

Section 245

Interval II

The 5th Battalion October 1916 to March 1917

After their experiences on the Somme the 5th Battalion were given a well deserved rest. They were all returned to their correct brigade, the 35th after some had been attached to the 88th. First they went to Arras. (continued from section 235)

Pte Ambrose Joins the 5th 11th September to 20th October 1916

Pte Ambrose [37394] was part of a draft of reinforcements for the Royal Berkshire Regiment. They were being held in reserve at the 42nd Base Infantry Depot at Rouen. The new drafts joined the 5th Battalion train and awaited the return of the rest of the battalion from the Somme fighting.

On Wednesday Sep.11th 1916 we was on a route march when an orderly came up and ordered us back to Rouen at once. On arriving back at Camp we found ammunition and new gas helmets, and rations which was Bully Beef and biscuits ready for us and had to be ready at 1-30 to proceed to the front.

We got to the station to entrain and managed to get into a third class carriage, most of the boys being in cattle trucks. We moved off from Rouen about three o'clock, the first stop being about half a mile out of Rouen. I say the first stop because we hardly saw the wheels go round at all. We went through a good few tunnels we got out and sit on the footboard of the train as it more comfortable than inside.

We stopped about every mile. That time of year apples were plentiful we ran into orchards and picked them up. Once the train started before we got back, but it was quite easy to catch it up. We arrived at Abberville about midnight, a large station. We stayed till morning managing to get a cup of tea at the Canteen on the station while we were waiting.

Leaving at daybreak at the usual speed or much slower we amused ourselves by picking up wood along the line every time the train stopped, so that we could make some tea, but it generally happened that as soon as the fire was going the train got a move on and we had to stamp the fire out and pick up our dixies and sticks for the next stop. Anyway we got something wet and warm in the end. Some of the boys got boiling water from the engine and put their tea in being a bit thick it needed no milk. Tea and sugar is always carried in a tin as an emergency ration, you get in a good bother if you cannot show one.

By noon we were getting nearer the line so our speed was slower. Instead of our train being the only one on the line at the time, there were five trains in front of us and three behind all nearly touching, so we saw there was not much fear of our train going for a time, so we went down

to a village and bought some rooty, this being tommies name for bread in France, if he does not use the French for it 'du pain'. We should have had time to have bought the baker and his shop for we got back and had nearly eaten the bread before the train started again.

On this journey the kiddies were shouting 'Bully Beef' or 'bisquees~. I think they had a very good haul as none of us was gone on Bully Beef

Our train stopped when it was nearly dark for an hour. We didnt know why it was but it was so that the Germans should not see the train, we could hear the guns firing during this stop, most of us had a wash at the stream. When it was dark we moved on once more, our last stop being at Albert. We marched from the station but could not see much of Albert, some of the houses were badly damaged and the Cathedral was one mass of ruins except the spire which had been hit by a large shell at the bottom and blown part of the entrance away, and another shell had hit it a few feet from the point causing the top to bend over and point towards the ground which was rather marvellous that it did not fall right down.

As soon as we left Albert proceeding along the main road we began to meet motor lorries, a few at first but after a few more miles it was one continual stream of them, going up on the right and back on the left of road. We had to walk on the side of the road up to our knees in mud. By this time we could see lights going up from the trenches, but they were further away than we thought at the time. We could also see the flashes from the guns and hear the explosions.

We went by a village, on the top of a hill, I think it was Longeval but nothing remained but heaps of bricks. No trees could be seen standing, all that was left was heaps of wood and a few feet of stump. Most of the way we could see objects moving on each side of the road and lights which were camps, and horses and mules picqueted everyw'here, the shelters being old canvas or bell tents.

After going about six miles we turned into a field amongst objects and lights having reached our destination at about one in the morning. This was the transport and the few men that was left behind while the Battalion was in the trenches. There was a large shed where they kept the rations built of a few old boards and a large rick sheet on top. Next to this were two bell tents where the sergeants slept and then a few bivouacs built by the other men of sticks and odd pieces of canvas. When we arrived they found what room they could but most of us had to make our own waterproof sheets which we carried or sleep in the open. Being very tired we preferred the open. I slept up close to the wooden shed in about six inches of mud, laying the sheet down first sleeping quite soundly till morning.

After breakfast next day we were told to get our equipment ready to go to the trenches, leaving our packs

behind, also we were served out with steel helmets and had to be ready to go into the trenches at night. But later word came up that we should not be wanted that day but we were to be ready at anytime in case we should be needed before the others came out, but luckily we were not needed. During the remainder of that day it rained, so we had to make bivouacs for ourselves with sticks and our sheets.

The next few days we amused ourselves by strolling round the old German trenches where our men had fought weeks before and I don't think we shall ever forget those few days. We went up these old trenches which were littered with broken rifles, parts of equipment, tunics, greatcoats both ours and German, ammunition, tins of bully beef, steel helmets, shell cases and many other things. And one of the worst things we saw was mounds and little wooden crosses several of them having on them the words "*Here lies the body of an unknown British soldier*". He would probably be reported missing and his friends still wondering if he is still alive.

Shell holes were all over the place large and small, also dud shells their noses buried in the ground. German bombs laying about and some of our Mills bombs. In some parts laid the remains of one of our guns or transport waggons that had been hit by a shell and nearby were the graves of those who belonged to the guns or drivers of the waggon. Barb wire lay everywhere being blown to pieces by our artillery. There was also large piles of boxes that had contained shells, these we made free use of for firewood and improving our bivouacs.

We went through Metz (Mametz ?) Wood one day. It was a job to get through as every tree had been blown down, huge oak trees had been broken off by shells, some of the trees being nearly three feet through them. All round as far as could be seen was bivouacs and horses and mules used for carrying shells to guns. They have two baskets slung over their backs carrying four each side. They can be seen all day like an endless chain winding about in all directions to different batteries. The mud was awful above the animals knees and on the roads it was over the limber wheels and motor lorries getting stuck often.

Near our camp if we could call it such was an observation balloon observing for a naval gun which fired every fifteen or twenty minutes. Every time it fired at night the concussion used to blow our candles out in our bivouac.

Our meals consisted of Bully Beef, biscuits, stew, cheese and posy (jam) and tea. Half a mile along the road was our divisional canteen one of the London coffee vans where you could get biscuits, tea chocolate and cigarettes.

We saw a great air fight in which thirty machines were engaged, dodging in and out like wasps round a jam pot. Several Germans having to make for their lines we watched as they gradually got towards German lines, ours following close on anyone who made a dash for home. We spent some of the time watching our anti-aircraft guns shelling Fritz, often making it too hot for him, and driving him back.

After nearly a fortnight we had news that the Battalion was being relieved, so they had to find another place where some shelter was already built, this being about a mile from the other place. We marched there to get anything ready for them that we could. It poured with rain all the afternoon, being nearly dark when we got there,

we had to make the bivouacs safe from blowing about by the wind, and to dig a trench round to keep the water from flooding them.

By the time this was finished it was inky black, and we were told to try and [find] some wood to light some large fires for the men to warm themselves and dry their clothes. This was a good job as we fell into shellholes and fell over a bank on the side of the road. Anyhow we found some old stables, so they soon had to come down and some of the boys found their way to the wood, so we managed to get eight or ten good fires going by midnight as that was the time the boys were expected.

Some of them came looking more like mud statues walking than men, some kept awake around the fires but some of them laid down and slept till daylight. Others did not reach us till morning and some joined us a day or two afterwards.

I forgot to mention that we had a band which played every evening, it was our drum and fife band. It seemed to liven us up a lot. After the boys from the trenches had got a bit clean and had a rest we moved to a different part of the line. [TX00609A]

Arras

21/10/16 to 1/11/16

Private S P Ambrose recalled what happened when they were rested in Arras:

After the boys had rested we moved on October 21st 1916, marching to Mericourt, a small village near Albert. We stayed one night sleeping in old barns. We moved next day going two miles to a wide road where French motor lorries were waiting for us. These were driven by Singulose troops. We were taken from this place through Amiens to Doullens, then to a small village called Hauteville about twelve kilometers from Arras. There we put up in huts, which was a treat to stay in after the few previous nights we had had.

We stayed there four days, the boys getting thoroughly clean. A new lot of men joined us there so the Colonel inspected our draft and the other new men and gave us a word or two of advice. We also had our pay before we left. We had had none since leaving Rouen so we were all glad of it. In every village there were shops which sold cakes and chocolate and other things.

On Friday Oct 27th 1916 we marched into the town of Arras, arriving after dark as troops were not allowed to enter the town in daylight. We went to the French Cavalry Barracks for billets.

Arras may be called the silent city. During the day we were not allowed out of billets as we were so near the German trenches and German airmen were frequently over the town. The reason we were not allowed out was to keep them from shelling the town which of course they would do if they knew a lot of troops were there.

Very few shops were open in Arras, about twenty down the main street, two butchers, one grocer, one chemist and two or three fruiterers. The others sold silks, fancy cushions sachels and anything a soldier is likely to send to England. Everything was very dear as it all had to be brought up at night. Of course there were several estaminets (public houses) open which sold French and English beer, vin rouge and vin blanc and biscuits. They were only allowed to open an hour and a quarter in the

evening. We were allowed out from half an hour after sunset till nine o'clock. Of course we could not see much of the town except when going to the trenches or on a working party.

The town had not been shelled very badly except the churches, cathedral, town hall and station and convent. One church near our billets was nearly level with the ground, a great part of the wall of the Chancell remained and a few bricks belonging to the tower still hung together, everything else was a heap of rubbish. The bells lay amongst the bricks and splintered pews. The altar had been blown to pieces, the organ was a mash of twisted pipes.

A few people still lived in cellars although most of the houses had not been smashed by shells and had furniture in them. Soldiers were billeted in some of them where the roof had been blown in or the front. Everything at night was bustle as motor lorries and transport brought rations and ammunition and we were of course all out in the evening for a breath of fresh air. About the third night some of us had to go into the trenches to put up barb wire. We were a bit nervous at first as it was over the top and the Germans sent one or two fairy lights up while we were doing it. Well nothing much happened so having used all the wire we returned about midnight to our billet. The next day they came and asked if anyone knew anything about signalling so as I had learnt it in England I was picked for the Signal Section. [TX00609B]

Ronville - In the Trenches

1/11/16 to 17/12/16

The next day (November 1st 1916) the Battalion went into the trenches. I went to Battalion HQ as signaller; our telephone being in a large cellar, and sleeping quarters in the front room of an empty house at Ronville, a small village on the outskirts of town. We had feather beds to sleep on and a good place to cook our food.

In the garden at the back were several graves of British soldiers and French and about three German soldiers. After four days we returned to the Barracks while the 5th Essex were in the trenches. During our time in barracks we practised signalling. We had a canteen where we could buy biscuits, tinned fruit, tea cocoa, cigarettes and tobacco.

When the Battalion went into the trenches again I went to the Exchange Signal Section in Hooze St. By Hooze St I mean Hooze Trench as most of the trenches are called streets and a number of trenches are called sectors. We were in H Sector, all the trench names beginning with H: Hunter Street, Hooze Street, Huntingdon Street, Halifax Street and Hamilton Street.

The Exchange Signalling Station was a large dug-out in Hooze St with two entrances. There was a partition making two rooms of it. One we used for cooking and the other for sleeping and telephone office. We had bedsteads, a table, a very large overmantel, two padded easy chairs and a kitchen stove - also one cat and I don't think we ever counted the rats - I think it would be three figures. Anyhow I have seen dozens in there all at one time. We did our own cooking.

Our Battalion and the Essex had a small canteen in Ronville. We used to go and get tinned fruit, condensed milk and Quaker Oats and have fruit and burgo for supper. (Burgo is our name for Quaker Oats). We lived very well with our rations and things we could buy. Our

ration consisted of frozen meat, a limited quantity of bully beef, Maconnici rations, jam and fresh butter in tins also tinned beans. At night we used to go over the top of the trench to an old garden and get some cabbage which helped to improve our dinner.

The Exchange was only 1500 yards from Arras Barracks and the German front line 2000 yards from the town. Of course being our first time in the trenches we were all surprised at the quietness of them; only one or two shots were fired at night. Sometimes it seemed impossible for a war to be on, we never got shelled and no trench mortars. When we first went into this part of the line I think it was because troops came to that part to rest from the hard fighting on the Somme, both ours and the Germans, because the Germans put up a large board in the trenches at one time with the words "*We have just come from the Somme, so have you. If you don't fire we shall not.*"

We saw very little of the German aircraft during the first part of our time in this part. We used to have a walk round the trenches most days to see our telephone wires were in good order or to mend them as they were frequently getting broken. We remained in this part of the line six weeks going in and out every four days. I did signalling at Left Company HQ which was a large dug-out in the support line. This was not so comfortable as the Exchange.

Twice I did Signalling at the Centre Companies Office, also a dugout. Here there was an accident close by - an explosion in a trench mortar dug-out. It appeared a shell exploded in the gun causing others to explode nearby with the result that the Officer and two men were killed and two others wounded.

I also did a turn at the Reserve Company. We had three companies in the front line and one in reserve. The office was in the cellar of an empty house. We had very few casualties till the last time in the trenches, only slightly wounded. Our men were busy towards the latter part of the time repairing the trenches and making dug-outs. Our last time out of the trenches we had a concert in the skating rink given by the Divisional Concert Party which we all enjoyed.

We had five days in the trenches the last time which we were not sorry when it was time to leave as it was getting rather uncomfortable as our people had begun preparing for the Easter push. Our men were digging more trenches and getting guns everywhere and ammunition in cellars and any place it would be safe and no doubt the Germans knew it as we had more shells and trench mortars, but when they sent one TM ours sent five in return.

Aircraft was busier the day before we came in - a German had been very daring, flying very low over our trenches and Arras. About four he came round again but was quickly followed by one of our planes who fired a belt of machine gun bullets at him. We were all watching from the barrack windows. The first belt did not take much effect, but the second belt made him waver a bit. It gradually began to lower at last attempting to make a spiral descent, but only managed to circle, finally making a nose dive to the ground. It fell just out of Arras, on Hetsas Trench. A great cheer went up from Arras when the troops saw them come down. The two airmen were both killed and our men buried them near the White Chateau; the Reserve Coys HQ. We saw the wreck next day as we went into the trenches. I managed to get a

piece of it as a souvenir. The Germans sent a few shells over to try and destroy it completely, but they did not manage it as our Flying Corps took the engine away next day.

Ronville had been badly shelled as it was near our front line and the church was ruined. The last five days there was much more rifle and machine gun fire from both sides and our artillery used to shell for two or three hours every afternoon, but not much came back from Fritz.

We had three men killed by a rifle grenade and one or two wounded by shells, otherwise our casualties were light. The weather being fine, airmen were busy. Four German planes were brought down in one day by airfighting. We could hear the bombardment on the Somme and see flashes of the guns from there at night.

On December 15th 1916 our guns were bombarding when we went out. Going through the station we were quite close to the batteries. We had some shells drop unpleasantly close which put the wind up us a bit. I should say Arras Station was wrecked by shells. Metals were torn and twisted, parts of trucks lay about and the Ticket Office was strewn with papers, books and tickets and there were barb wire entanglements everywhere. Also the streets had barb wire and barricades to stop the German advance earlier in the war as they got into Arras the same time as they were advancing on Paris.

Well we arrived at the barracks safe and stayed till Sunday. Some of our guns were shelling a Fritz aeroplane. The Germans sent a few shells back at them. They soon moved off to another part as they were mounted on motors so we did not get a shell in our barracks. TX00609C]

Denier 17/12/16 to 2/2/17

Private Ambrose's account continues with much interesting detail of French farming and life in billets:

We left the barracks at Arras on Sunday 17th Dec 1916 at four in the afternoon and marched to a village 12 miles from Arras called Gouves: a few farms and a shop or two. We sleep in the barns on straw for the night. We left in the morning, marching through Avesnes-le-Compte and Liencourt to a village called Denier. We were billeted in barns. Nearly all the people in these small villages own their house and farm. They keep a sort of small holding, a few cows, pigs and fowls and a horse and cart.

Most of the dwellings are bungalows with a cow shed joining, a door leading out of the living room into the cowshed. Cows often went out of the wrong door and through the living room. At the ends of the houses stables or sheds are built at right angles with the house and the barn built facing the house making a square of the buildings. In the centre is where they put the manure heap right opposite the front door with only a narrow brick path between.

Now the corn barn. We have no such barns in England. We should be afraid to put a dog in them for fear of their catching cold. Upright pieces of wood are put up from the ground with a few cross pieces and then lathes or ordinary sticks are nailed across. Then it is filled in with mud and a little straw to make it hang together. When they put the straw or corn in, it frequently gets a knock and is soon in holes. This is the sort of place we sleep in during the snow and frosty weather. When we were

inside we could see the carts go by in the road. It was like being under a collinder.

I don't think their method of farming came up to ours as they plant their crops in such small quantities - about two or three pole of wheat, then some other crop and then more wheat. I never saw, except on one occasion, more than half an acre of corn in one place. They do their own threshing with a small machine with an oblong place for a horse to stand with a sort of treadmill which works the machine.

The village was small; just room to billet three companies with the other company being at the next village. We were all in barns, about twenty in each. Almost every house was an estaminet where we spent most of our evenings as it was warmer than the barns and you could buy eggs, bread and butter, also coffee and wines. They sold what they called 'English Beer' at 1/3 a bottle, but the boys did not think there was much 'English' about it. They could drink all night and not get drunk. Of course we had our own Battalion Canteen where we could get most of the things we needed.

The men did a little physical jerks and a walk or two till after Xmas. My time was spent in signalling in the morning. We did nothing in the afternoons. The first fortnight Christmas came and we had plenty of snow and a very good time considering the circumstances. We had roast beef, potatoes, swedes and turnips with rice pudding and figs, Christmas puddings (which came in two pound tins), dates, nuts, oranges and apples. The usual issue of cigarettes (which was about 20 a week, sometimes 30) and we had the Berkshire Tobacco Fund issue which we got about once a month: three packets of tins and two ounces of tobacco (called 'alf a mo') then we had a present of fifty Myrtle Grove cigarettes and a bundle of ten cigars from Simmonds Brewery in Reading. So we did very well I think. We arranged a concert in the school in the evening. Our Christmas parcels did not arrive till a week or more after so we had another treat when they arrived.

There was a very steep hill in a field where we enjoyed ourselves in the snow. We got sheets of galvanised iron for sleighs. At first all went well, but after a time the tin got bent and would insist on going in a curve, shooting us off as it turned round leaving about eight of us in the snow.

On the 7th of January 1917 I went on a course of signalling at Div HQ to a small village called Le Laurey. The billets were a little better and being at Divisional Headquarters the REs had laid electric light on to most of them. We had a pleasant time there. There was football matches twice a week and we could get many things at the Divisional canteen. During my stay there I visited a friend whom I met by accident. I saw some men of the Devon Regt working on the road. I just asked if they knew my friend, Fred Jacobs, hardly thinking they would, as there is a good few battalions of the Devon Regt. Luckily they did. They happened to stay in the same barn as he did, so after inquiring where it was I went and found him. He was just getting into kip. Of course he was very pleased to see me and another lad was with me from home. So he got up again as it was only about seven o'clock and had a drink of French wine together and talked of home and things we used to do. After that night we met on several occasions while we stayed in that district, but I am sorry to say he was killed later on so we shall not meet at home to talk of those few meetings in France.

I returned to Denier after three weeks at Div HQ. During this period we experienced some of the coldest weather of the year. Our bread was frozen, we could not cut it so we used to put it in our dixie of tea for the steam to thaw it. The jam was frozen in the tins and we had a job to keep from being frozen as well.

I went several days on a rifle range to telephone from the butts to the firing point. The battalion did training and trenching and we learnt to signal to aeroplanes by means of a large sheet about eight feet long and four wide, with flaps on it. The sheet is pegged to the ground and the flaps lay flat. They are painted green on one side. By means of a string which works them backwards and forwards showing white on the other side, words are signalled and the aeroplane answers with a hooter. We did a good deal of this signalling and flags signalling. I went on several occasions to Liencourt. I should have said that was the village my friend stayed at, about a mile from Denier. [TX00609D]

Work Party - Beaurainscourt

2/2/17 to 9/2/17

We left Denier about the 2nd of February 1917 and went to Beaurainscourt, in huts for working parties. When we left Arras to go to Denier. the fields were being levelled to lay a railway across. This time the rails were laid and traffic on them. We had to dig chalk to bed the railway up.

The weather being very frosty we had to work very hard and we had the worst rations we ever had. We shared a 2 lb loaf between eight for a days ration and no biscuits. We went on like this for a week. After that they got a bit better and we were glad when our time to move came. [TX00609E]

Training - Lattre St Quentin

9/2/17 - 22/2/17

During the second half of February Lt Col Willan took over command of the 35th Brigade. The men moved to Lattre St Quentin to practise for the forthcoming Battle of Arras. Pte Ambrose resumes:-

We went to a place 3 miles from Beaurainscourt called Lattre St Quentin. We went to that place to practise the attack which was to be at Arras at Easter. Everything was done exactly as it was to be done in reality, using smoke bombs and rockets. We practised that every day for a week. [TX00609F]

Billets - Arras

23/2/17 to 2/3/17

Marching back to Arras on the 23rd of Feb 1917 we were billeted in cellars and houses around Barb Wire Square, which was a large sort of market square with barb wire entanglements. We went from there every day for six hours work in the trenches, helping the REs dig large dug-outs. The parties that worked in daylight dug the chalk out, as it was all chalk around Arras. They put the chalk in sand bags and stood them along the trench. For those that came at night to empty on the top we used to make a chain and pass them along to each other. I think we were seen on several occasions as it was moonlight. We had to lay down several times to escape machine gun bullets and on three occasions we had to bolt to the

dug outs. The first occasion we were nearly caught, a few white lights went up and then some green and red rockets from the Germans, which was a signal to their guns who sent a good many trench mortars, wiz-bangs and 9.5s over - we had to bolt for the dug outs. Once we had just arrived at the bottom of the steps when a trench mortar fell on the entrance, filling the dug out with white dust. The concussion blew out all the candles so we were in darkness for a few minutes. After the first time we did not wait long after the rockets went up as we knew we would get some shells over and of course our guns sent some back in return.

Every night when we went to work we used to have to carry large pieces of timber up from the RE dump (named Ritz Dump) to put into the dugout. We did not stay long at the dumps as Fritz often shelled it. We had several wounded there. Another place the Germans shelled a lot was the town cemetery. Large tombstones were wrecked and blown to pieces and the wall round the cemetery was level with the ground. They also used to sent a good few shells into Arras. One night a 4.5 in shell dropped on the floor above where we were billeted, but luckily it did not explode. One of the boys went and carried it down next morning.

One night while returning from a working party, being very dark we took a wrong turning and had a long job to find our way out. Our men were getting tremendous supplies of ammunition and rations stored in Arras and hundreds of guns which were well disguised. I saw four large howitzers in a garden where there was a good many clipped evergreens: box and yew trees. They were in among the shrubs and covered with green mats which looked like the shrubs. We should not have seen them only we went through the garden. Once or twice we did a little drill just outside of Arras at some old French forts.

Just outside of Arras was a large cemetery where numbers of our men have been buried. There was close to two thousand graves there when we were at Arras. By the side of the road was a large number of 15 in shells laid on planks ready for the Easter push. [TX00609G]

The Trenches - I Sector

3/3/17-7/3/17

Lt Col Willan returned to resume command of the Battalion on 3rd March. He returned as the Battalion was about to return to action in the trenches. Pte Ambrose recalled:-

We moved into a large girls school after we had finished working parties and went into the trenches for six days in I Sector. The trenches were named Ink, Ivy, Islington, Imperial and Inverness Streets and one going through the cemetery - Cemetery Trench.

We did three days in Reserve Trenches, staying in dugouts in Islington St. The dugouts were dug under a railway embankment. Whilst in reserve we guarded water tanks and bomb stores and wherever a company stayed we had a gas guard at a convenient place where he can alarm his comrades if gas is coming. He usually has a bell handy or an empty shell case so he can make a good noise. The Germans used to shell near us but we never had one on our dugout or it may have been all up with us as they were 9.5 shells.

We used to have to carry rations to the front line also tea or hot soup about 12 at night. When it was tea it had rum

in it. I have not mentioned rum before as we had very little of it although we should have found it helpful during the very cold weather. On one occasion we had to show a sergeant Major the way to his company's dugout. He was just returned from leave from England and he was very much the worse for drink. We took four large dixies of tea, one for each company and four jars of rum to be put into the tea when we got up to the front line. When we arrived at the dugout the Sergt Major wanted to put the rum in so of course we let him, but of course he kept half a jar for himself leaving it on the top step of the dug out. Of course we had to take the tea unto each company and wait for the empty dixies to take back. When we came back by the dugout the rum was still there. One of us had to report to the officer in the dugout on returning so we saw the SM was in bed and asleep so we emptied the rum back into one of the dixies and filled the jar with a little tea that was left, making good use of the rum in the tea that was waiting for us when we got back.

After three days in reserve we had to go into the front line. I should have said that I was off the signal section because they had too many. I was still a reserve signaller so I had to do duty with the other men till I was wanted again.

I was on guard up a sap, which is a trench going out towards the Germans from our front line about forty yards from our front line. The sentries are at the end to warn others of any movements of the enemy. The Germans shelled rather a lot but of course they went over our heads to the support lines. They sent over trench mortars, wiz-bangs, coal boxes, 4.5s and 9.5s. Only one dropped near us, a 9.5, killing two men who were digging a gun pit. The noise of the explosion made our ears ring for sometime. The weather was very cold and frosty and no one was allowed in the dugouts at night. During the night we did one hours sentry duty, one hours work and one hours sleep, sleeping soundly on the firestep. The work we did was cleaning mud out of the trench. Any rubbish collected during the day is emptied on the top at night. One of our men who got on top was sniped at four times but luckily he missed him. The bags were left till a darker night.

Several of our men were wounded digging an advance trench in no mans land and one killed. While we were on guard up we had a rather uncomfortable experience. Our trench mortars had been firing all the morning at the German front line and towards the afternoon they appeared to be dropping nearer our line. TM shells can be seen going through the air and we had been watching them dropping nearer to us. Just as we had got our teas we saw one coming almost on us. We laid flat on the bottom of the trench and it dropped right on the end of the sap, smothering us with earth and spoiling our tea as it filled our mess tins with earth. The Captain came round just at that time and he soon sent a message to the battery.

We used to watch for German TMs when we heard the gun fire. We could judge where they were coming and if they were near we used to run. At night they could be seen by a tail of fire. We call one sort of TM a coal box because they make such a large cloud of black smoke like coal dust.

The Germans used to shell the cemetery with large shells. The monuments were strewn all over the place and the wall round it was level with the ground. One afternoon we were so tired that we slept through a heavy bombardment. [TX00609H]

Bombers

8/3/17 - 16/7/17

From the 9th of March ten officers and 220 men were sent for special training for an exploratory raid scheduled for the 16th. They were organised in six sections with each Company contributing about fifty men. It came as a bit of shock to the men who had been expecting another rest, as Private Ambrose recalled:-

Our three days being up we were all pleased to go out into billets again as we thought to have a good nights rest. But that was not to be because in the evening the Captain came round and called out some names and told us we were all going for a school treat. We were to get ready to march to Lattre St Quentin that night, fifty from each company. We did not appreciate it as it was fifteen miles and it had just started snowing. We arrived at our destination about midnight. It was not a march - we stumbled along as the roads were like glass.

As soon as we found our billets we were soon asleep. Next morning we had to parade and was put into different parties, two hundred of us in all, fifty from each company. Each Company was divided into three parties and each man was told off to do a certain thing. Our school treat was to practise a bombing raid of each party. Some men had to go and carry a torpedo, a thing about twenty feet long the size of a drain pipe on a house, filled with explosives. It is pushed under the enemies barb wire and then exploded making a large gap. Those men go first, then two men with wire cutters in case any wires was left, then men with bombs and trench mortars and last of all snipers who pot any Germans they could.

After it was all arranged we had to go to a field where an exact plan of the part we were to raid was dug out and the same distances as the German trenches showing enemy dugouts and machine gun emplacements. We started from our front line on the plan and went over the course two or three times each day and to the same time as we should in reality. Nothing was left to keep it from a success, barb wire and all which we blew up the last time we practised going over. We had a good time when not on parade. I should say that A and C Coys were to follow behind B and D who were to bomb the front line while A and C were to go over to the support. [TX00609J]

The Raid

17/3/17

The raid took place on the 17th March with 10 officers and 200 other ranks under the command of Major Sharp with Lt W C Adams as his 2ic. The six sections were deployed in pairs, one in front and one in support with a centre section and two flanking sections. There was good co-operation between the heavy artilleries from Division and corps and a box barrage was successfully maintained. For once the guns did their job of cutting the enemy wire and only the right section had to use its Bangalore torpedo. Pte Ambrose recalled:-

We returned to Arras on March 16th 1917 walking four miles and then getting into motor lorries for the remainder of the journey. While marching the four miles we had to stop because the road was blocked with traffic. On our right were some Red Cross cars and the chap next to me

said to the driver '*We shall want that tomorrow*' I thought perhaps he would not and he didn't as he got through alright.

We arrived at Arras expecting to have our raid next morning but we heard it was cancelled as the Germans had taken prisoner two of the Essex who were in the trenches that morning so they thought they might find out about our raid. We were served out with eight bombs and a trench mortar on Friday afternoon. The trench mortars were to throw down the dugouts. [TX00609K]

The raid started at 07:00 and lasted only 25 minutes. It was very successful and all went according to plan, although the left section (including Pte Ambrose) were held up for a while by machine gun fire but that was swiftly dealt with by the centre section. Otherwise very little opposition was encountered and most of the Germans facing them were either taken prisoner or killed, many by the firing of Stokes mortars into the German dugouts.

12th Division History:-

Opposition in the trenches was not very serious and when we got into the front line the Germans tried to escape by the communication trenches, but our men going over the top, reached the second line first and shot several of them. All the enemy inside the barrage were killed or taken prisoner and the dug outs destroyed by exploding Stokes mortar bombs in them,

Pte Ambrose:-

We went over on the raid on Sat morning. We were paid on Friday night and we enjoyed ourselves in case it was the last time for some, but I felt sure I should get through without being killed. The night before we felt a bit nervous, but when morning came we were all right. We started just after 5.30 in the morning. We had not got far before our guns started a tremendous fire. We thought something was wrong as they were not to start till 7 o'clock for us, but it was a raid by another Battn of the East Yorks a mile on our left: they went over at 6 o'clock.

We were all excited going up, all hoping we might get wounded enough to get a Blighty. We had taken a concertina with us on the six days practice and the boys had it with them in our front line at 6.45 all waiting for 7 o'clock which seemed one of the longest 15 minutes I have experienced I think.

Well seven o'clock came and on the stroke it seemed as if every house in Arras had a gun in it. Shells were hissing over our heads and we could see hundreds of trench mortars going over; dozens in the air at a time. Anyhow the two minutes were up and we clambered on top and walked over, the party who had the concertina playing it as they went. We arrived at the German barb wire or what remained of it. We did not need the torpedo as our shells had blown it to pieces. All the time our guns were going in front of us and on our flanks to keep the enemy from closing in on each side. We did not see many Germans in the front line, machine gun bullets were flying over our heads but our guns soon stopped them.

We got to the second line. Germans threw bombs but not far enough to catch us. We drove them back by throwing from shell holes and firing rifles. Getting in the second line we threw trench mortars down the dugouts as they would not come out. Shells were bursting all round, ours

dropping near us to keep the Germans away. We only had one man hit in the 2nd line. He was carried back but died later. We were in the 2nd line 20 minutes; our allotted time. [TX00609L]

After 25 minutes of fighting the men were ready to return. Casualties had been very light with 2nd Lt B H A Fellows wounded as they went over the top and one man seriously wounded. Retirement was a different matter however as it was under heavy German artillery fire. Major Sharp was killed by a shell when only ten yards from home. Of the other ranks one was believed killed, one was missing and 28 were wounded (including Pte Ambrose) Two machine guns and six prisoners were captured and about 120 Germans killed. The Battalion received the congratulations of both the Divisional and Corps Commanders for a job well done. Private Ambrose recounted his last few minutes of active service:-

The order came to retire. We were told to get back as quick as possible as our barrage would come back on the German's front line at 7.30. As we came back we could see the German artillery had found out and were shelling our front line with wiz-bangs, a shell that travels very quick and flies into very small pieces. We had a paper trail to guide us back. Then nearly to our barb wire the leaders missed the trail and came to our barb wire where they could not get through and all stood in a bunch which was a silly thing to do. Me being the last man I noticed the gap and made a rush for it. [TX00609M]

At this point Pte Ambrose was wounded. He had got his Blighty and his tale resumes in section 16-4.

Lt Col Willan wrote to Major Sharp's mother:-

" He was in command of a special party that was sent to raid the German trenches. The whole operation was most successful and I cannot tell you how sorry I am that your son was not spared to know the result, indeed he was one of the original officers who helped to raise the battalion to the high standard it has reached. He was always most cheerful, full of energy and a fine example to the younger officers. He will be a great loss to me as well as to the battalion." [TX00828]

The Reading Mercury Account

The Reading Mercury on 28th July 1917 reported:-

HOW HONOURS WERE WON

Further details of a successful bombing raid by a battalion of the Royal Berkshire Regiment at Arras were given to our representative by a non-commissioned officer who took part. He said that the attack was made at 6 o'clock the morning prior to which the heavy barrage was put up by our artillery on a 200 yard front for the short space of two minutes. The Germans were fully prepared for us but on account of our splendid artillery fire the opposition was quickly demoralised. So successful were we that in addition to the enemy sustaining a couple of hundred casualties recaptured for machine guns two trench mortars and several prisoners. It was all over within half an hour .

We had great misfortune to lose Major ----- who was in charge of the raid. He was killed in no man's land whilst

we were entering our own trench on the return. Second Lieutenant B. H. A Fellowes was seriously wounded and he unfortunately succumbed to his injuries shortly afterwards, but our casualties were very slight they numbered 23.

There were several deeds of gallantry on the part of our men the coolness displayed by one of our officers Lieutenant Ready was truly remarkable. He walked about as though he were on the parade ground, his shouting was really splendid and to my knowledge he accounted for four German s. Corporal G. F. Epsley, who was awarded a bar to his military medal deserved a great deal more recognition than he actually got. He put a whole machine-gun section out of action by charging them single-handed with bombs. He simply did it on his own while we were waiting for the wire cutters to cut the wire in order that our troops could get through Lance Corporal H. R. Chapman and Sgt E Breakspear both got the DCM. Breakspear who is quite a lad knows no fear. His coolness under heavy fire is remarkable and never was did so much demonstrated as on the location under notice.

Sources

Diary of Private Ambrose

History of the Royal Berks [Petre] pp221-222]

War Diaries 5th Bn

History of 12th Division pp 95

Reading Mercury 12/5/1917