed to shoot himself in his left hand on the 2nd October. One might surmise he was trying to get himself repatriated as on the next day he was shot dead without any apparant German involvement.

Sgt Taylor:

Friday: Went back to the firing line and relieved C Company.

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 2nd Remained in Reserve Trenches all day, more under cover, & one consolation we are allowed to move a little, & have more room to stretch our legs. 1 Great Coat, 2 Sheets 1 shirt & 4 pair of socks issued to my Section during the early hours. Sharp frosts the two previous nights, Managed to retain the coat which proved to be rather small, but intend

to keep it until an opportunity occurs to change it for a larger one, also obtained a Waterproof Sheet, so hope to be warmer tonight. 2 letters received from N. pleased to have news from home again, we are anxiously waiting for darkness, & living in hopes of obtaining tea tonight, as we hear the others while occupying the Reserve trenches have obtained tea every night. We were not disappointed. managed to obtain some & turned out digging Rifle Pits again all night, returning to same trenches just before dawn.

3rd October 1914

The chaplain held services for the men who had been killed and buried near Metz Farm. In anticipation of a German attack the Brigadier issued orders on how each of his three battalions were to offer support in the event of one of them coming under direct assault. If the Berkshire were attacked, the S Staffords were to support by rifle fire and then counter-attack south of Rifle Point and the Kings by rifle fire and counter-attack from Canal Brifhe and north of La Metz Farm. As it turned out his precautions were unnecessary - the Germans opposite were mostly Reserves and described as 'very apathetic'

Sgt Taylor:

All stood to arms at 4 am. The firing quietened down a little but it is only a lull before the storm. The artillery started again in the middle of the night and there was a battle royal for about two hours.

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 3rd Remain in Trenches all day. Rifle pit digging again after dark, afterwards drawing rations & carrying same to Coys occupying front line trenches & then Paraded to find the position of Alarm trenches, returning just before dawn.

4th October 1914

The body of Lt Herbert Reuben Loomes of the 1st Loyal North Lancs Regiment,, who had been killed on the 14th September was found on Oct 4th and buried.

Sgt Taylor:

Sunday: About 10 am the enemy dropped one of their shells almost in our trench. We waited patiently for some more to follow, but glad to say none came. At 10 pm the enemy's infantry attacked us, but they were repulsed. I thought by now they had learnt that it was impossible to leave their trenches, but they have to obey orders and then they only attack half-heartedly, each one trying to get behind the other.

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 4th Remain in Trenches all day suffering from dysentery for over three weeks, & feeling very weak, so reported sick at 6:15 pm. Temperature 101.2, detained all night at the farm which is Battalion Headquarters, lost tea, but obtained a little milk. Tobacco issued to Coys, but none brought to me.

5th October 1914

Pte George Bedford [6627] of Theale died of his wounds at Terlincthun. The 4th reinforcement arrived under 2/Lt Searles consisting of 2 sergeants, 1 corporal and 125 privates.

Two platoons were moved to rest at a house near the lower lock near Englefield.

Sgt Taylor:

Monday: Just a few Black Marias.

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 5th Remained at the farm all day, sent back at night a few miles with others in a Supply wagon to a temporary hospital at the Chateau de Soupin, Aisne, beautiful house & lovely grounds, belonging to Madame Calliux, some say the one who shot the Exitor, & some say the one who had previously been divorced, spent the night on the floor which was covered with Cocoa matting.

6th October 1914

Sgt Tiesteel

I think we were in this position about 19 days. Then we moved to the village of Oeuilly for a few days rest. General Monro visited us while we were still resting and complimented us on the way the Regiment had stuck it.

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 6th Detained in hospital, a fine collection of Armour decorated the walls, all Medical Cases being down here, Surgical cases being in rooms above, Milk for breakfast, Soup for dinner, and milk again for tea, much better and warmer than the trenches & the rest is very acceptable, spent the night on the floor again, no beds.

7th October 1914

At last on the 7th all men had been re-issued with great coats.

Pte H Plested wrote to his brother in America:

Whilst we were in the trenches it was nothing else but rain and we were sitting in about a foot of water. None of us had our coats for we had thrown them away on the retirement as we were unable to carry them on account of the heat and the fighting and marching. It was as much as we could do to get along with our rifles and ammunition.

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 7th 2 Eggs issued for breakfast the first I. have tasted since leaving home, no butter, but thankful for small mercies. given Medicine & Duty though feeling none too fit. The Battalion we hear are being relieved from the trenches tonight, & proceeding to Billets, am hoping the rumours are correct as we could do with a rest, & a chance to pick up again. Cannot rejoin the Batt until night. Left Hospital about 5 pm, found the Transport and managed to obtain a ride on the Water Cart, very thankful for the lift, as I don't feel equal to marching far at present. Joined the Coy who were on Parade, one Coy being out Reconnoitering, Our Coy 'D', standing by, remained in the same position for 2 or 3 hours, not allowed to move & to keep absolutely quiet, very cold

nearly frozen, eagerly waiting for tea from the Cookers which came up with, us, but was ordered to wait down the road, until allowed to come up to Coys, the tea being just warm when issued, expected to find it cold, as they had been waiting 2 or 3 hours with fires drawn, Rations, trenching tools to make up deficiencies & blankets drawn & issued, Picks & shovels also & off we go about 2 miles, & remained digging trenches all night, retiring back to trenches already dug just before dawn, but not the ones previously occupied by us, no such luck as being relieved it seems, received information that 3 or 4 letters came for me during my short absence but that they had been marked sick base & handed in at Batt Head Quarters, rather anxious to receive same letters, so sent a message to the Post Cpl to get them for me before dispatching the Sick Base mail.

Mentioned in Despatches

The gallantry of the Berkshire Regiment was brought home to the people of the country by the publication of Sir John French's despatches. The following names being mentioned in the despatches of Sept 17th and October 8th.

Lt Col M D Graham
 Capt L H Birt
 Capt G W P Dawes (att RFC)
 Lt C StQ O Fullbrook-Leggatt
 9691 Pte A Ross
 9420 Pte E Philps

8th October 1914

On the 8th the identity disc of Sgt Denham (killed 21/9/14) was found in the pocket of a German who had been shot near no 1 trench. On the same day 900 blankets arrived. The body of Pte John Newell [9876], killed on the 22nd September was found and buried. Pte Leonard Moore [8315] was wounded.

Captain CHT Lucas joined the battalion on the 8th. He had been given his orders on the 5th. His diary was heavily drawn on by Petre. He recorded in the diary:-

October 5th.--Received wire from I.G.C. to go to my Regiment. Drew webbing equipment from the Ordnance, as Officers appear to be wearing this at the Front.

Left for Paris by the 11 p.m. Rapid; huge crowds returning to Paris, we had to leave half the people standing on the platform. Three Civil Surgeons came up in the carriage.

October 6th.--Reached Paris at 8 a.m. Caught the 10.40 p.m. from the Gare de Lion to Villeneuve St. George. Paris very empty. Had lunch with the London Scottish. They are living in nice, airy railway carriage sheds with clean cement floors. A truck in the siding riddled with bullets and a shell through it. Six French batteries passing through from Lyon, all reservists with old guns. Chasseurs Alpines also going through to-night from Italian Frontier. Left Villeneuve at 6.45 p.m. Paris searchlights looking for aeroplanes.

October 7th.--Reached the railhead. Saw several aeroplanes, ours and Germans, all being shelled, no result. Was starting off at 10 a.m. in a Supply Column Lorry, when a Colonel on the Staff took me to Army Headquarters in his

car, where I found Ready and Orr. After tea I went down to the Brigade Headquarters at Supier where I found Isaac, who was looking after the transport, and after dark we rode out to Battalion Headquarters which was at Metz Farm.

October 8th.--My Company was at the Farm all day. Some shelling was going on, but not at us. Steele shot a German from the Trenches.

Some of my Company went out after dark to dig the trenches a bit further forward. I went out and walked round with Colonel Graham; there was a little sniping going on. [TX01709]

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 8th Remained in trenches all day. Turned out to complete digging trenches at dusk, tea brought up while digging very acceptable as it is very cold, afterwards sent out on Patrol, retiring back to trenches occupied during the day on returning from Patrol: Pack up, 7 move into other trenches nearer the road. was disappointed to learn my letters had already been sent before my message was delivered, so lost them by about an hour, don't expect to receive them now.

9th October 1914

The 9th was nearly a day of disaster as at 13:30 a shell exploded on the bank of the canal and the water flooded into a ditch to the west. The water had to be diverted to stop it running into the trenches.

Capt Lucas obviously hadn't realised the danger:-

October 9th.--Fourteen Howitzer shells fell round one of our trenches today, but the only damage done was one rifle broken in two. We moved down to Englefield before light, and spent a quiet day, no shells fell near. The men dug pits under the canal bank in case we were shelled. During the digging we found four new German transport saddles hidden in some bushes. Our trenches run across the valley, between Saupin and Braye, they begin on the left at Rifle Mound and have got a fair barbed wire apron in front. From Rifle Mound to the Canal they have practically no field of fire. In one case the trench is too long but some of them are good, about five foot deep. and dug well in at intervals, so that the men are absolutely safe, unless a shell pitches in the trench itself; there is however no head cover. The chief difficulty lies in all the work having to be done at night, also the original siting of the trenches was done in the dark. The Rifles join us on the right and the South Staffords on the left. [TX01709]

Col Graham wrote on the 13th October:-

Last Friday (9th) he {Jerry} gave me a tremendous going with his howitzer. In my night trench near the canal bank four shells pitched. I was behind them and brought a big flood of water down a ditch on the W bank, so I had to turn out 50 men and dig a ditch at C to divert the water back into the canal and so prevent my reserve trenches being flooded. He had a lovely chance of shelling my men whilst they were digging but missed it. The water got into the right of my trenches before I had finished my ditches.

Above A lock there is no lock for 5 miles and it took three days for the section to run off. I still have the canal full between locks A and B.

Lt Sparrow gives a fuller account:-

Then there was a night of which it would be cruel to tell the tale. Wretched and furious, you go to see your company commander in the early morning and then hurry away to

catch up a patrol that has already gone out along the canal, and the sun is just about to break through the mist. You catch the patrol up sooner than you expected, and the corporal greets you with a cheerful grin. He has just shot a man. "Where?" He's just ahead, for they'd bumped into a German patrol, fired, and the man had fallen over dead. That's what we want above all things, an identification, for the staff are sure that the enemy have been reduced to putting old Landwehr troops against us, and it is said also that they have run out of the new pointed ammunition.

We push forward at once to find the body, but we can't find it anywhere, though we beat the ground as if looking for a dead partridge, and the corporal is obviously flummoxed. Push on a bit. There's the enemy patrol firing through the iron lattice-work of the parapet of the righthand bridge. But though we are only a hundred yards away we can't hit them, their field grey blends so perfectly with the autumn mist.

This is no good. Force is useless. It's your mind against theirs. You try a flanking movement, taking three men, but only two follow, the third dodging in the rear pretending he thinks you want him as a connecting file. The other three you leave to give covering fire. You move under cover and get to the edge of the bridge. You feel fit as hell and a wild desire seizes you to wrestle for life with one of your opponents, to seize him in your arms and hurl him to the ground. You leap on to the bridge. They've gone. Providentially for you, for it was a mad thing to do. "Yes," say the covering force as they come up, "they cleared out the moment you started the flanking movement." "Then, why the devil ---?" Oh! It's no good saying anything to the fools. Besides, you're too happy. This brush was just what you wanted to cleanse the foul stain of last night. Back to battalion headquarters you go, with some pointed ammunition and a few scraps of marked equipment. Life is worth living, you feel, as you sit down to breakfast with battalion headquarters and wolf into the eggs and bacon.

That night we listened to the Germans singing the Austrian national anthem that goes to the tune of 'Praise the Lord, ye Heavens adore him.' Antwerp had fallen.

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 9th remained in the trenches all day,. Artillery shells dropping very near today. Myself & 6 Men of my Section ordered out at 6:30 pm. to go on detached post, occupy the Bridge over the canal, & remain there all night, to retire back to trenches at 5:30 Am, night bright, but very cold, a sharp frost. managed to make a drop of tea during the early hours using the tea & sugar of our emergency rations, obtaining water from a small stream, & boiling it at the bottom of an hay rick which had been set on fire about 100 yards behind us, nothing seen of the enemy.

10th October 1914

The Berkshires were still digging the second line trench and Pte Turrel injured himself with a pick. 4 cases of suspected enteric fever were discovered.

Capt Lucas

October 10th Spent the day at Englefield, in billets in the stable of a small P.H. They shelled the place three times during the day but never struck any of the buildings. Went back in the evening to Metz Farm. About 8.30 p.m there was very heavy firing on our right, evidently an attack on part of the 1st Division Line. [TX01709]

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 10th Returned to trenches at 5:0 AM & found a letter which had come up with the rations, pleased to hear from home again, this being the quickest to arrive, heard rumours that we are being relieved tonight, hope it is true, as we could do with a wash & shave & a rest, having been here 14 days, still on short rations, Cake, tobacco & 4 Cigs per man, also 4 boxes of matches per section of 12 men, saved again as no one had a match left, & it looked like being without a smoke all day again. remained in Trenches all day. relieved at night & went to Billets about 1 mile away, barn nice & clean & warm, had a good night

11th October 1914

On the 11th, news was received that the battalion was to be deployed in a different theatre of operation. The bodies of Pte George Dunkelly [8879] and Pte Frederick Harvey [8923], both killed on the 22nd were found and buried. News was also received that Pte Leonard Moore [8315], who had been injured on the 8th, had died in hospital at Soupir on the 10th and buried in Soupir Churchyard. Pte J Watts [7380] had also died in hospital at St Nazaire on the 11th.

Capt Lucas:-

October 11th. The Germans threw about forty shells on to the hill about 150 yards east of the Farm. There was nothing on the hill, but they probably mistook a tin which was shining there for a helio.

In the afternoon, whilst throwing more earth on some horses and ammunition carts, which had been blown to bits by a big shell, they unearthed two of the transport men, who had been buried in the dugouts along side.

Cpl Wickens:-

Oct 11th Remained in Billets all day, letters up received 1 from N & some cigs from a Chum, answered & handed in letters, hot dinner today with a few potatoes which a fatigue party went & dug up out of the garden, much appreciated after cold food for so long. Self & 12 Men paraded at 5:30 pm for Observation Post 24 hours duty, tea served up before starting.

Rumours that we are to move tomorrow, blankets were taken from us early in the night which gives colour to the rumours, very cold & a sharp frost, but managed to keep warm with 2 sacks.

12th October 1914

On the 12th a patrol under Lt Sparrow was sent out at 18:15 to burn straw by no 2 bridge. The Germans responded by heavy gunfire but there were no casualties

Capt Lucas:-

October 12th. - Spent a very quiet day, hardly any shelling except just at dusk. No one was hit. The Brigade Scouts went out after dark to see what fire they could draw, and they succeeded in drawing a good deal, so they set fire to two straw stacks and came back.

A message came from the Divisional Headquarters to ask for me to be sent off for four days to arrange for the entraining of the Division. The C.O. said he couldn't spare me. [TX01709]

Col Graham wrote the next day:-

There was rain yesterday [12th] and in the morning I saw them [the Germans] getting straw from ricks. At dusk last night I sent Sparrow with a platoon via the canal bank to no 1 bridge and made a fuss there with signal balls - things you fire a white light out of a candle. Whilst Sparrow was amusing them a patrol crept out and set alight the two ricks. There was a pause till they realised the ricks were on fire. Then they opened with guns, machine guns and all the rifles they possess! We did not fire a round in return. They kept up their fire for quite half an hour!! I had no casualties, though the bullets did fly about. One man had his hand grazed by a bullet.

Lt Sparrow tells his version:-

The act is drawing to its close; the curtain is about to fall on the Aisne. But it had yet to give you one more adventure. The C.O. had collected a small body of picked men to form headquarter patrols, and he had received orders to stir up the enemy in order to conceal the relief of some of our troops by the French. Accordingly he decided to send by night one patrol under a sergeant to fire a rick that was by the left-hand bridge, the same that you had had your night adventure at, whilst the other, under a corporal whom we will call Wells, though it wasn't his real name, was to climb the spur and fire a Very light into the quarry, which was obviously being used as an observation post. This patrol was issued with the Very pistol we had just received and our only five cartridges. Your orders were to support this patrol with your platoon. Corporal Wells, you were told, would post the men as he wanted them, and, virtually speaking, you were placed under his orders for this exploit.

Accordingly, at the appointed hour the patrol and the platoons set out, going by the east bank of the canal so as to avoid the right-hand bridge (where you had had your early morning scrap). The patrol is leading and you follow. But to your surprise the corporal halts the platoon when you are a good two hundred yards short of the bridge and proceeds to put out the sections to guard his flanks. It's a bit early, you think, to deploy, but as you presume he knows what he's about you say nothing. Suddenly, to your horror, he fires a Very light. What is he doing, destroying every chance of surprise in this way? Then the platoon moves forward another thirty yards, halts, and again Corporal Wells fires his Very pistol. You are with the reserve section, but on seeing what's happened you storm forward. "What are you doing, you bloody fool?" you hiss. "Well," he demands sulkily, "how could I see the ground ahead was clear if I didn't fire the light?" At his words your rage bursts its bounds. You'll show these battalion headquarters pets what's what. "Go back to battalion headquarters," you snarl, "and tell the C.O. what a bloody mess you've made of it. My platoon will take this on. Get out of it, d'you hear? Get out of it."

But even as you drive away the discomfited corporal, you are wondering what you really can do, for he has ruined all chance of carrying out the original project. Nevertheless you push your men on as far as the bridge, but you daren't go any farther; the enemy must by now be thoroughly on the 'qui vive,' for remember these are the first Very lights we have fired. It's no good putting your head into the mouth of the waiting lion.

There is just one chance left of disturbing him and .of avoiding fiasco - a burst of rapid fire. You put out the sections again. "Five rounds - rapid fire!" The rattling explosions tear the night. "Cease fire!" You listen. Not a sound of alarm greets your anxious ears. Try again. "Five rounds" - by Jove, the rick's alight - "rapid fire!" The rick's alight and so is the night. The enemy is thoroughly roused,

though it is the other patrol, you feel, that has done the trick. For a mile or more cascades of Very lights are falling even before your volley is finished, and the air is alive with bullets. The strength that is revealed comes as an eye-opener to you. We've stirred up the wasps' nest with a vengeance. Give it another poke. "Ten rounds - rapid fire!" The whole front is roused and the enemy bullets are whiss-whiss-whissing everywhere. Soon their deep-throated guns join in. We've done better than anybody had any right to hope. It's time to be getting back. "No. 1 section, get back! Remainder, five rounds rapid." "No. 2, get back! Remainder, five rounds rapid." A stream of bullets is whissing overhead, but too high to hit. Now it is time to go back by ones and twos. "You," you touch a man on the back, "and you," you touch a second, "get back." Then you order a third, but the fellow shakes his head and points to his arm. He's a lance-corporal. "Quite right," you bellow through the din, and send someone else off in his stead. Those who are left blaze furiously down the towpath, for like as not the Germans are trying to get at you that way. One man after another goes back as you touch him. Nor does anyone attempt to go until he gets his specific order. In the dark you tap the lance-corporal again, and once more he shakes his head. "Sorry," you shout. You wish you'd known before you'd had such a stout-hearted fellow, for you'd have made him a section commander. At last only he and you are left, and after he has fired a final clip of cartridges, you two walk together down the towpath, the bullets still whissing overhead. But the disturbance is already quietening.

Before you have gone fifty yards, you come upon Corporal "Wells" of the patrol and his man, standing on the towpath. They haven't gone back to battalion headquarters and you rather respect them for that. Bidding them follow, you push on until you come to the machine-gun post. "I've sent for the stretcher-bearers," says the officer. "Have you many casualties?" "No one touched," you answer. "We're the last." "Well done," falls on your grateful ears, and being greedy for praise you accept it, although you know that it was the other patrol that really did the trick.

By the time you get back to battalion headquarters, the night is once more practically normal.

Cpl Wickens

Oct 12th Beautiful day, Shirts & Pants & socks issued, & brought to us on observation post, what a treat to be able to change, having worn the same we put on , on being mobilized August 6th expecting hot dinner again today, as the rest of the Coy are still in Billets, disappointed as regards dinner received none at all, on short rations, tea brought up, not relieved until 11 :30pm & moved to trenches again, the Coy having already moved to trenches from billets, spent remainder of the night there.

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Diary of Cpl Walter Wickens transcribed by Delyse Jo Brown 2002

Diary of Cpl Harry Wright (The Wardrobe archive)

continued with section 189