

Section 203

The Build Up

The 1st/4th Battalion March to August 1915

At last the 1st/4th were being allowed to see active service. Capt Cruttwell's account continues with extracts from Lt Ronald Poulton-Palmer's journal and the diary of Pte Wheatley. (continued from section 113)

Arrival in France 30th March 1915

The machine gunners seem to have arrived before the rest of the Battalion. Pte Wheatley:-

Arrived at Le Havre after 13 hours on the boat. Disembarked about 9 am, unloaded transport and limbers. All very interesting at Havre.

Four French soldiers on guard, very talkative. Attempted to chatter with them. Exchanged souvenirs.

Slept on quay for the night. Awake bitterly cold, some change from Mrs Richells warm bed - get up bit closer to Walt and tried to sleep again, kept nodding and dozing. Fed up!

31st March 1915

Capt Cruttwell:-

The night was calm and bright with stars as, with an escorting destroyer, we crossed rapidly to Boulogne. After disembarking we marched to the Blue Base above the town, clattering over the cobbles, and drawing the heads of the curious to their bedroom windows. Here we lay down in tents and endured with the mitigation of one blanket a bitter frost. We awoke next morning to driving snow.

That evening we continued our journey towards the unknown from Pont des Briques station, where we found our train already contained the transport from Havre, two of whose number had been deposited on the line en route by the activities of a restive horse. The men were crowded into those forbidding trucks labelled "Hommes, 40, chevaux, 8," and suffered much discomfort as the train crept through a frozen night, whose full moon illuminated a succession of dykes and water meadows stiff with hoarfrost, and bearded French Territorials with flaming braziers guarding the line.

Pte Wheatley:-

Awakened at 2 o'clock marched to Railway station and loaded up. Slept about 7 am in a cattle truck. Passed through Rouen, spent the night in the train. Picked up the Battalion about 8 o'clock at night. The Battalion which came over the day after us, got on our train, and we continued our journey. Getting fed continued our journey. Getting fed up with this luxurious travelling nearly 40 of us in one cattle truck laying on one another's bodies, trying to get a wink. Ah my diary! I can see we shall have some stories to tell before we are finished.

Poulton -Palmer did not have a good night because of the cold:-

There was not much sleep last night because of the cold. However an al fresco meal cheered us up. The morning was spent in inspections etc and I had a talk with Eastwood who did not know me from Adam. I forgot that my name had been changed. After lunch several of us walked down to Boulogne, where we met several people and understood that Boulogne was very much impressed with us and our disembarkation. Back up the hill in a Red Cross motor van to supper.

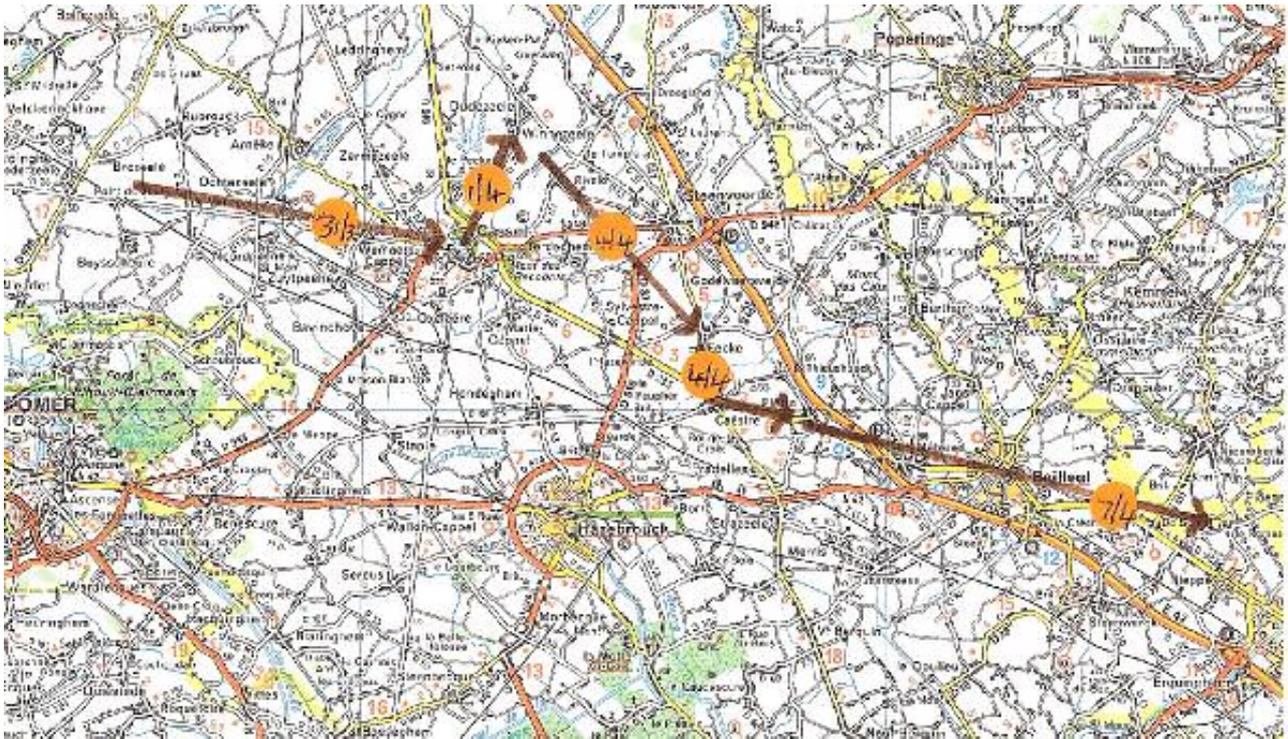
They left Boulogne by train that evening but the train was short of a van and was very crowded. Poulton-Palmer:-

We fell in and marched off to the Pont des Briques, a matter of four miles. The men found the pack rode very heavy and two or three fell out. At the station the Battalion was divided into parties of 42 - each party to go in a goods van. When the train arrived we found the latter half full of our transport with Jack [Capt J M Aldworth] and [Capt E S] Holcroft in charge. They had lost two men just down the line, who had been kicked out by a horse. There was a ghastly crush in the train since we were one truck short, and as many as 50 were in some. They could not sit down but had to stand on the six hours journey. Off we went about 11 pm and arrived at St Omer via Calais. Then on to Cassel which was our detraining point. A ghastly cold night and little sleep.

1st April 1915

The Battalion left Cassel for Winezele and for the first time were within earshot of the guns.

Capt Cruttwell:-



The journey to Romarin 31st March to 7th April 1915

As dawn was breaking we detrained on the long platform of Cassel, and after the transport was unloaded moved up that steep hill which is so well known a landmark in Flanders. When we reached the summit, leaving the town on our left, we looked over the great Flemish plain, and heard for the first time the faint pulsing of the guns. The sun had now fully risen, and dissipated the thin morning mist; the level country parcelled out into innumerable farms and clumps of trees stretched endlessly to the east. Only to the northward the steep outline of the Mont des Cats with the long ridge of the Mont Noir behind broke the plain. We descended, and made our way wearily to Winnezele, a straggling village of out-lying farms, close to the Belgian frontier. Here billets were provided.

Here we remained three days, and with the zeal of new troops obeyed every letter of the law. Orderly sergeants descended into the village in marching order with full packs, no officer was ever seen without his revolver, while every billet was guarded as if at any moment it might be taken by assault.

Pte Wheatley

Arrived at Cassel about 8 o'clock in the morning had a stiff march to Winnizeele. Settled down in a barn. Sergeant Gale told us that poor Fred Coales, our limber driver was kicked out of the truck on the way up. We have started already.

I give Bill Bailey, a hand with the cooking, we visit a French house afterwards, I make an impression on mama, and we get a drink which tastes like water and honey Captain H reads us orders about cowardice in the field, punishable by death. Oh! He has cheered us up.

Poulton-Palmer:-

About 5 am the train stopped with a jerk and we found ourselves at Cassel which turned out to be the headquarters of the South Midland Division. The men seemed none the worse for their close travelling and we were soon out and formed up. After a long wait, during which an English aeroplane flew over, apparently to guard us, we got off. It soon got very hot and the first three miles were steadily up hill, so the men felt it a good deal as they are not yet used to their packs. The men too were very silent, apparently being a bit strange in the new country.

The view up the hill at Cassel was very lovely - The Flemish plain glittering with hoar frost and looking singularly peaceful although the guns could, for the first time, be faintly heard. About a mile before we reached our destination, the village of Winnezele, eight miles from Cassel on the Cassel-Ypres road, I rode on, on Thorne's horse, with the Colonel and other Company Commanders and the Brigade interpreter, and met the Mayor in the centre of the village. Here we saw where we were billeted and a dirty old man and one small boy led us off to our Company billets. These were a good mile further east and the platoons were in farms lying around a public house at a cross-roads called Drogland.

The farms were found to be very comfortable, especially that one inhabited by my platoon. The woman in charge supplied them with eggs, milk etc very cheaply and the barn they slept in had plenty of clean straw. They had a pond to wash in and a field to play football in so they were all right. All these farms had been visited by the Germans during the time the English divisions were detraining at Hazebrouck, but they appear to have behaved quite well.

I lived in the pub and was quite comfortable though the room and bed were very dirty. We dined at a pub, the mess in

Winnezele and were in bed early that night after visiting the guards outside each farm.

Inspection at Steenvorde **2nd April 1915**

Capt Cruttwell:-

On April 2nd we marched to Steenvoorde, where Lieut.-General Sir H. Smith-Dorrien, commanding 2nd Army, inspected the 145th Brigade. The Brigade consisted of the 1/4th Royal Berkshires, the 1/5th Glosters, the 1/4th Ox and Bucks Light Infantry and the 1/1st Buckinghamshire Battalion. He congratulated them on their smart appearance, and spoke most warmly of the work already done by Territorials in the war. He also cheered us greatly by his anticipation of the fall of Budapest and of the forcing of the Dardanelles within the next few weeks.

Pte Wheatley:-

Good Friday morning no hot cross buns. Plenty of bully beef and biscuits.

Marched to Meteran and were inspected by Gen Smith Dorien.

We form three sides of a hollow square, and fix bayonets, no doubt we do look a fine lot. French villagers greatly interested in the proceedings afterwards march back to Winnizeele.

Poulton-Palmer

After breakfast the Battalion marched three miles to Steenvoorde, the Brigade headquarters. It was then inspected by Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien who command the army to which we belong. He afterwards addressed the officers in a very complimentary strain. He seemed very optimistic about the army and said we were to be attached for instruction to the III Corps of the II Army. We then marched back to billets and had a slack finish to the day.

3rd April 1915

Pte Wheatley:-

Gun drill and mechanism in farm-yard inclined to be wet.

Georgie breaks the news to us that he has a c, some day perhaps when the weather is finer, and no one is about. They will be some souvenirs, but it is a risky job, worse than carrying diary about.

Poulton-Palmer

This day passed quietly with parades in morning spoilt by rain. The beautiful weather of the last few days seems to have broken up. We had several interesting talks with French soldiers who had just been relieved from the trenches. They were very cheery, but not very smart. Franking the men's letters is a great nuisance, though unavoidably one gets some interesting lights on their characters. The men were paid five francs this day.

Fletre **Easter Sunday 4th April 1915**

They moved on to Eeke starting at 12:30 to link up with 145 Brigade, then on to Fletre via Caestre to billets, arriving at 16:00.

Capt Cruttwell:-

On Easter Sunday, we marched to Fletre, a village on the great paved road to Lille, 3 miles short of Bailleul. Here long lines of lorries attested the importance of this main artery of the Army; while the effects of war were plainly seen in the bullet-riddled houses, the random little trenches and crosses dotted around, which recalled the successful fighting of the 4th Division on October 14th.

The chateau which Headquarters occupied was said to have been similarly used for eight days by General von Kluck. Here for three days we enjoyed the rain of Flanders, and a foretaste of its eternal mud, before moving a stage nearer to the battle line, the flares of which had been an object of much interest at nights.

Pte Wheatley

Packed up in the morning and moved at dinner time to Fletre. Arrived at 5.30. Billeted in a dirty barn with a calf Passed through Stenwoode and Caestre.

What filthy places! In the evening I washed my underclothes in stream. Saw the church tower, where the Germans flung the Warwicks off Brought my first loaf of French bread, not bad tasting stuff

Poulton-Palmer

We left billets about 12 pm and marched by easy stages along the road to Fletre via Steenvoorde and Caestre. At Caestre we struck the great main road to Armentieres. It is broad pave and is lined with ammunition parks of different divisions on motor

buses. In Fletre we took a side road and landed in our new billet - two farms. They turned out quite nice but the people were not so pleased to see us and seemed anxious to make what they could out of us.

5th April 1915

Wheatley:-

Wet and cold all day heard rumours of shifting but nothing happened. Had good wash in stream. More mechanism and mount gun.

I am sick of it, did we come out here for this stuff after 6 months of it in England.

Poulton-Palmer

All this day it rained appallingly and we did nothing except inspect in the barn. At evening the flares were clearly seen and looked very weird. At tea time Geoffrey Palmer [his cousin] came from Strazeele and had a chat.

He wrote home to his father in more detail:-

We are all extremely fit and my platoon is still at absolutely fighting strength with nobody even sick. We left the place we had been at yesterday and came here after an eight mile march. We came on one main road which is very congested with motor transport and all pave which is very bad for the feet. There were some ripping motor van workshops hard at work in any corner of the street. We passed several of the Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars and I spoke to the Squadron Sergeant of Geoffrey's squadron.

Our Battalion HQ is a big house which was the HQ of General von Kluck in October. The Germans mounted machine guns in the tower of the church: 200 Germans were billeted in the farm I am at. Everybody is extremely cheerful. We shall stay here a bit I expect but of course we may have our first lessons in trench work from here.

The people round here in the farms are very much on the make. My French is coming on by leaps and bounds and I am doing my best to stop the fellows getting cheated. The food is very plentiful and good but mostly tinned and biscuit; so they will buy bread at exorbitant prices.

It is much better fun than at Chelmsford because though the discipline is more strict in lots of ways and the punishments much more severe, yet one can be much more friendly with one's men and its rather humorous to receive compliments unofficially by reading the men's letters as we have to censor them and they are meant because the writers do not give their names and you only know that they come from the Company but do not know which platoon.

Tuesday 6th April

Wheatley

Fairly bright morning. Mail arrives. Getting better food and plenty. I had one letter from home with a Postal Order inside, now what on earth is a PO good to me here. I managed to change it for cash with A.S.C. motor driver. Went in the village and had a chat with some of the M.T. who had been out since the start. I am not in such a hurry to visit the trenches after that talk.

Poulton-Palmer

A better day. We inspected and had a short route march. In the afternoon Challoner and I strolled round and came on several graves of the Warwicks who were cut up here during the retreat of the German advance guards in October. The farm we were billeted in was held by the Germans at one time but there are little or no signs of war as yet. People pick up spurs and German money now and then and there are some trenches near here that have been used.

Attachment to a Regular Brigade Romarin 7th April 1915

Capt Cruttwell:-

Our next journey, on the 7th, led through Bailleul, where the band of the Artists' Rifles played in the great square, and the Warwicks of the 143rd Brigade viewed us with the superior air of men who had already been in the trenches with the 6th Division; then between the poplars along the Armentieres road, until we turned to the left at Rabot, and soon arrived at our destination, a small village called Romarin.

It lies just within the Belgian frontier, a bare 3 miles behind the firing line, whence the crackle of rifle fire was plainly audible, whilst from the coppiced slopes of Neuve Eglise, which bounded the northward view, intermittent flashes denoted the presence of the field batteries.

The battalion was now attached to the 10th Brigade of the 4th Division, who were still holding the same ground where their victorious advance had come to a standstill in October in front of Ploegsteert Wood and northward round the base of Messines Hill. The four Companies were divided for their period of 48 hours in the line between 1st Warwicks, 2nd Seaforths, Royal Irish, Dublin Fusiliers, and 7th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (T.F.).

The time passed without casualties or special incident, except for the shelling of a night working party under Lieut. Challoner,

which escaped disaster only by good fortune. All will remember with gratitude the good comradeship and helpfulness of this Regular brigade, from whom we learnt much during our short period of attachment.

Pte Wheatley:-

Left Fletre this morning passed through Meteren and Baileul. Arrived at Romarin. Saw plenty of graves by the roadside and hasty trenches. Arriving nearer the war zone.

Poulton-Palmer

This morning we left billets and proceeded by the main road towards Armentieres. We, my platoon no 13 of D Company acted as rearguard to the whole brigade. This meant marching behind all the train and field ambulance and it caused a long series of checks. We marched through Ballieul where there were thousands of soldiers resting and through Meteren where the Warwicks suffered so badly in October. Then at a corner called Rabot we turned to the left and arrived at Romarin in Belgium [two miles west of Ploegsteert] about three miles behind the firing line at Messines. There was any amount of mud and water about and the billets were very close but my platoon was lucky in having a good barn. We had quite a nice little house but the woman was a shrew. And so to bed [The woman kept several canaries whose singing drove them wild]

Thursday 8 April 1915

They began their front line training on the 8th. A and B Companies went up first, one platoon to the 7th Argyles, three to the 2nd Seaforths and four to the 1st Warwicks. They began with individual training and then had 24 hours working as platoons. C and D Companies provided working parties digging behind the front line on the east bank of the Douve near the ruined farm of La Plus Douce

Pte Wheatley

Billeted in barn by the road-side. Heard we were going in trenches for 48 hours experience. Georgie takes his first, in the doorway of the barn, unfortunately I am in the back of the crowd.

Saw one of our aeroplanes being shelled a long distance away right over some woods. Little balls of smoke high up in the air. Met some real soldiers coming out from the trenches. God, what a mess they were in.

Poulton-Palmer

This day was spent quietly till the evening. I lunched with D Burt-Marshall at Xth Brigade headquarters. About 9.30 pm my Company paraded for night digging. We marched to a point about 1000 yards from the German lines and as we came over the hill and down the avenue we heard several stray bullets flying overhead. My platoon was detailed to complete an all round defence of a farm in the second line of the defences. Apart from occasional bullets there was no excitement. The rest of the Company were digging trenches rather in front and had more bullets over but with no loss. We got back safely about 3.0 am

Steenwerck April 9th 1915

The trench training for A and B Companies continued with C and D doing more digging in the evening. Poulton Palmer rode up Hill 63 to view the lines of trenches and a distant view of Lille. He was even more impressed by the sight of Germans walking around the village of Messines.

Pte Wheatley:-

Left for trenches with guide at nightfall. Things pretty quiet when we got there a few stray shots whizzing about. Made first acquaintance with star-lights.

Was in the trenches with Seaforth Highlanders 2nd Bn Machine Gun Section Was showed how to place our guns, and post our sentries, and also more important still, how to drink our rum ration. No casualties!

Poulton-Palmer (journal)

On the morning of this day I and Burt-Marshall rode up to a hill near by and saw a fine view of the German and English trenches for about three miles. It was a wonderful sight, absolutely still and calm and not a sign of life. On our way up we saw several graves among them Malcolm Hepburn's. I lunched at XI Brigade with Keppel - the Irish trials forward.

We were again paraded for night digging, the morning having been spent in the usual inspections. This time it was to complete a breastwork between two of the actual British fire trenches, about 150 yards from the German lines. When we arrived at our rendezvous the Engineer officer in charge said he could only take 50 of my 100 men as the Germans were shelling and firing on the working parties. We then proceeded down the road towards our object in fear and trembling as it is covered by a German machine gun. On arrival at the reserve trenches of the firing line I got my men into a communication trench and awaited orders. There was a lot of firing and shelling going on and finally he decided not to send out a party which was a considerable relief to us.

I sent the party back and went on with the Engineer to see the breastwork, but his Engineers met us on the way and we returned together. On our way back we had to fly for safety to a ditch full of water because they suddenly opened rapid fire in

our direction. I then went down to the Battalion headquarters of the battalion lining the trenches and saw a very cheery lot of Seaforths who were talking, eating and drinking in a ruined house not 300 yards behind the lines and in full view of the Germans. The Engineer and I then found our way home in safety

In a letter home to his mother Poulton-Palmer described his ride up the hill and the view in more detail:-

It is an extraordinary sight the two lines running across the face of the earth at varying distances from 100 to 500 yards apart; and back from them run the enormous series of communication and reserve trenches. And the funny thing is the absolute stillness and lack of movement and almost of sound as the snipers are not very vigorous here. All the houses and farms near by are ruins, so it is a curious sight.

and goes on to describe Hepburn's grave:

Will you tell Margaret that I saw in a wood suddenly the grave of Michael Hepburn. The Seaforths are in the Brigade to which we are attached and they are very careful of their graves. It was beautifully turfed over and planted with primrose and surrounded with a rough palisade of wood. The cross was plain deal painted with "In Memory of 2nd Lieut M Hepburn Killed in action Nov 1914. If his sister wanted I could get it photo'd I expect.

Saturday 10th April

The next two days saw the role of the Companies reversed. A and B were on digging duty and C and D went up for training in the front line now held by the Royal Irish Fusiliers and the Dublin Fusiliers. D were on the left of 4th Division near La Plus Douce.

Wheatley

Came out of trenches as soon as it was dark enough. Went back to barn in Romarin, dead tired.

Poulton-Palmer

At 6 pm the Company paraded to go into the trenches. Platoons were taken and intermingled with Companies of the Dublin Fusiliers. These had a breastwork just in front of where we were digging on the first evening. We had a long slow march down an avenue road. The Dublins were very humorous all the time and quite cheerful. We were a bit apprehensive! We then had a long march on what are called corduroy roads. These are short pieces of boughs fastened to planks to make a rough pathway over the mud. This path leads roughly parallel with the trenches in the valley about 600 yards behind. We passed several ruined cottages which are full of dead and the whole atmosphere was tainted with the smell of death. Occasional bullets flew overhead but they were mostly high. After about half a mile we moved diagonally up to the brow of the hill and just over the top came to the first of the breastworks where we were to live.

The ground behind was riddled with shell holes and broken with communication trenches full of water. The breastworks were dug about one foot into the ground and were made of sandbags and earth. There were frequent traverses but the works were not continuous, there being three separate works for the one company. They had parapets but not all of them were sufficiently high to be much good. After a prolonged wait outside the trenches we all squashed in. I found the dugout of the nearest platoon commander and sat with him. The dugouts were mostly in the front of the trench though some were in the rear. The men were divided up for duty with the Regulars. They did ordinary sentry duty and also went out on the listening post, some few yards in front of the trench. The night was very quiet, there being only sniping to which the Dublins never replied.

Later in the evening I went to see the Captain and went out with the second in command on a reconnoitering patrol. I carried a rifle and 15 rounds. We climbed through the wire and went a few yards forward and lay down, in the formation - Corporal and officer together, and two men in rear, interval ten yards, distance from officer about ten yards. They watched the rear and flank. I was lying for a quarter of an hour by a very decomposed cow! After listening hard we moved forward and again lay doggo. This went on for about an hour during which time we were perhaps 100 to 150 yards out. Then we returned, each pair covering the other two.

In a letter to his mother he wrote:-

Saturday night we went up to the trenches. We arrived there of course after dusk. It is an eerie feeling, as the flares go up every minute or so and you have to freeze as you are of course in easy range; but they can't see you if you freeze. The ground is absolutely broken by shell holes full of water so it is easy to have a bathe at any moment. It isn't very savoury on the way up as there are still a good many dead horses and cows unburied.

Sunday 11th April

Pte Wheatley

Resting all day, and relating experiences.

Poulton-Palmer

We all of course stood to arms at dawn and the Germans started a tremendous fusillade as is their custom. But soon after all was quiet and you could see the smoke rising from the fires all down our line and the German line. About 11 am our field guns put 12 shells on to the German trenches in front of us. Immediately the German guns opened on us putting 10 high explosive 6 in shells and the two last 'white hope' shrapnel - their back blast shrapnel. The result was 8 ft of parapet blown down, another bit shaken down,, one man with a dislocated shoulder of ours and five men of the Dublins wounded, one seriously. As they

were all within 3 yards of me, I was lucky. The brass head of a shell shot through the parapet, missed a man by an inch and went into a dugout where we obtained it.

The shelling is very frightening - the report, the nearing whistle and the burst and then you wonder if you are alive. Crouching under the parapet is all right for the high explosives but for shrapnel it is no good, so that's why they mix them up. The men - the Dublins - were quite as frightened as we were as a rule but some didn't care a damn. Some were praying, some eating breakfast, one was counting his Rosary, another next door was smoking a cigarette and cheering up our fellows. After a prolonged pause we rose from our constrained position and went on with our occupations; but it unnerved me for a bit.

After lunch the sun shone gloriously and we had three or four aeroplanes (British) over us; these went right over the German lines on reconnoitering trips. They were heavily shelled and I counted 134 shrapnel shells round one aeroplane. It was a beautiful sight, only embarrassing because the shrapnel kept dropping on us. Soon after, just as it was getting dark, one of our aeroplanes came flying low along our line. All the trenches opposite opened a furious fusillade hitting our parapet frequently. Our guns then opened on their trenches and I was afraid they would start on us. The evening ended quietly.

After their experiences in the trenches the battalion were able to shelter in the barn at Romarin and reflect on their experiences. Pte R Ludlow of Hungerford took the opportunity to write home to his parents, describing his first impressions of trench life:-

We have been in the trenches for 48 hours; we went in on Thursday night and came out last night. It was a very exciting experience for us all but we were very lucky for out of the two companies that went in - A and B Companies - only one man was wounded.

Well it isn't so terrible as I anticipated. The worst danger is in going in and getting out but once you get in you are practically safe unless you poke your head a little too high. Our Captain had a shot go right through his cap.

Our trenches were about 450 yards from the Germans the first day and next day we got moved to some more about 600 yards away. We had to go in with some of the Warwicks who are 'some lads'; they don't care a bit and are just the boys for recruits to go in with.

It was very exciting the second night we were in. The Germans were shelling some place behind us nearly all night, but it did not affect us at all and we were all surprised at ourselves for we thought it would be something terrible; but instead it seemed to come quite as a matter of course, and all we were concerned about was in getting our food as, my word! It does give one an appetite. We get plenty of grub in the trenches but water is not so plentiful as it can only be got at night so we have to be very careful with it. I do not know when we are going back in the trenches again, but to tell you the truth, I am looking forward to it. It was lovely and dry in our trench and some of the dug-outs are very comfortable. [TX00292]

Pte Frank Earley of Reading had a somewhat different view:-

"We are sleeping in barns and have moved several times since we have been over here. I have seen Leslie Grinstead, Fred Love and Horace Truss (who was at the office of this paper) and they are all looking well. We have been in action and are having a rest at the present time. We were in the trenches 24 hours and I was on outpost with two other of our chaps. It was a bit of an experience as we were only about 100 yards from the Germans.

They send up flares at night that light up the surroundings just like daylight and if you move your foot or any part of your body you get a shower of bullets round you. The worst part of trench fighting I think is getting in and out of the trenches as once you are in it is fairly safe except of course if they shell the trenches accurately. Then it must be hell upon earth.

"They tried to shell us with lyddite but they did not find out our trench although they found out one of the others. An Irish regiment was in our trench and a better set of fellows you could not wish for; it makes you proud to belong to an army where such men as those are. They take things as they come and don't worry and crack jokes as the shells whistle over.

It's a rotten business trench fighting and I think if we could once get them on the run the war would soon be over. There are a good few Territorials. I see Jack (the writer's brother) almost every day as he is only 50 yards down the road.

The people seem religious out here. In every house I have been in there is a crucifix and by the side of the road a shrine, a small house where they pray. I hope that Reading will win the league and also Chelsea the cup. [TX00294]

Monday 12th April

The trench training was over and, in preparation for their own spell of duty, they marched to Steenwerck and were billeted in farms around Le Grand Beaumart, described as their best billets so far. They left Romarin at 0930.

Capt Cruttwell:-

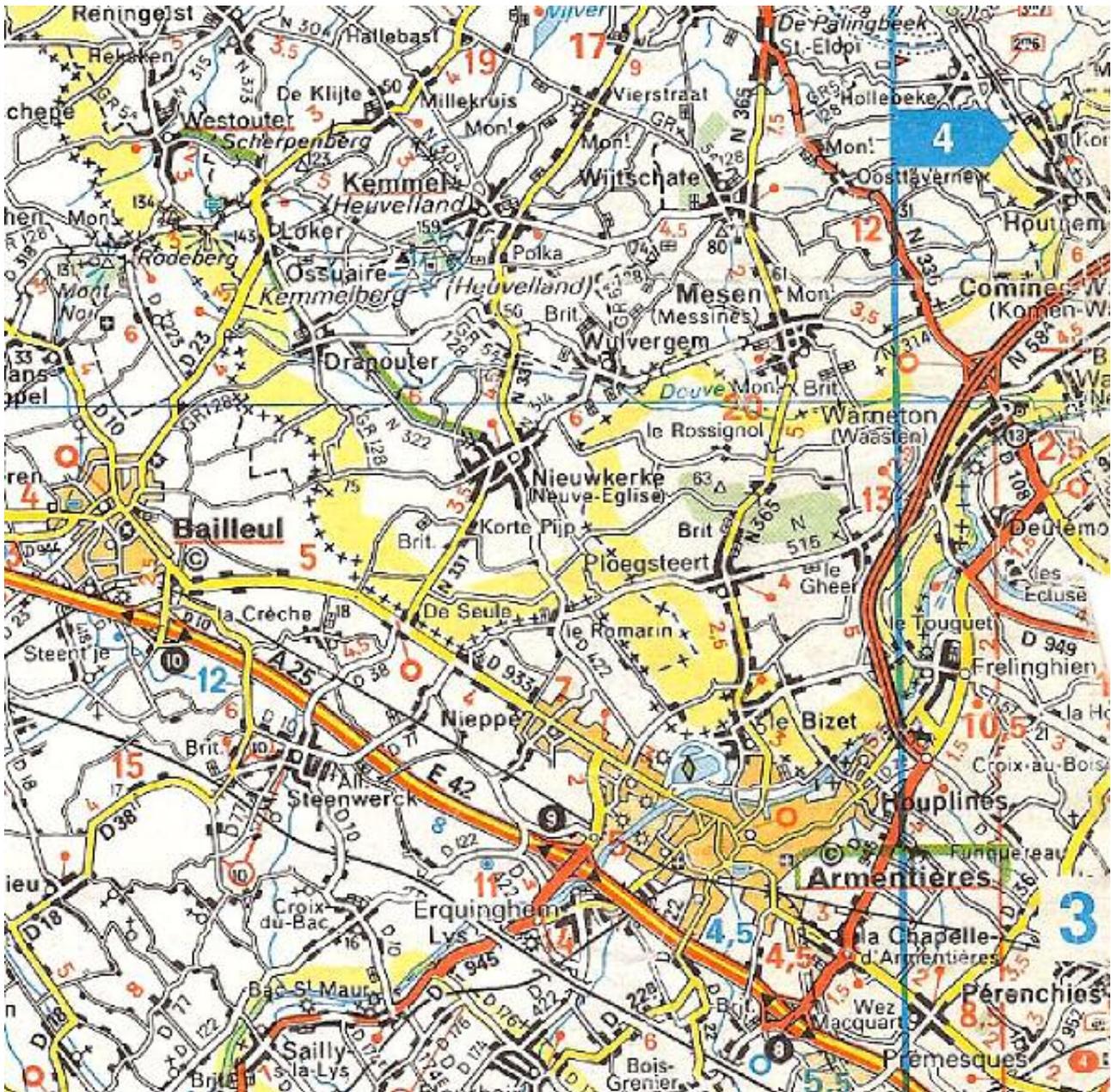
On the conclusion of the attachment to the regular Brigade we marched back to billets at Steenwerck, a station on the Lille line midway between Bailleul and Armentieres. Here we endeavoured unsuccessfully, with the aid of a French officer, to locate a chain of signalling lamps impudently displayed from Bailleul right away towards the German lines.

Pte Wheatley

The Bn having all finished their trench instruction. Go back to Steenwerk for a 4 days rest. We arrive there in the afternoon the best billet which we have had since we came out.

We crowd in the farmer's house at night time, and worry his two daughters to death, showing off our broken French.

We kid the old man on to sing the French version of Tip-I-addy I-ay. Not a bad evening.



The area around Ploegsteert 7th April to 23rd June 1915

Poulton-Palmer

At 2.30 am I had the Platoon out of the trench and formed up and found all present. This was a bit ticklish as it had to be done standing just behind the trench. Then we met Thorne and got back to the road, met other platoons and so home to Romarin for breakfast. No sooner had we arrived than we were ordered to move in an hour and march with the rest of the Battalion to Steenwerck, where we arrived at 11 am and went into billets in farms at the south end of the village, by the Estaires cross roads, and lay down in peace.

Tuesday 13th April 1915

The day was spent resting.

Pte Wheatley:-

Cleaning up and getting ready for our next turn in the trenches. Captain H cheers us up again by telling us that it is a hotter part of the line, which the Prussians are holding. How does he know? Walt tells me, he likes the life, I am not so sure about that, I think its rather unhealthy at times. Still everything has its drawbacks.

Poulton-Palmer wrote to his friend R W Dugdale:

I am sitting outside a little farm in a rest billet some ten miles back. I have to stay out as the room stinks so inside. We are all

full of beans, though why we haven't had any casualties I can't think. I suppose in this war one bullet hits in three or four million fired. They snip all the time and hit nothing. We go up to the trenches again Thursday. Tomorrow we play rugby against the 4th Division - it ought to be quite amusing.

Wednesday 14th April 1915

On April 13th a Rucker match was played at Pont de Nieppe between teams representing the 4th and 48th Divisions, and resulted in a victory for the latter. Here Lieut. Ronald Poulton-Palmer of the 1st/4th, who captained the side, played his last game. He had been an England international threequarter. He commented in a letter:-

The match was quite amusing. We won 14-0 and there were millions of Generals there.

Actually the score was 17-0. In his journal he wrote:-

After breakfast drove into Nieppe in a motor lorry to see an exhibition of bomb throwing. After that we drove in a motor ambulance to Armentieres to have lunch and to shop. This town seems none the worse and there is plenty of business, though everything is expensive.

After lunch we moved to Nieppe and I played rucker for the South Midland Division against the 4th Division. It was an amusing game; we had opposite us players like W J Tyrrell [Ireland captain], H J S Morton [Cambridge and England]; J G Kep[pell] [Ireland trials]; W P Hinton [Ireland full back] and were refereed by Basil Maclear [Ireland] I had a goodish side, mostly 5th Gloucesters and we won 14-0 but they stuck it well considering their condition. Several of the Liverpool Scottish from Ypres came over including Dum Cunningham and Dick Lloyd. It was splendid to see so many rucker players about. I changed in the room of the Captain of the 4th Divisional Staff. They lived in great style, quite unnecessary I thought. In fact they rather bored me. They ought to do a turn in the trenches with us all. Back to bed.

They played only 25 minutes each way as the 4th Division players had come from active duty in the trenches. The referee, Capt Basil Maclear of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and Ireland was killed a few weeks later. One of the touch judges was Lt Col G F Collett DSO who had played for Cambridge and Gloucestershire he supplied Ronald's father with a full team list:-

48th Division

full back	Pte C Cook	1/5 Glosters	wounded
three quarters	Pte Washbourne	1/5 Glosters	
	Pte S Hamblin	1/5 Glosters	
	Lt R W Poulton-Palmer	1/4 R Berks	Liverpool & England - killed
	Pte F Webb	1/5 Glosters	wounded
half backs	Pte S Sysum	1/5 Glosters	killed
	L Cpl A Lewis	1/5 Glosters	MC & Bar
Forwards	Lt C R M F Cruttwell	1/4 R Berks	Oxford trials
	Lt L R C Sumner	1/5 Glosters	MC - wounded
	Capt F H Deakin	1/5 Warwicks	Moseley & Midland Counties - wounded
	Pte J Harris	1/5 Glosters	Gloucester - wounded
	L Cpl Millard	1/5 Glosters	killed
	Pte A Cook	1/5 Glosters	Gloucester - wounded
	Pte S Smart	1/5 Glosters	Gloucestershire & England - wounded
	another unnamed		

4th Division

Full back	W P Hinton	Ireland
Three quarters	J N Thompson	London Scottish
unknown	W J Tyrrell	Ireland
	H J S Morton	Cambridge U & England
	J G Keppell	Ireland trials
	R Fraser	Cambridge U and Scotland

D Cummingham

Liverpool Scottish

R Lloyd

Liverpool Scottish

7 unknown

Holding the Line for the First Time

Le Gheer - 15th April 1915

On April 15th the Battalion moved up again, and took over for the first time its own line from the 2nd Hants at Le Gheer. They left their billets at 08:45 and marched to Oosthove Farm via Rabot and Nieppe, arriving at 11:15. At 16:00 they marched on to Ploegsteert to take over from the Hants.

Capt Cruttwell:-

The trenches ran here with singular angles and salients along the east face of Ploegsteert Wood; many disconnected posts, which could only be relieved by night, strong points in ruined houses with such suggestive names as First and Second German House were reminiscent rather of outposts than orthodox trench warfare.

The weather was bright, the enemy entirely inactive, and the wood, with its oxlips and other spring flowers, its budding branches unscarred by shell fire, was a picture of charm rare in modern warfare.

Pte Wheatley

Left Steenwerk after breakfast and passed through Nieppe and Armentieres and arrived at Ploegsteert. (Hyde Park Corner) at 5 o'clock. Went in trenches, our Division takes over the line (Ploegsteert Woods). Relieved 2nd Hants.

Hampshires go to Dardanelles I was sent back at midnight with two more (Smiler and Scout Burrows) for rations which we had to draw in the woods at the back of the trenches. What a muck up it was, sorting rations out in a wood, black as hell, in the middle of the night. Picture me?

Poulton-Palmer

We left Steenwerck about 8.30 am and marched to a farm about one mile behind Ploegsteert. Here we stayed all day and moved off about 4 pm for Ploegsteert. We then moved straight on to the wood and took a corduroy path called Regent Street through the wood. After about 200 yards walking, passing various breastworks in the wood, we came up to our reserve breastworks held by two reserve platoons. We (platoon 130 pushed up to some breastworks called the Tourist Lines and from these sent out advanced posts to breastworks in the edge of the wood. There was a further position, a ruined house, right in the edge of the wood about 200 yards from the German trenches, which were plainly visible. It was quite amusing walking about in the wood, apparently in full view of the Germans who however could not see us. There was continuous sniping but fortunately no one was hit. The change over from the Hants Regiment was soon accomplished and we settled down for the night. I had to take out a listening post to a house across a stream about 100 yards further than the house mentioned before. This was a bit ticklish as it was very near the Germans and the flares fell right among us. But it was a quiet night and nothing of event happened.

Friday 16th April

The Battalion suffered their first front line casualties - one wounded and one killed (Wilfred Hubert Dix 2753 of Caversham). Dix was killed by one of his comrades by mistake. Poulton-Palmer finds a man asleep at his post.

Wheatley

In the trenches between 70 and 80 yds from the German lines. Too close to be pleasant, snipers very troublesome. Narrow escape while fetching water showed to much head. Wet night.

Poulton-Palmer

In the daylight we saw our position and learnt various intricate paths through the wood. The wood in front of the Tourist Lines was thoroughly wired and so there was no continuous defensive position, but really a series of breastworks making a kind of outpost position, with the picquet in the first German House and breastworks; and the support in the Tourist Lines and the reserve where our two reserve platoons were. It was ticklish work getting to the advanced posts by daylight but the Germans were very quiet and only an occasional sniper interfered with our repose. A certain amount of shelling went on, but it was beyond us into the woods

That evening was dark and raining and the going on the corduroy paths very difficult. We had to use electric torches with a certain amount of risk, but the night turned out quite quiet. I had arranged to take out the relief for the listening post but it was so dark that I decided to take out only the Lance Corporal and tell the post they must stick it till dawn. On arrival I found that all was well but they thought they had seen a man in front, but after listening a long time it seemed to be nothing. While there a German flare fell within a foot of us, so it was close work.

On returning, before crossing the stream I thought I saw something move, so had to wait five minutes till a flare came up. Then I found it was a barrel! On my way up to the post I found Lance Corporal ----- asleep at his post on duty. I had him arrested and I fear a Field General Court Martial for him; but his nerves are quite smashed by the shelling and that should count in his favour.

Saturday 17th April

They were relieved by one company of the 7th Worcesters and two of the 4th Glosters and marched back to billets at Romarin.

Pte Wheatley

Left the trenches after dark, while loading the limbers up at the back of the lines was fired on and had to leave hurriedly. Lost some stuff, but no-one hit. Reached Rabeau about 12 o'clock at night.

Found no billet when we arrived, so dog tired that we fell asleep in the road for about an hour. When the captain fell us in and marched us to an old barn, where we slept the night and part of next day.

Capt Cruttwell

Forty-eight hours only were spent in this idyllic spot before we returned to Romarin to the accompaniment of the roar of mines, artillery, and concentrated rifle fire and machine gun fire, which heralded the sudden outbreak of the Battle of Hill 60, 4 miles to the north, just before sunset on April 17th.

Our relief of the 4th Division was now complete, and our instructors marched to billets in Bailleul, only to be thrown within a few days into the furnace of the second Battle of Ypres. Before leaving they placed a great board just outside the Regent Street entrance to the wood, stating that it had been taken by the 4th Division in October, 1914, and handed over intact to the 48th Division.

Poulton-Palmer

A beautiful morning. No event except shelling. I had to attend twice at Battalion headquarters for court of enquiry on ----. It is a beautiful walk to the farm where the headquarters are, through the wood blooming with cowslips and bluebells, past two or three beautifully kept graves. On arrival there I attended the funeral of a man in A Company shot by a comrade by mistake in the trenches the previous day. It was in a pretty little cemetery in a field, entire a military one. The losses round here must have been very high - mostly East Lancashires and Hampshires.

About 5 pm the 7th Worcesters arrived to take over from us. I got the platoon off and stayed behind to see the officer in. I had to furnish him with a lance corporal to show him the listening post. Then I got off to Romarin where we found our old billets in the barn, the officers in the farmhouse. Slept like a log.

Plugstreet 17th April to 8th May 1915

Captain Cruttwell reviews the situation:-

The line held by the Division for the next two months was wholly within Belgian territory; with a frontage of about 5,000 yards, which stretched from a point about 500 yards south-east of Wulverghem on the north to just below Le Gheer. The 143rd Brigade were on the left, 145th in the centre, and the 144th on the right. We were on the left of the 145th, and worked on a self-relieving system by which two Companies spent alternate periods of four days in the trenches and in local reserve.

They held a front of seven hundred yards forming an abrupt curve in the low ground between the wood and the River Douve. The trenches in this sector were in reality sandbag breastworks offering a tempting target to and poor protection against shell fire. The organisation of the line was also extremely incomplete. No support line existed, the only rearward defences being a collection of breastworks and strong points within the wood, although a reserve line was dug within the next six weeks through Romarin and Neuve Eglise.

B and C Companies on the right shared trenches 37 and 38, also named Berkshire and Argyll; A and D in turn. inhabited trenches 39 and 40, or Sutherland and Oxford, with a total frontage of 700 yards. The trenches ran along low ground between the wood and the River Douve; on the left the famous hill of Messines peered into our positions, and though itself barely 200 feet above sealevel loomed like a mountain among the mole-heaps of Flanders.

The distance between the opposing lines varied from 450 to 250 yards. Reliefs could be carried out by day across the open on the right. to Prowse Point (called after Major Prowse, of the Somerset L.I., who here organised a successful counter-attack in November, 1914, and afterwards was killed as a brigadier in the Somme battles); but the left was much in the air, as the only communication trench led up to some reserve breastworks near the Messines road, barely shoulder high, and themselves incapable of secure daylight approach, and all rations, stores, etc., had to be brought up overland by night over bullet-swept ground, but with negligible casualties.

The amenities of trench life depend almost wholly on the enemy and the weather. In both these respects we were fortunate. The Saxons who faced us lived up to their reputation, and apart from some accurate sniping. which did more damage to periscopes than to human life, made no attempt to annoy us.

Sunday 18th April

A rest day at Romarin and the officers inspect the trenches they are about to occupy. As they had left the trenches the previous evening a furious battle for hill 60 erupted about six miles north of where they were and they could

hear the rumble of the guns all day.

Pte Wheatley

Had first bath in a ditch, very cold and muddy, still better than nothing and I wanted a wash very bad. Went with Walt to try to buy a mouth organ, no success.

Poulton-Palmer

Woke expecting to have a peaceful day. About mid-day was warned to go up to our new trenches, at present held by the 4th Oxforde, as we were taking them over tomorrow. I was to go up to see round them. You can enter these by day, so I went up in the afternoon and got a guide from the Oxford headquarters. A short walk

along the edge of the wood brought us to the communication trench and so into the trench well to the right of our line. Moved down to this and got to our trench. This is a top-hole one, strong in front, apparently good wire, good parados in part, not bad dugouts and apparently never shelled by the enemy. There is also a farm called Antons Farm which is held by a platoon and fortified (badly) as a supporting point - a bit of a shell-trap I thought. Had some food with Dashwood and Rose and then went back home the short way across the fields to the Messines road. Then to bed at 12.30



Anton's Farm in May 1915

Monday April 19th 1915

They relieved the 4th Oxforde at Prowse Point with 2 Companies and one platoon in the Oxford trench, 1 company in the Argyle and Sutherland Trench, one platoon in the Berkshire Trench and Battalion HQ with the rest at the Piggeries. They had the Warwick Brigade to their left and the Bucks on the right. D Company were on the left in the Argyle & Sutherland Trenches and were later relieved by A Company 13 Platoon was first in the cellars of Antons Farm.

Poulton-Palmer wrote to his mother while basking in the sunshine:

I went up yesterday to look at the bit we take over tonight. We go there tonight instead of Wednesday. They are very safe, beautifully made, 300 yards from the Germans and have not been shelled for months... So the prospect is rosy.

It is so hard to write lying on the grass on ones front! It is a gorgeous day. We go in tonight for four days, then into local reserve for four, then in again for four then back here for four days rest. You can get up to these trenches by daylight individually but a whole company goes up by night to save going along the communications trenches. We hear no news. I haven't seen a paper for ten days, though they do come up to us, but there are very few of them.

Poulton-Palmer (journal)

A beautiful morning. Basked in the sun at Romarin all day. Moved off about 6 pm and marched to Hyde Park Corner: there picked up rations and guides and moved to the trenches. Met Dashwood half way there. A few bullets about but nobody hit. Soon in and relieved Oxforde who left No 13 Platoon in the house [Antons Farm]. This is a poor job for they cannot come by day as the Germans must not know it is occupied or they would shell it. So I have to work them all night.

Quite a quiet night, we did two hour shifts by night and four hour by day. I now take up second in command in trenches and am in charge of work entirely.

Tuesday April 20th 1915

Two men were wounded while they were in this tour. In the field message book the routine orders included:

Lt Palmer will be in charge of all repairs and improvements to the trench and works, Platoon commanders will report to him by 3 pm daily their suggestions. They will detail such NCOs and men as Lt Palmer may require.

Poulton-Palmer

We got very little work done last night, though I went out with two others and carefully examined the wire. I found it very good though it wanted a certain amount of work on it. The morning was quiet and fine and we simply basked in the sun. Later in the day we were rather bothered by a sniper - called Sir Charles - who made made very good shooting but did no damage. We had no loopholes in his direction and so could not spot him. That night I got a certain amount of work done but it is not yet sufficiently systematic. Quiet night. The plan I am going on in the trench is as on opposite page. Wire parapet, parados with dugouts inside and spaces behind with communicating passage, carefully screened from front and flank where we can lie, cook etc so all work must fit in with that idea.

Wednesday April 21st 1915

Poulton-Palmer

Another lovely day. These days are much the same so I shall take a survey of the whole time. The work is the most important thing as I am in charge of it and my time is filled up with it - by day getting the work organised for the night. This has got better and better and now I have a good system. Of course it is nearly all done at night. It is curious, at stand to at about 8 pm to hear the sniping dying down and then suddenly the tap tap of the German party starting. Then we know we are safe as there is a kind of mutual agreement not to fire on each other's working and ration parties. So out we go and hardly a shot is fired. The men betray the usual good humour at it all and are in perfect spirits, only betraying annoyance at the absence of biscuits and the presence of biscuits (not H&Ps!). They have grown quite callous and you hear them whistling and shouting while working on the parapet in full moonlight. We did a good deal of work in our four days. My plan was to superintend till 12.0 or 12.30 then to sleep till stand to at 3.0 am then sleep till breakfast at 9.0 am, but at times I was on duty at 4.0 am or 8.0 am so sleep was a bit short at the end. The sniper was active and we haven't got him yet. He knocked a hole in three periscopes and one shot glanced off and wounded one man in platoon 14 - Bennett. There was some shelling of farms in rear and the chateau but none of our trenches and we had a kind of dress circle view of it, so it was quite amusing.

The Bennett referred to could have been either 2426 George H or 2740 Herbert George

Thursday April 22nd 1915

Poulton-Palmer wrote to his father:

Just a line before I turn in to sleep at 9.0 am. Here we are in our third day in the trenches. They are the ones we have permanently taken up and the whole Brigade is now on its own with the other two Brigades of the Division on its right and left. We have splendid breastwork trenches, extremely well made, parapets beautifully bullet proof. This was the result of three months occupation by a Territorial Regiment. They admittedly work much better than Regulars! It is a very quiet part and has not been shelled for two months (touch wood). The last regiment only had 22 casualties in three months.

But there is lots of work to be done and I am works manager for our Company. So it is interesting. You would simply love all the schemes for improvements and making dugouts and improvements for drainage etc.

Rations and material come up each night to us though as a matter of fact we can get away from the trenches by day along a devious route. But we always relieve and ration across the open at night.

Sniping is all that goes on and in this at present they have an absolute superiority. We have constructed steel plate loopholes but cannot find the brutes. When we do we shall have them as we have some wonderful shots. They got one of our men in the throat last night but it is not a bad wound. The trouble is to locate the snipers. We reconnoitered to where we thought he was last night but he wasn't there. Aeroplane shelling and the shelling of farms is the only other excitement. I'll write better after we are relieved tomorrow night. We then go into local reserve for four days and that means any amount of digging parties at night.

We heard the Battle at St Eloi last week when we blew up a mine and captured some trenches. The sky was illuminated and the noise of the French 75s was tremendous - also the roll of musketry.

Friday 23rd April

The promised relief came from the 4th Oxforde and two companies went to huts in the woods while the other two went to Ploegsteert village.

Wheatley

Back to Ploegsteert. Billeted at Brigade stores. Having nice weather.

Decent house where we are, only windows all broken, but tear the carpets off the floor and use them as curtains, we make ourselves at home.

Walt has parcel come, his stepmother makes nice cake anyway.

Poulton-Palmer

This evening we came out. The maxim was a bit busy but it quietened down and all got out safely. We had to go straight back to Ploegsteert and then back - 150 of us to dig at a part of our line, on the right, where it is being joined up and strengthened. It is only about 100 yards from the Germans, but the same good feeling prevails and we weren't fired on. In fact it is safe to walk anywhere by night. Home to Ploegsteert.

Saturday 24th April 1915

Poulton-Palmer wrote to R W Dugdale:

We came out after four days in last night and immediately went off digging and 1/4 hours rest. The whole thing as a war is a screaming farce. This is honest fact. We went up to a part of the line near here which has a gap of 200 yards in it. Here Territorial Engineers are building a magnificent breastwork and parapets and Territorial supply working parties. The joke is we are 120 yards from the German trench and about 80 from the German working parties. And we make the hell of a row, laugh,

talk, light pipes etc and sing and nobody fires a shot. except one old sniper who seems to fire high on purpose; and yet when the flares go up we stand stock still so as not to be seen!! And we of course dare not work there by day. It is a farce. If you were here now, 1 1/2 miles from the firing line in one direction and 900 yards in another you would never know there was anything unusual on. There is no sound of guns or rifles.

The Germans are about 55 yards away and are very quiet. They sometimes blow a motor horn and sometimes sing the Marseillaise and Tipperary. They started firing a maxim just before we filed out last night but they let us go in peace.

Sunday 25th April 1915

Poulton-Palmer wrote to his mother:-

Here we are very happy and peaceful. The mail didn't come in yesterday owing to great movements of troops so I don't know if I have got any letters from you to come. But you have been awfully kind in writing so often and it is the great thing to get the mail in the evening in the trenches.

We are in a village very much battered about with shells. The church is in ruins though the altar has escaped damage and the spire still remains. They shell the village at times but haven't done so since we were here. We came out on Friday night and go in again Tuesday evening.

Every evening we take out vast working parties to work at a big gap in our trenches which has to be filled. We furnish about 750 men a night and we work in a two hour shift.

It is Sunday today and we had Holy Communion in the school yard - the altar a pile of ammunition boxes covered with a mackintosh sheet. It was not quite ideal because we couldn't kneel down. I should have liked it better in a field behind.

I had a fine bath and change yesterday, not having removed my clothes for five days! nor washed as water is a difficulty in the trenches..

The snipers are very good shots. We had three periscopes smashed and yet they only show 3x3 inches over the parapet and the German trenches are quite 500 yards away. But we think they have snipers in the clover in front. We hope to be able to silence them soon. But at present we can't spot them at all. We are all very well but I don't gather the idea that the war will be over soon. I believe the Germans are very strong opposite to us.

PS There's a gun of ours popping off just behind this village. It makes the most awful bang each time and nearly jerks me out of the room.

Poulton-Palmer wrote to Capt C P Symonds

The whistle of the approaching shell is pretty terrifying. I don't think I shall get used to it in a hurry. Luckily the trenches we hold are very quiet. They don't shell us but they smash all the farms about 400 yards in the rear into small bits trying to find artillery observers and Batt H Qs. It is a pretty peaceful existence. There are a lot of gaps to fill in our line and we work away cheerily and the old Germans 150 yards away do the same. The Bucks are only 70 yards away in one part. As they came in the other day they heard them shout "Hullo Bucks - you've got a damned good shot in no 15 Platoon" and so they had. The men are splendid. I have had one breakdown, a poor fellow who was twice shelled, once in the open with fifteen shrapnel on him. His nerve went and he couldn't sleep. He never reported sick but I found him asleep on Sentry G. He got a big sentence but will be in hospital and will probably be discharged.

But I am proud of the Territorials. Their work in the trenches is infinitely better than the regulars. Any good trenches have always been built by them. The Engineers say that their working parties do three times the work of regulars. I know we always finish the job 3/4 hour before time. They never grouse and in fact I'd rather have them than anybody else.

Monday 26th April 1915

Poulton-Palmer made the final entry in his journal at Ploegsteert.

Here we are placed in the local school close to the church. The church has been badly shelled and it is terrible to see inside. The school has had all its windows smashed by shrapnel but is otherwise all right. The men are very comfortable. Challoner and I lay on a mattress in a ground floor room very comfortably. This period of four days passed very much in the same way from day to day so I will lump it all together. On the first day I had to attend the court-martial of Lance Corporal ----- who was asleep at his post in the Tourist Lines. He got five years penal servitude, commuted by the Brigadier to three months Field Punishment no 1, and now he's off to hospital with his nerve quite shattered. Each night we had to dig in the same place though one night one man had his hat shot through. By day we sat about and slept and on one occasion we had a football match between two platoons. I took part and we took a beating, Occasional aeroplane shelling was all we saw. This brings us to Tuesday April 27th.

He must have written the above entry on the 26th although it is dated the 24th.

Tuesday 27th April 1915

In the evening they went back into the front line relieving the 4th Oxforths with three companies, two in the front line and one in the Berkshire Trench.

Poulton-Palmer wrote to W Dimpleby

We go back into the trenches tonight. All quiet here. The Germans shout out "Don't shoot, we are sick of this. I am a waiter at Lockhart's Edgeware Road"

Wednesday 28th April 1915

The line was re-arranged leaving two companies forward, one in the Oxford and Argyle trenches and one in the Siutherland and Berkshire trenches. one company was in reserve in Hunterston North trench and another in the Piggeries. One man died of wounds (Pte F W Giles)

Writing to his mother on the 29th Poulton-Palmer describes a death.

Yesterday the Germans shelled a big farm about 600 yards behind us and set it on fire. It was a fine sight to watch.

Yesterday was a most extraordinary day. I went out of the trench after breakfast (you can get along the communication trench by day) to see some bomb throwing and then came back, watched this shelling, the a poor fellow (Pte F W Giles) was shot and fell right on to me. Then I stayed behind to show the relieving Company the work to be done.

Then I came back here and in the wood I heard a nightingale singing more perfectly than I have ever heard it before. And so home to bed in this lovely spot.

Thursday 29th April 1915

Pte Wheatley

Entered trenches No 3 Gun position. Starting now to build trenches up. Working day and night constructing new trench. One good thing we get plenty of food, and cook all our own rations in trench. I generally do cooking, except when my turn for sentry interrupts it. I am accepted as the best tea maker in team. Of course the real success here, is making a lot out of nothing. Its a good job they don't see me making some of the stuff

Poulton-Palmer writing to his father, they obviously were having problems with the mail. He writes about the sniper problem

Please note that I number my letters from today so please do the same then you can see if all arrive.

It is of course quite impossible to expose yourself during the day. The sentries, of which there are very few by day, use periscopes and they do not keep them up in the same place too long otherwise they are shot through. But at night sniping stops. At Stand-to - ie at dusk - when everybody is up at the parapet, sniping stops. Then you know its safe to start and also its safe for the ration parties to come up, as they do, right in the open. Its simply a mutual agreement I suppose.

There is then no sniping by night hardly. There is a certain amount but it is very wide and you don't worry about it.

Yes I think they have had the advantage of knowing the ground. We can't trace their whereabouts yet at all. There is a house just behind our lines and we can get there in daytime and we have men in the roof for hours with telescopes trying to trace them, but they can see nothing.

As you say they must come out at dawn and go back at dusk, if they are in front of their trench. But that is not certain. If we can't find them by movement we shall go out at night and try and see if they come out and generally reconnoitre the ground in front. This ground is getting very thick with long grass and will soon be very good cover. It is quite absurd to see the quite immoveable landscape with no movement of any kind on it, and yet to hear the most accurate shots on our parapet, shots which have killed two men dead in the last two days, who foolishly put their heads up carelessly in a low part of the parapet to look back. Don't worry about me in this respect. I am in charge of the work and the parapet is being raised and immensely strengthened and thickened. We are doing 50 men at it during every hour of dark, and during the day I am always thinking of it. and keeping my head down. It is only one bit of the trench about 50 yards long.

The bullets come in through the top of the parapet in one piece I think. But that is being rectified now. The rain has eroded the front face and left it a bit thin. And of course they come just over the top. Some of the shots look as if he was perched up high. But we have examined every tree with a telescope and can't find him.

It is simpler to go out at night and conceal yourself than to go up by a sap head, though of course they often enter that way. We have a German sap somewhere near us but it is full of water and disused. We have had instructions issued about obnoxious gases. It is a clever wheeze on their part.

About work. I am works manager. During the afternoon I go with the platoon commanders and consider the work in their particular section. All this work has to fit in with the general policy of the trench which we have outlined and placed in the logbook of the trench. This work includes wire, parapet, firing steps, parados, dugouts and rear communication trench and drainage. The rear trench is important as then I shall have a safe path by day along the trench instead of going into the fire trench and so round the traverses.

No we have no instruments to detect sappers, but it is very easy to hear them, so say the Engineers. Yes we have traced bullets by bits off two sandbags in parapet and parados.

How splendid of you to have a passport. If I ever get leave I will wire and you will come. But at present all leave is out of the question. They want all the troops up at Ypres and we have a long line to hold. Snipers are not behind our line, we are sure. But you get stray bullets from behind (not in our trench luckily) because

He goes on to describe a drawing of the wiggly line of the trenches showing how the shots can come either from the

British or the German side. This letter was followed up by one to his mother:-

Well we went to the trenches Tuesday and were only there one day when we were relieved by another company and sent to reserve for three days. There has been a re-arrangement and we are now taking over a stretch of trench (the same as we were in the last four days and a bit more) and relieving by companies so that it is always the Berkshires who are in. So we are in a beautiful wood about 1700 yards back. It is perfectly lovely here, absolutely boiling. I bathed today in a very dirty pond just outside the wood. We live in log shanties and eat all our meals out of doors.

Our only diversions are making various wood things such as hurdles, chairs, bowers, shelters and pegs and stakes and watching the aeroplanes being fired at overhead and hearing the German shells buzzing leisurely over the wood to burst beyond us, trying to find our guns who reply as leisurely. It is funny hearing them buzzing gently overhead and then - bang!.

Yes Battock and a man in my company have had a cap shot through.

Captain Cruttwell describes the huts, referred to above as shanties.

These huts were built by the Rifle Brigade at Hunston North, in the centre of the wood, on the E Side of Messines Road, between Ploegsteert and Hyde Park Corner. Here we planted a garden round the log hut which served as sleeping place and mess, wire bunks in two tiers being arranged round the walls. This was the best camp in the wood and the safest though bullets came through occasionally. Fatigues when in support consisted mainly of building up a gap at the NE angle of the wood where no defences existed.

Friday 30th April 1915

Saturday 1st May 1915

Sunday 2nd May 1915

One man was wounded

Monday 3rd May 1915

Poulton-Palmer' last day

Tuesday 4th May 1915

Poulton-Palmer wrote three letters this day as he was waiting in the reserve trenches for the evening's work. The first was to Mrs Gripper, his former landlady at Chelmsford.

I was woken up this morning by shelling and found we were being shelled. Kauenhoven's dugout was completely smashed by a little Willie but luckily he was the one officer out of his dugout on duty. Old ---- our old drunk cook to was just out of his dugout and it was blown up. They were aiming at a house, Antons Farm, which is part of our line and which we use for sniping from. But they hurt nobody as nobody was in. They knocked the chimney down and theres another big hol in the roof.

..... I am sitting in our dining room which is dug well down and faces the rear. I am getting a little tired of the view of the cabbage field in our rear. The front view is more interesting but also more dangerous to look at

The second was to his sister Margaret:-

Just as I was proceeding to open them [letters] at about 12 pm as I was at work all the early part of the night, we had to stand to as a Brigade order. It was maddening - three hours messing about doing nothing. Then I got to bed at 4.0 am and was woken up and pulled out because we were being shelled and it is safer to be under the parapet than in a dugout.

His final letter was to his father which was never posted but found among his papers. He first repeated the things he had said to Mrs Gripper:

....Otherwise we have been very peaceful only it rained a lot and that doesn't make things very pleasant. But we have installed a splendid French oven stolen from the aforesaid Antons Farm in a kitchen dugout by the officers mess and we have all kinds of roast joints and red wine and Apollinaris water at 1 fr 15 a bottle.

Wednesday 5th May 1915

As usual Poulton-Palmer was in charge of the D Company working parties which went on on their last night in the front line. It was a very dark night, the moon was not yet up and there was a slight fog. In view of the sentiments he had expressed earlier about the 'pact' between the Germans and the British at this point on the line he felt reasonably safe. He was liaising with the works manager of another company and then he moved to look at a group of workers near the new officer's mess dugout in Trench 40 which was covered with corrugated iron and had just spoken with Sergeant Perrins. He was standing on Captain Thornes dugout and watching men build a new dugout in front of the mess when he was hit by a stray bullet which went in at the level of the third rib on the right side and hit his heart. He died instantaneously, falling into the arms of Sergeant Brand. Captain thorne, Challoner and the doctor were on the scene fairly quickly but there was nothing they could do He died at 00:20 on the 5th. At stand-to that morning many of the men of old F Company, which he commanded at Chelmsford, were crying.

His body was carried to the Field Ambulance in the Nunnery on the Le Bizet road in Ploegsteert and passed through the lines of the 1st/7th Warwicks. He was the first officer of the 1st/4th Battalion to fall and it was not until the Battle of the Somme that another one would fall. His death affected virtually everyone in the Brigade as he well known, famous for his sporting achievements and popular. Sergeant A C Tomlinson of the 1st/7th Warwicks wrote home to tell them of the death and the shock it was when they realised whose body it was.

Thursday May 6th 1915

Poulton-Palmer was buried by the Bishop of Pretoria (Dr Mike Furse) in the Battalion cemetery on the west edge of Plugstreet Wood by the side of the Messines Road. The service took place at 18:30 and beforehand the bishop consecrated a plot of land that had been fenced off as a burial place. This later became Hyde Park Cemetery and although the name of the Royal Berks is linked to it, Pte Giles and Lt Poulton-Palmer are the only Royal Berkshire men buried there. At the burial only his Company, brother officers and a few close friends who could get there were present. Afterwards the bishop wrote to Poulton-Palmer's father:-

I don't think there was a man in the Regiment that didn't feel that if there was a man ready to go at any time it was your boy. It was tremendously touching to see the men's faces as I spoke and I felt it such a privilege to be there. It was only last week that I had been seeing your boy and his Company in Plug Street Wood and had a little service for them there. Their chaplain, Mr Helm - such a good fellow - was telling me what a tremendous help and standby your boy was to him in his work.

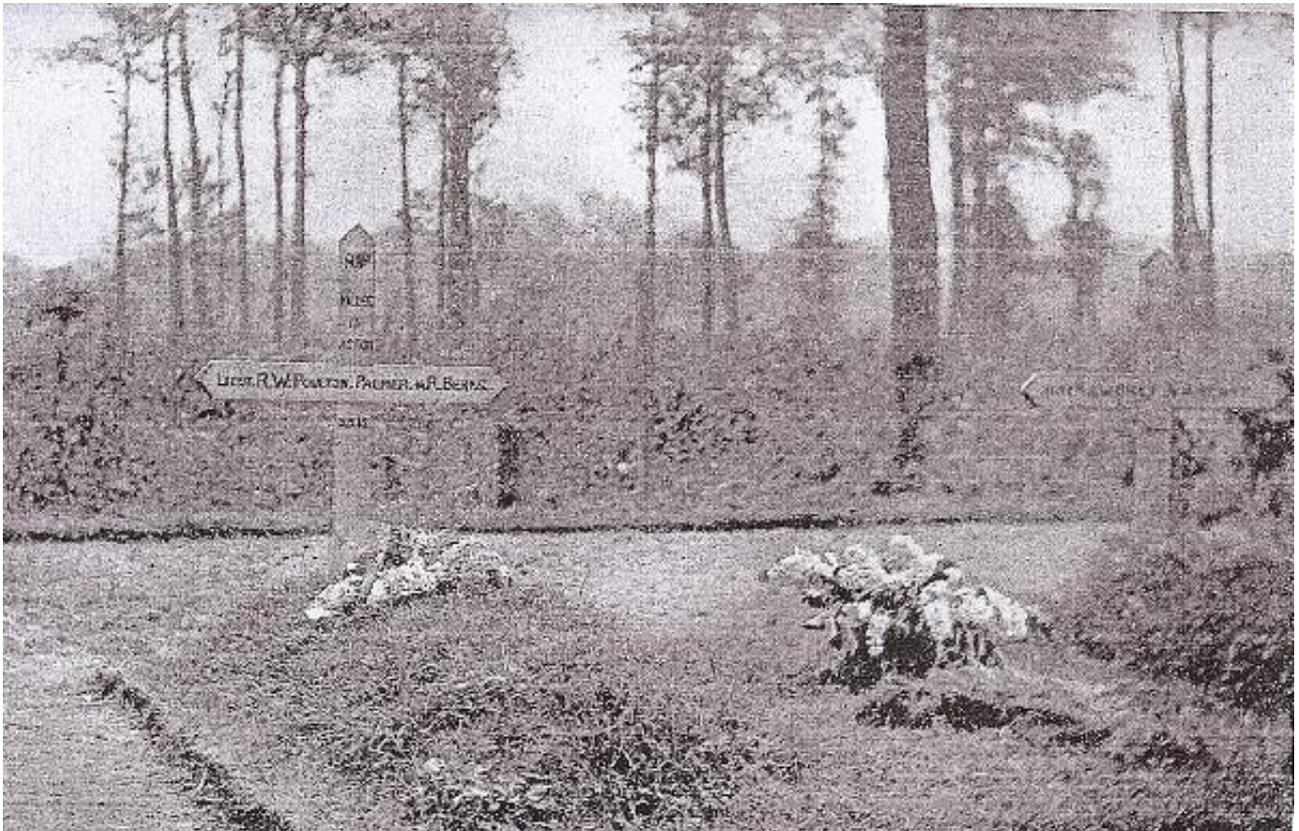
His close friend Lt Challoner wrote:-

After the service the Company presented arms and the officers saluted. The officers then went and saluted individually and said a little prayer for the dear fellow.

Mike Furse had been a don at Trinity Oxford and a close friend of Ronald's cousin Eustace Palmer. The grave was marked with a simple white wooden cross with the inscription:-

RIP / Killed / in / action / LIEUT R W POULTON-PALMER 1/4 R BERKS / 5.5.15

This was replaced soon afterwards by a more substantial wooden cross and later, in 1917 that too was replaced when a member of the family visited the grave and found it had been damaged by shellfire. Later still it was replaced by a standard Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone.



The graves of Pte Giles and Lt Poulton-Palmer in Hyde Park Cemetery shortly after burial. This was taken by Lt G M Gathorne-Hardy in May 1915



The CWGC headstones

Captain Cruttwell reviews the situation

Captain Cruttwell recounts some of the weapons used by and against the 1st/4th

No gas was ever emitted against the 1st/4th, though but a few miles to the north the enemy was using this new weapon incessantly. Throughout the end of April and for many days in May the wind blew steadily out of a cloudless sky from the north-east, and every morning we anxiously sniffed the breeze as we fingered the inadequate and clumsy respirators of those times. Every day a new pattern arrived with a new set of instructions.

Then our sappers were ordered to make boxes of gun-powder which were to be fired by fuse and thrown over the parapet to dissipate the gas. In doing this they succeeded in blowing up several of their own number in their infernal den at Doo-Doo Farm. Scarcely, however, were these boxes ensconced in their weather-proof niches in each traverse than they were condemned, and the sweating infantry who had brought them up returned them with many curses to store.

The guns also left our sector in peace, which was the more fortunate as our artillery was not in a position to reply effectively to even a modest bombardment. At that time field guns were rationed to one shell per gun per day and there was no High Explosive available.

Every now and then a little gun, apparently mounted on an armoured car which ran along the avenue just behind the German lines at dusk, would loose off half a dozen shells which burst with-out any warning, like a pair of gigantic hands clapping. Sometimes a few 'Little Willies' would strike Anton's Farm, which was included in our trench line, but no attempt was made to level this valuable ruin, which concealed patient and boastful snipers.

The Warwicks on our left expiated the sins of the whole Division, and on most days it was possible to watch with a feeling of complete security a variety of shells bursting among them a few hundred yards away; while overhead flew the liberal daily ration expended on scattered farmsteads, the village of Ploegsteert and the Chateau de la Hutte on Hill 63 behind.

From the lovely garden which surrounded the Chateau, luxuriant with lilac, Judas trees, tamarisk, wygelia and guelder-rose in full bloom, you could view, like Moses, the unapproachable land of promise, Lille and Roubaix, lying afar in the plain, with the smoke of enemy activity rising from their numerous tall chimneys.

7th May 1915

Colonel Seracold went off to take temporary command of 145 Brigade while Major R J Clarke took over command of the 1st/4th.

Day of Hate **9th May 1915**

The two companies in the trenches worked with the Royal Artillery to keep the Germans occupied so that they would not move troops south to oppose an attack by the French at Souchez. From 07:00 for 24 hours a non-stop barrage of artillery, rifle and machine gun fire was directed at the Germans. Meanwhile the other two companies were working on digging new trenches and redoubts. Surprising only one man was wounded.

Capt Cruttwell

We had our little excitements, as on May 9th, when the French attacked at Souchez, which was long remembered as 'the day of hate' The activity was organised to confuse the enemy as the main centre of action was at Souchez and Festubert, further south.

An elaborate demonstration was prepared by the brigade, of which the chief items were the exposure of trench-bridges 'obviously concealed,' and the firing throughout the day of long bursts of rapid fire. These interesting devices failed to deceive the enemy, who took little notice beyond shelling the unhappy Warwicks and the town of Ploegsteert with unusual severity.

My company was in the wood that day in reserve, and lay about pretending to be in readiness. It was, in fact, the only day in which we had nothing to do.

We also had our mine, which was exploded opposite the Oxfords after two false starts with much pomp and ceremony. A green rocket was sent up one mile west of Ploegsteert 'to deceive the enemy,' as the Staff memorandum hopefully remarked.

Captain Hadden, of the 1st/4th Oxfords, opposite whose trench the explosion was to occur, was ordered to keep half his company in the fire trench with the rifles~and bayonets of the other half. These were to be ostentatiously waved above the parapet. The other half company spent some time marching up and down the corduroy paths in the wood, so that the 'sound of their feet might suggest the arrival of large reinforcements. When the Brigade invited further suggestions of the same deceptive nature Hadden declared that he indented for magic mirrors a la Maskelyne and Devant, which would show the Oxfords not only in 'front but in rear of their enemy.

May 10th to 30th 1915

For the next month the diarist was almost silent, merely reporting one man wounded on each of the 24th, 26th and 29th May. He missed the death of the man from A Company who was shot in the head and killed on the 30th but as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists no one from the 1st/4th on that day we must assume Wheatley made a mistake.

Friday 14th May

Pte Wheatley

Again entered trenches opposite Messines, in No. 1 Gun Position.

Saw first Zep. Away in the distance. Begging to settle down to trench life. In for 12 days.

Second battle of Ypres took place. Counter attack by us, firing rapid all day and artillery shelling Germans replied. Some casualties. Heard sounds of terrible battle on left flank. My old chum Cpl H severely wounded, most casualties in the Coy.

Wednesday 26th May 1915

Pte Wheatley

Relieved today by other team after an eventful 12 days. Went back to the Piggeries. What a treat to get a wash and shave. Smiler and myself have a swim in the moat, but the water is almost green and foul, I come out dirtier looking than when I went in. Black slimy mud on bottom.

Sunday 30th May 1915

Pte Wheatley

After 4 days good rest, went back to trenches once again. Fairly quiet, but snipers troublesome, 4 periscopes smashed in one day.

Chap in A Coy shot right through forehead, died by our shelter.

Monday 31st May

Pte Wheatley

Very hot weather now. Watched one of our aeroplanes being shelled thinking what it might be like in England now with this glorious weather.

Wonder what I would have been doing? Walt supplies the answer. Nuff said.

Life at Plugstreet

Captain Cruttwell continues with his view of life at Plugstreet

Destroying the Hun's Trenches

There was also the occasion when the gunners promised to destroy a new work erected by the Huns in front of their lines. They were heavily handicapped at the outset by the necessity of employing percussion shrapnel against a strong breastwork: but even when allowances were made, it seemed unnecessary that their first shell, a premature, should burst in the trees far behind on the Messines road, that the second should fall in our trenches, and the third damage our wire. The fourth, however, it is fair to say, reached if it did not seriously disturb its objective.

Patrolling and Gardening

The ground between the lines offered many opportunities for patrolling; a belt of clover and rank weeds, knee-deep, in which our wire was enclosed, was succeeded by a deep watery ditch, also festooned with wire, and, beyond a fringe of willows on the further side, ran a wide field of rye able to conceal the tallest man. Each side cleared the ground immediately in front of their wire, and at nights the sickle of the enemy reaper could be plainly heard cutting swathes.

More than once ambushes were laid in the daytime under cover of the rye, which waited for an opportunity against him till late at night, but without success. Lieut. Gathorne-Hardy, who was the pioneer of these daylight patrols, on one occasion, stayed out from noon till 4 p.m. with his faithful follower, Sergt. A G Westall [405] of Newbury, examining the German wire, for which exploit the former received the M.C. and the latter the D.C.M. (to which was added a bar next year during the fighting at Pozieres for devotion to the wounded).

Life in the Trenches

The actual routine of life in the trenches was pleasant enough. The men knew exactly where they were. There was a time to eat, a time to sleep, a time for fatigues, and a time for sentry-go. There was little rain, and no bitter nights. The shelters, which held two or three men apiece, though mere flimsy shell-traps, were comfortable, and either boarded or lined with straw, which was frequently renewed. When the Warwicks took over from us they exclaimed in admiring surprise, *'Why, they're all officers' dug-outs.'*

Each section had its little oven made of a biscuit tin built round with clay. For the officers' mess in D Company we had the kitchen range from Anton's Farm, and a large zinc-covered erection in which six people could eat or play cards at once. The domestic element was supplied by two cats, who safely reared their offspring among us. Indeed, the calm of that placid series of days was such that it was difficult to realise that the second Battle of Ypres was raging with unbroken ferocity a few miles to the north, until we listened to the unwearied rumble of the guns and saw by night the great light in the sky where the doomed city blazed

When in reserve our days were mainly spent in or close to the famous wood, which was at that time regarded as the show-place, par excellence, of the British front. Its natural glories have long since departed under the devastating shell fire of the latter days of the war, but in the spring and summer of 1915 it was a beautiful place, where one might fancy that the many British dead rested more easily beneath oaks and among familiar flowers than in most of the cemeteries of this dreary land.

The wood was about one and a half miles long, with a maximum depth of 1,400 yards, and its undergrowth, where not cut away, was densely intertwined with alder, hazel, ash, and blackthorn, with water standing in large up by-two tiers of bunks made of wire and filled with pools on parts of its boggy surface. In one corner was the picturesque Fosse Labarre, a wide horseshoe moat enclosing a little garden, now a machine-gun emplacement, where grew the cumfrey, teasle and yellow flag. Everywhere the dog violet and blue Veronica flourished in enormous clumps, and near the Strand was a great patch of Solomon's seal. It was a continual pleasure to see the wood clothe itself from the nakedness of early April and increase in fulness of life until we left at midsummer. The nightingale sang there unwearingly, but other birds were few, and I never noticed a nest in the wood. The few pheasants which survived a winter with the 4th Division were, I fear, exterminated by us. Rabbits continued plentiful in spite of rifles and snares, and every now and then a hare was started in the deserted fields.

Our predecessors had spent much labour and ingenuity in fitting up the wood for comfortable military habitation. It was everywhere intersected by corduroy paths, which though tiring to the feet, completely saved one from the horrors of the mud, and enabled rations and engineering stores to be brought up with ease in even the worst weather.

Near the centre of the wood was Piccadilly Circus, whence many of these paths radiated; Regent Street and the Strand were the two great lateral highways; Bunhill Row preserved the memory of the British London Rifle Brigade; Mud Lane served to remind us of those days when corduroy was still non-existent, whilst Spy Corner hinted at some grim and secret episode in the wood's history.

Meanwhile, screened from aeroplane observation by the dense foliage, the reserve Companies of the Brigade lived in canvas tents fantastically daubed or in log huts. Some of the more elaborate of these latter served the double purpose of mess and bedroom for the Company Officers, the sides being taken up by two tiers of bunks made of wire and filled with straw. Outside the devices of the various regiments which had built or occupied them were carved or painted.

Around them were little gardens, some of which with happy forethought had been planted in the winter. The most elaborate of

all boasted a clump of Madonna lillies, and a red rose. We sowed vegetable seeds also, and ate our own mustard and cress, lettuces and radishes. In this connection, too, I should mention the 4,000 cabbages sent by Messrs. Sutton & Sons, which, planted in the transport lines at Rabot, were left for the consumption of the 5th Battalion when we moved south.

These sylvan billets we generally shared with the 4th Oxforde, Hunterston North and South, peaceful spots, seldom visited by shells or stray bullets; less fortunate were the Bucks and 5th Gloucesters at Somerset House, further to the east. Here by night a steady drizzle of lead descended, and on one occasion 70 incendiary shells fell close to Headquarters. One of these was a dud, and the Bucks, determined to omit no precaution, sprinkled its resting place with chloride of lime!

On the west side of the Messines road, just outside the wood, our Headquarters, with one reserve Company, inhabited the Piggeries, the enormous bricked and covered sties of which easily accommodated 200 men. The owner had only just completed his venture before war began, and the place was unmarked on the map, which possibly accounted for its immunity from shell fire.

Life in the wood would have been wholly pleasant but for two things, fatigues and lack of sleep. There is little doubt that if the war had gone on for fifty years, its last month would have found the men as strenuously employed in improving and strengthening the defences as in those early days. Soldiers are naturally inclined to think when depressed that (like the persons mentioned in the Bible) when 'they have done all that is required of them they are but unprofitable servants.'

But at Plugstreet at least there was much which cried out urgently to be done. A great gap in the trench line just east of Prowse Point called for attention on our arrival. The work might, of course, have been highly dangerous, for it was carried on within 200 yards of the enemy. But no attempt was made to interfere with our labours. Presumably the mild Hun who faced us was afraid that he would be called upon to attack through the gap and rejoiced to see it filled. Every night the picks and shovels of 300 or 400 men could be heard merrily at work with the inevitable under-current of conversation as familiarity increased security. When the moon was bright the enemy could be seen peacefully attending to his own wire, while sometimes we were reminded that the hour had come to break off by a voice from opposite calling out, '*Time to pack up, sappers; go to bed.*' Every morning a new length of enormous breastwork invited shells, which never came. On such occasions the thought arose that we must be taking part in the most expensive farce in the history of the world.

The lack of sleep was a more serious hardship, especially as it appeared avoidable. Owing, presumably, to the thinness with which the line was held, and to the lack of potential reinforcements behind, we were not allowed to sleep in the wood. Every night we made our way either to the lower or higher breastworks. The former were just off Mud Lane, and were consequently protected by the ridge from view, and to a certain extent from bullets. Here you could bivouac in the open under waterproof sheets, and except when the weather was very wet, enjoy a tolerable night. The latter, however, were on the forward slope, freely exposed to the continual fire with which the Huns replied to the provocation of the Warwicks. It was therefore necessary to lie at the bottom of a narrow and stinking trench on a 9-inch board. You had hardly fallen into an insecure doze when you were awakened and had to move out, for these breast-works, being barely shoulder high, were always evacuated at dawn, and dawn comes very early in June. The men naturally preferred the regular hours and the clean and comfortable shelters of the fire trench

Whenever any of the men desired to get rid of their pay quickly they had only to walk a few hundred yards to Ploegsteert, village, where, within a mile of the firing line, some hundreds of the inhabitants still remaining sold bad beer, tinned fruit, and gaudy postcards at Flemish rates, which are the highest in the world. When shelling was severe they locked up their houses and disappeared mysteriously for a day or two until a renewed lull enabled them to restart their profitable shop-keeping. Many alleged spies lived here unharassed, especially in the outlying farms; and credibility was lent to the current tales by the number of carrier pigeons seen passing over the lines, or by the incident of the two dogs, which suddenly appeared early one dawn from the German lines, leapt our trenches, and were lost in the darkness behind, in spite of Challoner's frenzied attempts to shoot them.

Besides its inhabitants Ploegsteert offered little of interest. The church, in spite of a dozen holes in the roof, and a great chip out of the east end, still reared its tall red-brick spire. On to the square outside the Huns directed a short afternoon hate at 3.30 punctually every day, reaching their target with wonderful precision, but doing little harm except when, as on May 9th, they employed incendiary shells.

When baths and the disinfecting of trench-soiled clothing were required, the men marched to Nieppe, and wallowed in the famous vats, where Mr. Asquith, one day arriving unexpectedly, found himself cheered by a multitude of naked and steaming soldiers.

From there it was but a short walk to Armentieres, that centre of the great world, where Perrier water champagne and other delights could be obtained, where in a luxurious tea-room you were waited upon by female attendants of seductive aspect, and where two variety entertainments, the "Follies" and "Fivialities," were on view most nights. The ugly industrial town had then been little injured by shells, though every now and then it received its share. The Huns sometimes playfully directed against it French 220's captured at Maubeuge, and to point the witticism sent over a few duds inscribed 'Un Souvenir de Maubeuge.' So passed seven weeks during which we learned the routine of war under singularly favourable conditions

1st to 6th June 1915

They were back in front line trenches from the 1st to 6th June suffering one wounded on the 2nd and two on the 4th.

Tuesday 1st June

Pte Wheatley's diary continues:-

Very quiet. Nothing doing. Germans must be having a slow time. Splendid weather still.

Capt Cruttwell

During the first week in June the three Brigades left their own quarters and exchanged trench sections. The 145th moved from the centre to the left, to the joy of the Warwicks, whose losses had been considerable.

Sunday 6th June

Pte Wheatley

Very hot day. Was on sentry over gun from 9 till 11. When about 10 o'clock our engineers exploded a mine in front of Hants trenches tremendous report. Shaking the ground and parapet all round. Our artillery started bombarding heavily. Germans shelled village - several casualties Ploegsteert church suffers again.

Kortepype 7th to 12th June 1915

Monday 7th June

The battalion was relieved by the 6th Warwicks and they marched off to new huts at Kortepype in Divisional reserve.

Pte Wheatley

Relieved to-day marched to Kortepype rest camp. Good old "Kortepype".

Capt Cruttwell

The Battalion was taken out of the wood, and marched to huts at Korte Pyp, on a plateau with a wide prospect on the southern slopes of Neuve Eglise Hill. The site was admirable, the huts well-built and commodious, and (rarest of sights in the rich cultivation of Flanders) a good-sized grass field was at hand sufficiently level to make a decent cricket pitch.

Here for four days we were free of fatigues, were inspected by the new G.O.C. of the Division, Major-General Fanshawe, enjoyed the sun, and endured a violent thunderstorm.

Tuesday 8th June

Pte Wheatley

Spent day cleaning up and writing letters.

Wednesday 9th June.

Pte Wheatley

Got up early and found a pond. Had a good swim. Saw boxing match at night. Bart surprises the Berks Bn.

Having lovely weather. Nothing doing, so therefore nothing to write about.

Thursday 10th June

Pte Wheatley

Very hot day went to bathe 3 times.

Concert at night

Pte J R Newey of Reading wrote

We are out of the trenches again, this time for eight days and when we go in next I believe it will be in some fresh trenches nearer to the Germans than we have been lately.

Today we have been into ----- for a bath and were let loose for an hour or so in the town and had quite a good time there. We are still enjoying splendid weather and we get browner every day and are now billeted in our usual place - the piggeries - once the home of pigs, now of ----. This evening we are having a concert here by the ASC, many of whom by the way are Brum fellows - which reminds me that when the 5th Berks came in the trenches with us there was a fellow near me who lived somewhere in Holley Road Birmingham.[TX01982]

In previous letters the writer said:

We are now comfortably settled down in a rest camp on a hill and it is splendidly healthy here, nice and high and the weather is very hot. we go and have a swim in a nice deep pool close by ---- quite a change of scenery after the woods and their corduroy paths leading to the trenches, these paths being tracks made of thin bags or planks and lashed together and are all named after famous London streets. [TX01982]

Le Chateau Rosenthal

11th to 14th June 1915

11th June 1915

On the 11th they replaced the 8th Warwicks in Brigade Reserve at Le Chateau Rosenthal with two companies at the Chateau, one at La Douce Farm and one at Le Possinol

Capt Cruttwell

Thence returning to the wood we sampled White Lodge, the Warwick's home under the steep wooded bluff of Hill 63, where the rats made merry among the dirt and unburied food; also La Plus Douce, a pastoral but dangerous spot, where the Douve flowed muddily amidst neglected water-meadows stretching along to Wulverghem with its battered church tower showing among the trees. On the opposite slope were two broken farms called St. Quentin and South Midland, wherein lay great quantities of abandoned tobacco, while all around were the tarnished scabbards thrown away by De Lisle's cavalry during the fighting at Messines of the previous October.

Saturday 12th June.

For the next few days Pte Wheatley seems to be a day out in his diary.

Left rest camp at Kortepype and marched to Hyde Park corner. Slept in woods for the night.

Walt now doing the cooking, told him not to forget his old mate, he is getting a big fine chap.

We have lovely position in the woods, more like picnicking in blighty than in reserve lines.

Sunday 13th June

Pte Wheatley

Went in reserve trenches at nightfall, very exposed position dare not show ourselves by day. Trenches on side of a hill. GermanS on hill side opposite. Nevertheless myself and Smiler crawled out at back of trench and got in some mined houses behind. What a mess!

Evidently Frity had been here sometime or other and dragged all the household goods into the garden behind. There was sheets blankets tablecloths in boxes and broken chairs pots and pans, jugs and broken china I souvenired a good saucepan for cooking. White enamelled.

Monday 14th June 1915

The 5th Battalion were attached to the 1st/4th for training and marched in from Armentieres on the 14th.

Pte Wheatley

Relieved again at nightfall.

Bertie Page brings rum jar full of beer up, can see they will have a good time.

We lost no time getting back to the woods.

Working with the 5th Battalion

15th June 1915

They relieved the 4th Oxforde - it was the same line they had handed over to the 6th Warwicks on the 7th June. Headquarters were at Ash House, some 300 yards east of Le Rossinol. As well as the 5th Ropyal Berks twelve cadets were attached for 24 hours training. One man was wounded.

Capt Cruttwell

On June 15th the whole Battalion returned to trenches, and held a total length of 1,450 yards, stretching from our old right, Trench 37, across the Messines road to a ruined cottage, close by which our trenches were carried over the Douve by a wooden bridge. Our line was thus drawn in a curve right round the south of Messines Hill, which twinkled with points of fire at every morning 'stand-to' from the tiers of trenches which honeycombed its face. Contrary to expectations, the centenary of Waterloo passed without incident during this tour, in spite of the Huns' reputed fondness for such. celebrations.

At this time we were fortunate in having with us our 5th Battalion for instruction, who had come out about a fortnight before with

the 12th Division, and there were many meetings of friends, both among the officers and the men.

Pte Wheatley:-

Left woods for front line trenches.

Went to machine gun corner. 5th Berks came in with us for instruction saw several chaps I knew in Reading. What a coincidence they should come to us.

We shall be stronger rivals than ever.

Private A Betteridge of Windsor wrote home under date June 15th from "The trenches somewhere in Flanders"

All the boys of the Windsor Terriers are quite well and safe although we have been shelled out of our dug-outs two or three times. But I am glad to say all have come out alive. At present we are at a place near ----- where no one can move a limb safely by day and not often by night. It is not very pleasant as we can only get one drop of tea for the day by a fatigue party of six men fetching it at one o'clock in the morning; then we have to make do until one o'clock next morning. Our meal consists of a tin of bully, biscuits and jam sometimes. I am sure the people of Windsor cannot understand the hardships and endless duties we have to do. Only last week we had our four days rest which was very much needed, being the first rest since landing, after endless work of trenching near the firing line, sandbag filling, barricade building etc after which we take our turn of sentry for the night. This at first was wearying to one's eyes till you get accustomed to the darkness. For two hours you have to look without a move of the eyes off the spot chosen, then comes the relief; then for two hours with the working party till morning comes. After breakfast we turn in for a few hours sleep, we just get down to it nice and comfortably when Fritz starts sending over "little Willies". Then we get out of our dug outs and stand to till the devils have done enough damage to our barbed wire which means more work at night. It is all very nice in the reserve trenches which are shelled every day regularly, but the firing line is nearly as bad although they only the front line occasionally. When you move pop goes a rifle from a sniper and you have to be quick to dodge his bullet or uopu count for one more on the Roll of Honour. We have not been in any big engagement but near enough to hear and see things for ourselves. Being near the most advanced line we have nothing at present to do but to hold the line till our men advance on the left and right - then for business. We shall let our people see what and where we are. We are having hot weather but the nights are dreadfully cold. [TX01980]

16th June 1915

2nd Lt Carter was wounded

18th June 1915

Lt G M Gathorne Hardy was engaged in reconnaissance:

Lieutenant G M Gathorne-Hardy is known as one of the most daring officers in the British Army. He went out with his battalion in the Spring of 1915 and in the following June was awarded the Military Cross, the following being the official record:-

"For excellent reconnaissance work along the German front whereby much valuable information has been obtained, notably on June 18th 1915 when, with a lance corporal, he crawled out by day and brought back most useful information regarding the German lines." [TX00740B]

Saturday 19th June

The battalion was relieved by the 7th Worcesters and went into Divisional Reserve at the Piggeries; but before they left the trenches Pte Barnes was wounded in the head, presumably by a sniper. He had a narrow escape and was taken to a hospital about ten miles behind the line.. He wrote home

We are still about the same out here - plenty of noise, guns and rifle fire. I was wounded while in the trenches about eight days ago, the billet cutting my head on its journey. I had a very lucky escape. Had the bullet gone half an inch lower it would have been all up. Some of our chaps reckon we have got nine lives. I dont mind losing seven more although that's very painful as long as they leave me one to bring home to England. The quicker this war is over the better. Do not worry about my wound; it is quite all right now. [TX01981]

Pte Wheatley:-

Relieved by the Worcesters. Went to the piggeries again.

Oh what a day, or rather afternoon, carrying out equipment and trench stores, finished up dead tired.

20th June 1915

The 5th Battalion left them and returned to their billets at Armentieres.

Wednesday 23 June

Pte Wheatley

Inclined to be wet. Heard rumours of moving to Baillue tomorrow. Hope its true!

The Move South 24th June 1915

They were relieved by the 8th Royal Fusiliers and at 21:30 began the march to Ballieul arriving at 00:30 on the 25th.

Capt Cruttwell

We then returned for the last time to our familiar haunts in the wood, where we found the wild strawberries, which we had watched creeping timidly out of the earth, ripening everywhere in countless numbers. Meanwhile the 12th Division abode in billets in Armentieres and Nieppe, and rumours grew strong that they would take over from us. The secret was well kept, but on Thursday morning, June 24th, as the Company Commanders were on their way to visit the Worcester trenches they were recalled by orderly with the news that the Battalion was moving to Bailleul that night. The evening was hot and steamy, the men soft from lack of exercise and sleep, and the 8 miles seemed interminable.

Pte Wheatley

Lovely day. Left for Baillue at 9 p.m. After stiff march arrived at 1 o'clock. Slept on stone floor in stable with mess tin as pillow-slept as well as in a feather bed.

Ballieul - 25th June 1915

The overnight billets at Ballieul were described as 'comfortable' which, compared with the last several weeks was probably an understatement. 145th Brigade set out at 0945 on the first leg of their journey to the Loos area where the next push would be made. The overnight billets were in and around Vieux Berquin. with the 1st/4th mainly at Hullebert Farm.

Capt Cruttwell

We arrived at Bailleul about 1 a.m., and billeted in the quarter adjoining the railway station. For the first time since leaving England I slept in a bed with sheets in a room to myself.

A fierce thunder storm next day had failed to clear the air, when we set. out again about 9.30. p.m. in an atmosphere of clinging dampness.

Pte Wheatley

Wet morning thunderstorm in afternoon had a walk round Baillue.

Left Baillue at 10 pm marched through pouring rain to Blue-Four.

Not much time for writing now.

Vieux Berquin - 26th June 1915

Vieux Berquin was left behind at 20:30 but they had most of the day to rest. The march was via Merville, Calonne and Robercq arriving at Gonneheim at 02:30 on the 27th.

Capt Cruttwell

The whole brigade marched together with our faces turned south towards unfamiliar country, and just before daybreak we arrived at Vieux Berquin, a village of detached farmhouses with gardens full of all manner of fruit and vegetables. Here a dozen crosses with a smaller black cross painted on the wood testified to the presence of the Bavarians last autumn. That night, with the moon about the full, though often obscured by clouds, the brigade made a long and weary march south-west, edging gradually away from the flares and the distant rifle shots. Towards midnight we had a long check at Merville, a placid little town with tree-planted boulevards along the banks of the Lys, while Canadian guns and transport passed us going north from their second great fight at Festubert and Givenchy.

Pte Wheatley:-

Left Blue-Four at 9 pm marched through Merville into Gohhem.

Slept for night in barn. Passed Canadian division just outside Merville.

Gonnehem - 27th June 1915

The headquarters and one company took over billets from a machine gun company - presumably the other three companies had to rough it. Again they had a day of rest before setting out at 17:30 for Lapugnoy via Chocques, They arrived at Lapugnoy at 19:00 and found good billets in the village

Capt Cruttwell

Day had broken and the sun was climbing an eastern sky ribbed with red and gold, when we reached our destination, the

village of Gonnehem, which boasts an ancient and beautiful church decorated with a quiet simplicity not often found in these parts. No enemy had entered here since the beginning of the war. It stands at the southern limit of the great plain; beyond are the low wooded hills of Artois; and away to the west the great slag heaps of Marles-les-Mines loomed through; the thunder clouds like pyramids. That Sunday evening we completed our last stage of 4 miles by daylight, moving south-west again to the large industrial village of Lapugnoy, with a station on the St Pol railway 5 miles west of Bethune, lying in a valley overlooked on either side by densely-timbered hills.

Pte Wheatley:-

Wet day started from Gohhehem 5 o'clock arrived at Sapugnoy at 8. Soon as we found our billets went for a walk round with Smiler, not a bad little place, think we can have a fairly decent time if they will let us stay.

Jess, finds an estaminet with a piano, we have a sing song that night. Fatty Holloway, brings tears to the eyes of many, with his pathetic rendering of "Moonlight Bay"? Jack Nuccoll threatens to choke him if he offends again. We have a merry evening.

Lapugnoy

27th June to 11th July 1915

They had 17 days at Lapugnoy acclimatising themselves to the new territory and the experience of joining 1st Army. For the first few days they stayed around the village with drills about the only activity.

Capt Cruttwell

Here, withdrawn 10 miles behind the line and comfortably housed, we spent 17 days in a succession of drills, route marches and wood fighting. We were now in the 1st Army and behind the southern extremity of the then British line.

From the calvary above the village the eye rested on many famous landmarks; the great cathedral of Bethune, untouched by the Hun, the church of Givenchy, the slag heaps of La Bassee, and the low ridge of Aubers, which barred the road to Lille, a dim frame in the background.

We visited Bethune, a gracious little city girdled about with poplars, limes and chestnuts, where most things could be bought, including the latest English novels. The Guards had their Head-quarters in the town, and impressed everyone with their physical fitness and splendid discipline. We consumed a morning waiting on the Lilliers-Bethune road to see Lord Kitchener drive past in a motor; we watched the Indians going up to the trenches in motor 'buses, and a motley crew of picturesque French Colonials going by train to Souchez: Zouaves, turbaned and bearded, Algerians, with thick-lipped niggers from Congo and Senegal, who ran along the open trucks shouting and gesticulating.

Tuesday 29th June 1915

Pte Wheatley

Resting and cleaning up. Received letter from home and Mrs Richell.

Feeling as fit as a fiddle. Walt still on the cooking job, he looks well on it too.

Thursday 1st July 1915

It was a very hot day and for a change they practised wood fighting from 09:00 to 13:00 and again on the 2nd and 3rd.

Saturday 3rd July 1915

A Company put on a concert at 19:00 in the grounds of the Chateau.

Sunday 4th July 1915

The CO, Colonel Seracold, held a kit inspection at 11:00. This was followed by a church parade at 12:15 and company drill from 18:00 to 20:00 once the heat of the day had passed.

Monday 5th July 1915

C Company went to the mine baths at Marles Les Mines with the other three companies off on a route march from 06:30 to 09:30

Tuesday 6th July 1915

The morning from 07:00 to 10:00 was taken up with wood fighting and in the evening it was the turn of D Company to put on a concert.

Pte Wheatley

First bath in Canal. Having grand weather. First real rest since coming out having a good time.

We hold Bn sports here, thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. Machine gun section win first prize for smartest turn out.

Gordon, has charge of section and is very pleased. Hope he will be as good an officer as Captain H.

Wednesday 7th July 1915

Having practised wood fighting by company it was now time to put it all together. One company was designated as the defender and the other three as attackers and they went at it from 08:00 until 13:00 - no casualties were reported!

Thursday 8th July 1915

At 07:10 the 1st/4th marched out of Lapugnoy to join the rest of 145 Brigade at Allouagne. Here they were inspected by the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener. The infantry battalions of the Division were formed up in single ranks alongside the road. At 10:45 the procession of cars carry the Secretary and his entourage passed the 1st/4th and each company gave a salute followed by cheers as the cars went by. At 12:15 it was all over and they returned to their billets at Lapugnoy and to enjoy an early evening of sports. starting at 17:30

Friday 9th July 1915

Several of the officers went off for a Brigade reconnaissance of the terrain for the impending night attack and in the evening at 20:00 the battalion took up their intended positions.

Saturday 10th July 1915

They returned to billets at 04:00 and in the afternoon the regimental sports were concluded and prizes awarded by the CO. The news was received that 2/Lt Gathorne-Hardy had been awarded the Military Cross for his exploits on June 18th.

Meeting of the 1st and 1st/4th - July 11th 1915

On July 11th a memorable meeting took place between the 1st and 1/4th Battalions in a field near Fouquieres-les-Bethune, where they spent the day together. The 1st had been billeted in Bethune. They spent from 12:30 to 16:00 together and many old friends and relatives were greeted. In the improvised sports which ensued the men of the 1st Battalion beat the 1st/4th at a tug-of-war, while in the officers' tug the result was reversed. The 1st Battalion were at this time commanded by Captain Bird, as their late C.O., Major Hill, had been killed not many days before by a shell which demolished the Headquarters' mess at Cunchy.

Pte Wheatley:-

Marched just outside Bethune to see 1st Bri Berks. Had dinner in a field with them. Marched back to Sapugnoy. Received letter from home. On guard at night. Captured drunken Belgian and Frenchman kicking up disturbance handcuffed and put in guard room.

Houchin Monday July 12th 1915

It was time to move again and at 19:05 on the 12th they set out for Marles-les-Mines to rendezvous with the Brigade at 20:10 and then it was off via Place a Bruay and Labruissiere to Houchin where they bivouaced in a field to the SE of the village. It was a relatively easy march as the roads were good and the temperature had dropped.

Capt Cruttwell

The next evening found the brigade on the move again, through the mining villages of Marles-les-Mines and Bruay, to a wretched hamlet called Houchin, where the only accommodation provided for the battalion was a field of standing rye ripe for the scythe.

When day broke we found ourselves in a desolate country with the high naked ridge of Notre Dame de Lorette shutting out the southern horizon.

Here in shelter of boughs and waterproof sheets we spent three days of great discomfort under pouring rain and wind, employed day and night in digging a reserve line some 4 miles away. As we worked near Saily-Labourse we gazed with curiosity at an arid gentle slope some 2 miles away, pitted by trenches and crowned by an elaborate iron structure with two towers. This ground was the scene of the main British attack on Loos two months later, and the building was the famous Tower Bridge.

The squalid little town between Houchin and Saily, at whose busy coal-mine the enemy intermittently threw shells, was Noeux-

les-Mines, where Lord French had his forward headquarters during the fighting. But even then there was an abundance of the sound of battle, for on the second evening a furious cannonade burst out to the south-east, which signalled the recapture by the enemy of Souchez Cemetery; the last scene in that terrific fight which had endured almost incessantly since May 9th.

Pte Wheatley:-

Preparations for leaving Sapugnoy. Slept at 6 o'clock.

After marching for hours up and down hill arrived at last in a cornfield and there we slept the night no coats no blankets only waterproofs. Wet and cold.

Tuesday 13th July

They were given a rest for the day and in turn the companies marched off to Houchin for a wash.

Pte Wheatley

Put up bivouac and stayed in field all day. Found we were just one side of Moex-le-Mines not far off Loos.

Wednesday 14th July

The battalion was split up into parties of 25 and, leaving at 3 minute intervals from 09:10 they marched off to dig new trenches about 3 miles north of Noeux-les-Mines. 700 men were engaged in this work and 350 of them were sent off again at 22:00 to build more dugouts near Railway Crossing. It had started raining at 16:00 just as the first session was concluded and by midnight everyone was cold, wet and thoroughly miserable.

Pte Wheatley

Went about 5 miles and started digging trenches saw the tower of Loos in the distance. Came back to field wet through slept in wet clothes all night. Received a letter from Chelmsford.

Thursday 15th July

Another working party of 350 went off to dig during the day but at 19:30 the Divisional motor transport put on a concert. Lt G Cruttwell had been sent off to Le Havre to escort a new draft but he returned without them.

Pte Wheatley

Fine day. Dried clothes left camp at 8 pm to dig trenches, again digging till midnight and then marched back tired out.

Received two parcels today. Came just right as we are short of rations.

Lillers - 16th July 1915

During the day another 350 man work party went off at 06:10 to build dug-outs but the rest were able to relax in their bivouacs. A billeting party of 18 went off to Hurionville under 2/Lt Ridley. In the evening the Brigade set off via Labruissiere, Place a Bruay, Lozinghem, Allouagne and Burbure. Here the several battalions went their different ways, the 1st/4th going to Lieres. It was an awful march in driving rain and very bad side roads.

Capt Cruttwell

The day on which we went on the trek again (July 16th) was long remembered. We had expected in due course to go into the trenches somewhere near Grenay, but it suddenly became known that the brigade was to march back to the neighbourhood of Lillers preparatory to entraining for an unknown destination. Half the battalion that day had done their daily trip to Saily and came back about 4 p.m., after marching 8 miles and digging for four hours. At 9 p.m. we moved off in driving rain for an all-night march of 15 miles. The brigade transport was in front, and checks were naturally frequent as we retraced our steps through Bruay and Marles, thence on to Burbure, where our guide misled us, through a narrow inky lane, in which most of the Brigade lost touch.

Just as the dawn was breaking and our troubles seemed nearly over our guide again mistook the way, and we found ourselves bogged in a cart track at the top of a down. The rain and hail descended in a sudden most violent squall and wetted us to the skin; while far away in the east the morning flares twinkled for 30 miles in a great arc; One of the signallers was heard plaintively to remark as we waited, '*What 'ave we' done to deserve all this?*' Finally we descended into Lieres, a pleasant remote village in a fold of the chalk, full of cherry trees, and slept peaceably till noon.

Pte Wheatley:-

Left Noex-le-Mines at 9.30 and after 6½ hours of hard marching arrived at Siers tired out. The worst march I ever did, it was raining all the time and through open country and the roads were in a terrible state.

Not one of our boys fell out so record unbroken.

17th July 1915

They remained in billets all day

18th July 1915

At 18:30 they set out for Berghette arriving at 20:30, although the transport was there two hours earlier. At 21:30 they set off, Major Clarke supervising entraining operations for the Brigade.

Capt Cruttwell

After a day's rest we marched on Sunday afternoon, July 18th, to La Berguette station, on the Hazebrouck line west of Lillers. Here we met detachments of our old friends of the wood, the L.R.B., who, reduced in strength to, 70 men during the Ypres fighting, had been put on lines of communication. We knew by now that our journey would take us to Doullens, a sub-prefecture of the Somme, and that we were to take over a portion of the French line. So back again in the cattle trucks and second-class carriages, the Battalion moved off south under far more pleasant circumstances. The rate of speed, too, was comparatively high and can hardly have fallen short of 15 miles an hour.

Pte Wheatley:-

Left Siers in the afternoon. March to Burquette station 12 miles away. Passed by the Lahore Indian Machine gun section headquarters. Entrained destination unknown. Vague guesses by the chaps.

19th July 1915

The destination was Doullens where they arrived at 02:15 after a fairly good journey. The battalion formed up outside the station and waited for the transport to catch up. At 03:30 they marched off via Authie, Amplier and Sarton to a wood to the north of Marieux where they bivouaced. They had had a two hours break for breakfast near Hateuncourt.

Capt Cruttwell

We reached our destination as usual in the early hours of the morning, and after unloading drew out of the town, passing on the right the old Citadelle with its red ramparts. high upon a hill, and the point of elderly Territorials at the junction of the great Amiens road. Thence we followed the south bank of the Authie River, enclosed on either side by rounded chalk hills 400 or 500 feet high. We breakfasted by the road opposite the Chateau of Authieville, where Major Barron and his M.T. lived luxuriously for many months 11 miles behind the firing line; then plodded on past Sarton, where the 5th Gloucesters watched us from their billets, and finally bivouacked in the beech woods of Marieux. Close by was the site of the French aerodrome, now deserted save for empty petrol tins; down in the valley, Mon Plaisir, an enormous country house was being prepared for the Headquarters of the 7th Corps; in the orchards were parked two batteries of long French 155's.

The roads were encumbered with the impedimenta of two armies We were starting on another stage of the great adventure, and felt again to a lesser degree the uncertainty of essaying the unknown.

Pte Wheatley

Arrived at station this morning. Detrained name of the place Doullens. Heard our destination was the Argonne however we marched through the town and breakfasted by the roadside.

Marched about 6 miles further in and camped in a wood. Gun French artillery on march so must be somewhere behind the French lines. Going into the unknown. Who would'nt be a soldier.

20th July 1915

After 36 hours in the wood we packed up again and moved by night through Authie, afterwards most familiar and welcome of rest billets, passing Coiguleux, where the French gunners, sitting by their fires in the horse lines, called out greetings, and ascended the northern hill to Bayencourt, a stinking little village full of flies and odours.

By now the enemy had apparently got wind of the coming of the English (which was first confirmed, according to prisoners, by the discovery of English bullets fired at their trenches), for during the next few days aeroplanes flew constantly over the village at a great height. In a field close by a French 75, which moved with a circular traverse round a platform of greased wood let into a small pit, endeavoured to arrest their progress with a wonderfully rapid barrage, and to throw them back into the area, covered by the next gun. Its adjutant had spent several years in a solicitor's office at Ealing, and spoke excellent English.

Pte Wheatley:-

Moved off from woods at dusk.

Arrived at Bayencourt at midnight. Slept in barns. The Warwicks had been here before us and stole every chicken in the place, so naturally the villagers did not receive us with open arms, and shouts of welcome ("Anglais no bon").

Wednesday 21st July

Still having nice weather. Saw French 75" gun used as aeroplane gun just outside village.

Hebuterne

Our ultimate destination was now the sector of Hebuterne, which had leapt into prominence on the occasion of the successful French attack on Touvent Farm, June 12th, but was now, from all accounts, peaceful enough. The 5th Gloucesters and 4th Oxforde were the two first to go into the trenches, where the French received them with enthusiasm, putting fresh flowers in all the dug-outs, and writing up everywhere greetings of welcome.

My brother (Captain G. H. W. Cruttwell) went before us into Hebuterne with part of B Company to relieve the guards of the 93rd Regiment posted round the village, a ceremony more interesting and impressive than the relief of the trenches by reason of its greater formality. He dined with their officers afterwards, and was presented, as a farewell gift, with the best mattress in the village.

The rest of the battalion started after sunset on July 22nd, passing a battalion of Frenchmen returning by half platoons from the trenches, and marched into Hebuterne, a most interesting example of the ruined village organised for defence, situated 600 yards only behind the front line trenches. It was destined to be our forward billet for many months, and to become as familiar to us in the smallest details as our own homes. A somewhat detailed description will therefore perhaps not be without interest.

Hebuterne

Hebuterne was a good-sized village of about 1,000 inhabitants, on no highway but the converging point of many small roads, lying in a very slight pocket of the rolling chalk plateaux of Artois, surrounded on every side by the orchards of the local bitter cider apple, with a village green in the centre, and a pond surrounded by tall poplars. The length of the village was about 900 yards, and its average breadth about 500 yards. Almost every house was a one-storied farm of three to four rooms, with considerable outbuildings of mud and plaster, capable of accommodating in close billets one or two platoons. There were no large houses, the so-called chateau on the Bucquoy road being a very moderate mansion, and, apart from it, the rectory, mairie, the mill by the pond used as Brigade Headquarters, and the pleasant villa called Poste Cambronne, alone stood out in modest prominence. There were very few inns, the largest of which bore the touching and appropriate sign, '*A la Renaissance.*'

At the south end of the village stood the church, a broken gaping shell of red brick with imitation marble pillars; it was afterwards razed to the ground by the sappers, who required its bricks and perhaps thought it too good a range-mark to exist so near their store. When we arrived we found, to our surprise, two civil inhabitants clinging to their ruinous homes; one who held some vague post of authority called himself a *Guarde Champetre*; another, an aged crone, suddenly emerged cursing from her hovel to expostulate with me for unwittingly stealing her peas and young carrots. They were cleared out immediately after our arrival.

The flight of the remainder had been evidently precipitate. Not only had beds, tables, and all bulkier pieces of furniture been abandoned, but knives, forks, crockery and many little china ornaments. The village had been re-occupied after a stubborn fight in October, 1914, and the enemy pushed well beyond its uttermost limits. In the western orchards was the large French cemetery, and hard by that of our own division, adjoining a cricket pitch, where we had many spirited games of tip and run.

Though naturally much broken up, with, perhaps, a dozen houses left intact, the village had never been so populous in days of peace. Not less than 3,000 troops lived there above or below ground, including the brigadier and at least three battalion commanders. That portion of the village which lies north of the pond had been made into a fortified redoubt known as the *Keep*, the garrison of which was the equivalent of one battalion, whose O.C. lived in the Poste Cambronne, a much desired residence until an 8.2 shell demolished its upper 'story' in December. Very few shells indeed ever fell in the *Keep* until the beginning of 1916, the chief targets being the pond and the area round the church. The village was fortunate in being practically screened from direct observation by a slight rise in ground between it and the enemy, and the indirect machine gun fire which raked the streets at odd intervals, was curiously ineffective, for the majority of shots went high, though on occasions one had to abandon respect and lie flat in the mud, until the shower was overpast.

We sampled all corners of the village the *Serre Cross Roads*, where the rain came through the roof and the machine gun bullets through the wall of our crazy billet; the chateau, with its broken conservatory, its fig tree, Christmas roses, and what we believed to be the only armchair in Northern France; 'D' Farm, where Private Frank Meads [3060], our first casualty in the village, was hit by a 4.2-inch just outside the window and died of his wounds on the

16th August; and 'B' Farm, with its collection of plates and ornaments amassed on the first morning before most of the village was out of bed.

Battalion Headquarters were first in the house on the Mailly-Maillet road, afterwards appropriated by the Brigade, who hollowed out for themselves great caverns in the earth; then in the little house by Serre Cross Roads, where the owners had chalked up an appeal to the French to take care of their newly-weaned calf; and finally in the factory by the pond, where shells through Q.M. Payne's bed-room and the gate posts drove them, too, under-ground, and led to the erection of an enormous bulwark of sandbags 5 feet high, to protect the mess.

The defences of the village were formidable, and when one got to know them, simple, in spite of the bewilderment caused by a first inspection of what appeared to be a mere labyrinth. The Keep, as has been mentioned, was simply a redoubt with trenches facing all points of the compass, its two points of chief tactical importance being the Mound, eminently suited for enfilade machine gun fire, and the barricades which closed the Keep to any enemy already in possession of the village to the south of the pond.

It will be seen, by studying the map, that the whole of the eastern face of Hebuterne was protected by two lines of defences, outer and inner. The former were 200 to 300 yards beyond the edge of the houses, and were excellently sited along a hedge for almost the whole of their length. They were connected with the first line fire trench by communication trenches about every 100 yards. The inner defence, running through the orchards, just covered the village, and was connected both with the outer line and with the cellars of the houses by numerous communication trenches. Finally the western exits of the village were commanded by a group of trenches astride the Saily road on rising ground. All this scheme had been completed by the French before our arrival, and reflected great credit on both their tactical skill and the energy required in construction.

Comparing Flanders and Artois

When we turned from the village to the trenches we found also points of interest and contrast. In Artois, unlike Flanders, you can dig to your heart's content, or, to speak more accurately, you can get a surfeit of digging. The soil is either a light manageable clay, or more frequently chalk. Here, then, we met with none of the conspicuous breastworks of our old home, but fire trenches more than 6 feet deep, and communicators whose bottoms were 8 or 9 feet below ground level.

Many of the dugouts, moreover, were elaborate caves, large enough to accommodate 25 men, and capable with their roofs of logs heaped over with many feet of earth, of resisting the direct impact of a 5.9-inch shell. The increase in security was naturally great, and bombardments which would have destroyed whole trench sections at Ploegsteert were almost ineffective. In the winter, however, under stress of rain and snow, the dugouts fell in, together with the sides of the trench, which, from lack of material, could not be efficiently revetted. Then men sighed for Trench 40, and the little sandbag shelters too small to collect such quantities of water. But as we viewed them then the dugouts seemed the last word in luxury; one of those which I inhabited contained a mattress, two chairs, a table, a large gilt-framed mirror, some artificial flowers, a portrait of the Czar and his wife, and an engraving called 'Le Repos du Marin,' which depicted an old sailor drinking peacefully under a tree.

All would have been well but for the small game; lice, a legacy from the French, enormous red slugs, which ate any food which lay about, and left a viscous trail behind every movement, countless swarms of mice and gigantic rats, some of which were so bold as to gnaw through the men's haversacks, as they slept, in search of the food contained therein.

French Trench Design

We naturally examined every detail of these new trenches with minute interest, and compared English and French models. The first sensation was of bewilderment. For at Ploegsteert we had been content with a very simple system; wayfaring men, though fools, could scarcely err therein. But here we had to learn our way about a perfect maze of trench, where it was easy, or rather inevitable, at first to go wrong, and; finding yourself enclosed by earth walls towering above your head, to lose all sense of direction.

This difficulty was not lessened for the men by our retention of all the French names for the trenches, most of which were christened after their Generals. Such names as Bugeaud, Poniatowski, Bataille, and the like, were so many pieces of gibberish which it was hardly possible for a self-respecting English soldier to pronounce, while Boyau, Abri, Feuillee and Puisard were not helpful forms of identification. But anyone who had become familiar with the labyrinth would at once admit that for purposes of relief and inter-communication it was far superior to anything he had yet seen.

Another useful novelty was the systematic use of saps for night-posts. A sentry in the fire trench will always find his

attention distracted to a certain degree, especially when he is 500 yards from the enemy; but put, him in a sap-head with only a few yards of wire to protect him, and the acuteness of his vision and hearing will be marvellously increased. On the other hand, in certain points the French trenches fell below the standards to which we had accustomed ourselves. Owing to their superiority in artillery, and to the thinness with which they held their front line, they did not bother to build strong traverses between the inordinately long fire bays, which were, in consequence, seriously exposed to oblique gun fire.

Again, no attempt had been made to provide any flooring for the trenches, and the Battalion spent many happy hours working under the August sun as amateur bricklayers, with the material ready to hand from the village, in the hope, which the winter was to bring utterly to naught, of thereby providing a solid bottom.

Peace Warfare

22nd July to 6th September 1915

The summer of 1915 was spent in what was known as 'Peace-wartime' The German and Allied trenches were 450-900 yards apart which greatly minimised the risk from snipers and there was a general disinclination to engage in hostile activities.

During the six weeks after our arrival the weather was very broken, with many violent thunderstorms and very little heat. Except for eight days at Sailly, where fear of aeroplanes was fortunately sufficient to prevent parades, but not cricket in the orchards, we spent all our time at Hebuterne.

The Battalion, for the most part, relieved itself as at Plugstreet, but had no fixed dwelling-place, sometimes extending as far to the right as Trench Bugeaud, half way up the north slope of the hill of Serre, where the ground was littered with the debris and decomposing bodies of the June fighting, sometimes as far to the left as Trench Morand, about 300 yards north of where the Bucquoy road crossed the trenches. From Morand to Hoche the lie of the land was all in our favour; the trenches were sited just in front of the gentle rise which covered Hebuterne; 500 to 600 yards away, at the bottom of the dip lay the enemy, about 40 feet below us, and behind him the ground again rose leisurely and showed its slope towards us for 3,000 yards, with the hand of the Hun writ large in chalk, revealing his second and third line with the great covered communication trenches which connected them.

The left of the picture was closed by Gommecourt Wood, of sinister memory, with its pretty little red-roofed village encased therein, and its gaping cemetery sticking out from the south-east corner. on the skyline appeared several battered farms, La Brayelle, Les Essarts, and Rettemoy, each surrounded by copses and orchards, and on their right the Bois de Biez, which provided a home for those thorns in our flesh, the 5.9 inch howitzers. On its right flank again running down the hill towards us was the Bois Rossignol, where an active battery of field guns made music less tuneful than that of the bird whence the wood was named.

Annoying the Germans

Straight in front of Trench Bataille, about 900 yards away, stood the skeleton of the little farm called by the French Sans Nom. It was the favourite point on which every type of gun registered, and the Germans attached great importance to its bowels, for night after night hand-carts unloaded there, and men could be heard by patrols talking and hammering. Much interest and amusement could be obtained from this panorama with field glasses and telescope. Along the road which ran obliquely from Les Essarts to Gommecourt came cyclists, fatigue men, and occasionally formed bodies of troops, who, when assailed with long range machine gun fire, extended and advanced in short rushes.

One day two fat Huns carrying a dixie walked along the side of the great chalk communication trench, who, when Sergeant Daniels fired a shot at 1,200 yards, dropped their burden and leapt nimbly into the trench. One morning when Goolden and I were looking through a telescope we noticed a trestle table being put up near Rettemoy Farm; this was followed by half a dozen German officers accompanied by two ladies dressed in white, who, after surveying the view, sat down to lunch. We thought this too good an opportunity to miss, and informed the F.O.O. By describing this little gathering as a working party, he obtained the major's permission to fire, and the ladies' meal was soon interrupted by our rounds of shrapnel.

The Seven Sisters

Opposite Lassalle a shoulder ran out towards the German lines with its steep northern face covered with dense thickets of thorn, apt cover for night adventures; this shoulder so restricted our view that from one trench the field of fire amounted to no more than 10 yards. If you walked south you passed the Puiseux road, opposite which and some 500 yards away was a clump of tall poplars between the lines generally known as the Seven Sisters.

There was a superstition that this was held by the enemy, but when explored by a daylight patrol of the 5th Gloucesters nothing was discovered in the nature of defences. South of the road the line curved south-west into lower ground and became separated from the opposing trench by 900 yards.

From here another wide prospect unfolded itself, with Pulsieux 2 miles away, lifting its white spire from a knoll enclosed on three sides by beech woods. Behind an occasional wisp of smoke showed that a train was making its way between Achiet and Miraumont, whose supply depots were frequently visited by our bombarding squadrons.

A mile to the south the hamlet of Serre, twice fruitlessly attacked next year, topped a barren and shell-blown ridge. About this point, notorious for frequent visits from the earth-shelling aerial torpedo, began the lines of the 4th Division, once again our neighbours. They were our sister division in the 7th Corps, which was completed by the arrival at the end of August of the 37th Division, who after spending some days with us for instruction relieved the French on our left at Fonquevillers and Hannescamps. The commander of the 3rd Army, which was gradually increased until its line extended to the southern marshes of the Somme, was at this time Sir C. Monro, afterwards Commander-in-chief in India.

Thursday 22nd July

Pte Wheatley

Left Bayencourt at 8 pm marched to Hibuteme. Slept for night in barn.

Met French soldiers coming out of line. Told us not to make so much noise, but thats what we are here for. There will be dirty work here before so very long.

Friday 23rd July

Hebuterne all day roamed about the village ruins. Place smashed to atoms. Church in ruins preparations for the trenches.

Saturday 24th July

Left the village and went in the trenches. French trenches fairly good. Communication trenches very deep. No sand-bags in fire trench. Large dug-buts. Found that we could not light fires or do any cooking. Name of trench "Sassale". All rations had to be cooked back in village and carried up by team in reserve.

Sunday 25th July

Very quiet usual fatigues and guards. Started building gun position in serp.

Wednesday 28th July

Shelling nearby all day several narrow escapes. Retrieved by Oxfords.

Thursday 29th July

Went back to "Sailly au Boir" for rest.

Received parcel and letter from home.

Started to make souvenir rings.

August 1915

Propaganda

The month of August passed quietly with us, though rendered notable by the great German successes in Russia. The fate of Warsaw moved the enemy to put up notice-boards announcing the event, one of which had on one side '*Warschau Gefallen*' and on the other, apparently reversable by a string, '*Gott Strafe England.*' With commendable caution, however, they were planted so near their own trench that it required a field glass to read them.

A few days later, when the German Fleet met with misfortune in the Gulf of Riga, Sergt. Tester posted a board with details of that reverse just in front of their barbed wire.

Shelling

The French batteries remained with us for a month, while our gunners were registering, and given a free hand in

accordance with the British custom of annoying the enemy incessantly, showed a complete mastery over him. Throughout the night at uncertain intervals their guns threw shells into Gommecourt. It was difficult to believe that the terrible explosions which resulted were caused by a shell lighter than our 18 pounders, whose shrapnel burst with an almost inaudible 'pip.'

Practically the only retaliation indulged in by the Germans was to shell our batteries as they were getting into their gun-pits, though without serious damage.

Pte Wheatley:-

Monday 1st August - Bank Holiday

M.T. concert in field.

Wonder what I should have been doing if I were in Bllighty now. Splendid weather.

Thursday 5 August

Left Saly-au-Boir for 8 day this time. I start my cooking again, find sack of rice in house. Plenty of orchards round here, apples just coming on. Apples and rice wont be so bad I shall become a chef

Friday 13th August

Relieved from trenches by the Oxfords went in to barns in Helriterne. Rue de Sac. Started making beds with wire and boards, Things not so bad after all, plenty of tubs and barrels we can wash in also part of Blacksmiths shop.

I got a few tools which will come in handy for making my souvenirs.

Monday 16th August

Building dug outs in village .heavy timber and blocks of chalk. Still doing well. Heard from A. R.

Saturday 21st August

Went into trenches again. Relieved the Oxfords in French Hoche. Things very quiet.

Tuesday 24th August

Pte Wheatley

Brickfields shelled. 'A' Coy suffered lost some old mates.

Capt Cruttwell seems to have got his dates mixed up

About the end of the month on the 25th August, however, a serious misfortune befell A Company, one of whose platoons was half destroyed by a 4.2-inch, which struck the Brickfields, a dangerous and conspicuous supporting point. The men had just returned from bathing the village, when the shell fell among them, killing five and wounding nine. The five killed, all of whom came from Reading, were 2857 Pte Frederick Charles Clemetson, 2782 Pte Arthur James Butler, 1686 Pte William Heath, 2848 Pte Frank Palmer Selby and 2727 Pte Albert Edward Ford.

A month later one of the wounded, 3163 Pte E J Allum of Reading wrote to his mother:-

It is very hard for me to write as I am still on my back. I have two wounds on my left leg and one on my right. The left leg is broken from from the hip to thigh. My head wound is better now. There were 15 of us in a dig-out, when suddenly a shrapnel shell exploded near by Five of us were killed and several wounded. I had a narrow escape myself from death. I am now twenty two miles away from the trenches in hospital but I expect shortly to be sent to England

Thursday 26th August

Heard rumours of staying in for another 8 days. Hot weather now.

Saturday 28th August

11th Warwicks in for instructions.

30th August 1915

At the same spot as the shellfire on August 24th Lance-Corpl. Albert Walter Boston, of Lambourn [2765] of B

Company, was blown to pieces on the 30th August while gallantly remaining out to see that the working party under his charge had taken cover safely.

Tuesday 31st August

Pte Wheatley

Came out of fire trench and went in reserve gun position.

Sources

War Record of 1st/4th [pp 4-37] by C R M F Cruttwell

Petre pp 122-130

Diary of Pte J Wheatley

The Life of Ronald Poulton - by his father.

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