

2352 Sapper

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These reminiscences constitute chiefly a record of quite incredible good luck, I never deliberately dodged anything but just did as I was told; yet – I never fired a shot towards the other side; I was never (as far as I knew) a selected individual target of the enemy; I saw only once the inside of a hospital (and that was when I visited one of our group who had flu).

When I myself caught 'flu during the epidemic in 1918 my unit was in rest and others of our party took my duties until I was well again; I doubt whether I spent as many as half-a-dozen nights completely in the open; I never did guard duty, nor a fire piquet, nor spent a night looking after the horses; and it is probable that all the spuds I ever peeled would hardly fill one bucket. Though I was often cold and wet I was rarely uncomfortable hungry or thirsty, although at one period my macintosh poncho was wet for so long without any break that it just rotted.. I never had any serious spill on my motorbike and nobody ever 'won' it when I had to leave it on the road side (or road end) and continue on foot. I had great good fortune to have as my companions – in a small group which underwent little change during the whole of my time – friendly young men whose education, intelligence and social background at least equalled my own and in several cases much exceeded it. Although a participant in the war I was one of the half-dozen or more required in the background to support each bayonet in front, and I had more than the average soldiers opportunity to observe what went on outside his own immediate locality.

Nevertheless, as my story will show, I had my ups and downs, but I shall never cease to sympathise with the infantry and the gunners and to admire and wonder at the incredible bravery of those whose lot it was to leave the shelter (such as it was) of a trench and face the near certain chance of death or injury in No Mans Land whether in a little raid at night or in a mass attack by day.

It was on 4th August 1914 that Britain took up the challenge of the German Kaiser and his gang and evoked from Sir Edward Grey the historic comment "The lights are going out all over Europe and we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime." How right he was.

Very soon Pontefract, like other Garrison towns, was thronged with men – not all of them yet in khaki, flooding the Town Hall, the Assembly Room, some of the schools, the pubs, as well as, of course, the Barracks and many tents on its sports fields as reservists and recruits flocked to the colours.

And in the middle of one early August night, from the wide-open window of my bedroom high above Gillygate, I woke to hear long lines of heavily laden and hard booted King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and men of the York and Lancaster Regiment marching through the town to Baghill Station lustily singing "Tipperary" – a song with a future which no-one at that time had foreseen. They were on the first stage of a journey which led them straight to Mons – and for many of them ended there.

Soon the reports of local men becoming casualties began to come in, the calls for more men for the Army became more insistent, and fingers were pointed with increasing directness at young men not in uniform. I was a big lad for my 17 years and attracted a full share of these fingers – and I did not like it.

Notwithstanding the calls (by many who ought to have known better) that it would be "All over by Christmas" and realising that according to writers in the motor-cycling journals my motor cycling experience might be useful in the Army, I made enquiries.

Thus it came about that I presented myself at the Claypit Lane, Leeds, barracks of the 1st West Riding Divisional Royal Engineers. In unsullied youthful honesty I stated my true age and home I came, for 19 was then the lower limit for enlistment.

By April 1915 the pointing fingers were too much for me and with nothing in my appearance to suggest that it was my 18th and not my 19th birthday which lay five weeks behind me, I found my way to Edenthorpe Hall, near Doncaster, where Lieut. A.B. Glover, R.E., approved me for enlistment as a motor-cycle despatch-rider. He directed me to the Glossop Road, Sheffield, depot of the 2nd Line of the West Riding Division R.E., whose 1st Line had turned me down at Leeds.

This 1st Line was re-numbered 49th and had gone to France on 13th April 1915 – the day before I enlisted at Sheffield. On the other hand, my lot, re-numbered 62nd, wandered round England for nearly a couple of years and when they went out did not see Belgium until the Armistice, though the Division in due course had troubles enough.

On enlistment we DRs were paid 14s (70p) a week, I think it was, and in addition we had another 14s as a billeting allowance, for we were still in private houses at that time.

For about five weeks we trained in Sheffield, marching daily to a place called 'The Tip', a big quarry which had been partly filled and levelled and served well enough for the teaching of simple drill activities. But what an atmosphere! We used to make our bras buttons and badges shine before we paraded (at 9, I think it was) at the Barracks, but by mid-day they were a repulsive green.

Summer soon came and off we were packed to Thoresby Park. There, having made the journey on the private bike of one of our officers, I arrived before the advance party of which I was theoretically a member, and I spent my first night in a big Y.M.C.A. marquee, which soon

became a canteen for the several battalions which in a few days more were under canvas in the park.

We motor-cyclists number fourteen, plus a sergeant in charge of us and an artificer to repair our machines, and these two took out messages only in times of stress or shortage. In those days motor-cycling was young and somewhat exclusive and it could have been in recognition of this, plus the fact that none of the N.C.O.s were permitted to address an officer – which soon became a commonplace feature of our routine – which now brought us the two stripes which had been promised to us before we enlisted. Our pay as corporals rose to a guineas a week, but our billeting allowance ceased, of course.

About this time our first motor-cycles arrived. They were Douglasses, 350cc. flat twin with outside flywheel, a simple two-speed gearbox, no clutch, chain to gearbox, and belt to back wheel. Acetylene headlight. Most of us had been well nourished and were not featherweights, but the roads were good and we got along very well. I suppose there must have been some rain, but I remember chiefly only sunshine and pleasant country runs to our three infantry brigades 185, 186 and 187 and a few other units. Until we became used to it, it was a little disconcerting, on returning to camp during the night, to be stopped three or four times by young sentries with bayonets fixed – sentries who generally did not know what to do next when we had stopped and answered "Friend." Incidentally, one of my wife's distant relatives was killed by a fidgety sentry somewhere in Scotland.

Presently, two of us were sent to each of the infantry brigades and other units and some to Divisional Headquarters at Edwinstowe Hall. At this place the signal office was in the laundry, which also served as a quartermaster's store, and I have never slept more comfortably than I did there on a pile of blankets a foot thick on a wooden table, awaiting distribution.

It was there that I saw something of the skill of some ex Post Office telegraphists. One in particular, would hear a call from one of the morse instruments, and without breaking off his conversation would tap out 'g', the signal for the message offered to be sent, continue his conversation, send 'RD' indicating message received, and not until his visitor had left would he write out the message. Was it mere coincidence that most of these men were quite grey-haired though only about thirty years old?

It was at Edwinstowe Hall, later, whilst billeted in a private house, that I for the first time suffered the indignity of sleeping in the same room as a man so drunk as to be sick in the night. He was such a witty fellow, though, that I could forgive him. Not much later he had a spill, damaged an ankle, and was discharged. He lived in Leeds and died young.

We lost another man too through an accident. He was Dick Crump, one of the sons of the secretary of Brice Butler and Lee, wine merchants, Salter Row (subsequently Muscrofts). He had a spill from his bike in Nottingham and for the rest of his life had one leg shorter than the other. His younger brother Ernest was one of our lot for all my time. The two Crumps and two Grocock brothers, sons of the Vicar of Dronfield, after the war set up the Pelican Engineering Co. in Dewsbury. The Grococks dropped out, the Pelican moved to Sheffield and then to Leeds, and both Crumps have since died. Ernest, the last, leaving £30,000 or so. A pelican silhouette – head well up and one foot raised – had been 62nd Div. Sign, very distinctive by comparison with the signs of some of the other divisions.

The autumn of 1915 saw the division moving into schools and such places in Gainsborough,

Newark, Southwell and district, with Division Headquarters at Retford House – where the first arrivals (of which I happened to be one) gathered most of a wonderful crop of walnuts from a fine old tree in the garden. At this place (which was uninhabited when we took over) we DRs had the use of the servants hall and it was my privilege (with others) to sleep in a servant's bedroom which had concrete floor – and we had only the minimum of blankets.

Shortly, however, we were required to change quarters with the Northumbrian Division in Newcastle, where the men had been so close to their homes that discipline had been difficult. To save transport each side had to take over the equipment of the other, but whereas the Northumbrian Signals Officer who came to us checked every nut, bolt and screwdriver, our emissary signed for everything unseen and hopped off to the theatre. Consequently we had to leave our light but well-maintained Douglasses and take over some 500cc Triumphs which, although more powerful than the Douglasses and had a three-speed gear and a hand-operated clutch, had been almost battered to death and had no spares worth counting.

The bike allotted to me, for instance, simply would not run straight 'hands off' unless I leaned far over to one side. When I could put up with it no longer and dismantled it I found that a part had been distorted (probably in a bump) and when this had been replaced the machine gave no trouble in this respect. By the way, I don't think any of us ever came within miles of the trick-cycling skill of the present-day Signals motor-cyclists.

Incidentally, in our early days in Newcastle it was ordained that we should use the excellent tram system, but it was soon realised that this was not much good as training for the work in the field for which we should be required.

Near the end of 1915 we were moved to Larkhill Camp, Salisbury Plain (which I think we were almost the first to occupy). We entrained in Newcastle cattle market early one morning and although before we left I had learned from the driver of our train that we should pass through Pontefract, it was not until we reached York that I was able to despatch a telegram home to say so. Not surprisingly, it arrived too late to bring anyone to the station – and if it had done it would have made little difference for we sailed slowly but without pause straight through Baghill Station almost in sight of my home. It was very late when we ended the journey, and my outstanding recollection of my first night at Larkhill was of the clammy dampness of the blankets issued to me.

At Bulford Camp, near Larkhill, I was one of the many innocents who were disgusted to see lines of new lorries standing in the open with no protection. It seemed recklessly wasteful but we little guessed what waste and destruction we would shortly be witnessing. And that reminds me of January 1917, when it was a routine duty all night of a team of four men to go round running the engines of the A.S.C. lorries parked with quilted canvas bonnet covers to keep them from freezing. One man sat at the controls, another took the starting handle, and one on each end pulled in turn on a rope attached to the starting handle. Larkhill had its own theatre and we had some good shows by amateurs and visiting professionals. On Sundays we had a church service and I remember some of the soldiery were made uncomfortable by a sermon on gambling by our new Chaplain, Capt. Chavasse. Later, in France, it was Capt. Chavasse who found hanging in our officers mess a picture of the Vie Parisienne type. Having discovered who had provided it he bought it from him with a French bank note – which was promptly put in the frame in place of the picture. It was this same Capt. Chavasse who, when our Division was in the line, was known to lose himself for hours at a time amongst the wounded in the advanced trenches – and even in front of them, according to the stories which we heard. I am not sure but I think he later became

Bishop of Liverpool, was it?

We had much mud at Larkhill and it had hardly begun to dry when we were sent on a three-day trek as an exercise. In the middle of one night I was sent with a message to a unit whose orderly room corporal I tracked down asleep in a GS wagon in the middle of Devizes Market Place. His words escape me, but I well remember the trend of his remarks when he discovered that my despatch in the middle of a February night described methods of keeping down horse-flies in hot weather.

Early in 1916 we moved again, this time to the borders of Norfolk and Suffolk, with Division HQ at Flixton Hall, near Bungay. We had units at Somerleyton (near Lowestoft), Henham, near Southwold and elsewhere, and three times a day (7,1 and 7) two DRs left Flixton with official letters for the outlying units. We had a little time to wait at our terminal points before we returned with the incoming despatches and on the morning trips we usually managed to pick up an extra breakfast for the runs were 20 or 25 each way and we were all young and heart of appetite.

Our duties were far from arduous and soon after we arrived one of the Divisional staff officers gave us a very wide order – When at liberty go out and learn the lie of the land: Joy-rides unlimited!

We had boating on the Waveney and much swimming. After the first parade of the day, when the roll had been called and the parade state reported, the first order was always "Fall motor-cyclist." This was theoretically to enable us to service our machines but in practice all of us who were not on specific duty had an hour or two to spare before breakfast. Most of us then toddled off to the river, only a field or so away, and I was generally one of the first in and usually the last out.

It was during this period that we had our first air-raid when one night a Zeppelin put a ring of bombs on Bungay Common – and frightened some cows. I think it was about this time that we saw the 'Pulham Pig', a dirigible balloon which lived nearby and used to go out submarine spotting. Later of course, we had many air raids. I was travelling one night on the road from Bapume towards Albert at a period when the fighting had moved on beyond Bapume and the land on both sides of the road was of the deserted tortured moonscape type so pitifully common in those parts at that time. Not much short of Albert – with its statue of the Virgin and Child still projecting horizontally from the tower of the semi-ruined church below – I heard the drone of a plane and was soon able to see its iron cross markings. I felt it unlikely that he was looking for solitary me in this blank expanse but – just in case – I dropped into a shell hole and soon heard explosions in poor battered Albert. In the outskirts of the town I found a house ablaze and was met at the end of a side street by a man who begged my first-aid packet for his pal in a lorry near the blaze. I obliged but did not loiter. It was not until the German advance of 1918 that the statue received the hit which finally brought it down. Both church and tower have since been rebuilt.

Flixton Hall was a very fine mansion, probably well under a century old when we moved in. When I re-visited it forty years later – what a change: The Park had been ploughed, most trees were missing, the drive deteriorated, the outbuildings flattened, pigs in the partoves, bullocks in the ballroom, the gardens gone and a bulldozer loading bricks and rubble to make farm roads. It did seem a shame – and it had not been done by the Germans.

The Signal Co. was a mounted unit and its horses and mules required daily attention and exercise. At one period sickness and leave reduced the number of their normal attendants and

some of us who were not fully occupied 'volunteered' to participate in an exercise outing.

About horses I knew even less than my fellow motor-cyclists and when I saddled and mounted the animal I was to ride the creature got the bit between his teeth and set off at a mad gallop across the park. Fortunately, I had given a little thought to the principles of horse riding – and even more fortunately the animal kept a straight course and avoided the trees with low branches. Nevertheless, we seemed to have travelled some miles (though it could not possibly have been so far) before my mount began to yield to my steady pull to the right, dropped to a canter, then a trot, and finally walked calmly back to the horse lines. I overheard some complimentary comment on my performance – but none seemed to have guessed how great had been my luck and how very narrow my margin of safety.

At Flixton I performed what I feel was one of the silliest tricks ever done with a horse. I had agreed to hold it for a few moments whilst its rider made a call at Divisional HQ. As soon as he was out of sight I tried to mount with a spring direct from the ground to the saddle – but something went wrong and I went straight over on to my hands on the road on the other side. Luckily, the horse was better trained than I and stood quietly a few feet away and allowed me to lead him back to the starting point.

For lack of the spares we awaited, our Newcastle Triumphs were by now in a very poor state and we could no longer keep one man to one machine. We found that the handlebars were not difficult to bend cold to suit our individual riding positions, but this did not do them much good. One day on a run to Henham, where the signal office was in a tent at the top of a steep bank, I was commencing my return when, on this bank my right handlebar broke off. I took a tumble, but was unhurt, moved all controls to the left and reached home, 20 miles away, without further trouble.

The chief reason 62 Division stayed so long in England was that infantry recruiting was much behind that for other branches whilst infantry casualties were much higher. By this time however, conscription had come in and the battalions were growing.

The Division was nevertheless, counted in for home defence which one fine day led to a huge laugh. An exercise had been planned, to include a mock invasion and a defence, to be done without warning. Unfortunately, when the starting order was given in the small hours one morning, the girl at the local telephone exchange was asleep and nothing happened. What disciplinary results or what changes were made I never learned, but no exercise took place either then or later, as far as I knew.

With the autumn the risk of invasion diminished and we were moved to Bedford, Northampton, Wellingborough, Rushden, etc., but with the close of the year our holiday (for it had been little more for us DRs) came to an end.

On 9th January 1917 we arrived at Southampton where the steamship Archimedes, a 10,000 tonner, absorbed what seemed to me an impossible number of men, horses, wagons, cars, lorries and endless quantities of stores.

We had a naval escort and an uneventful crossing to Le Harve, but we DRs had a shock on disembarking, for instead of the Triumphs we had brought up to good condition but had had to leave behind us we now had to take over some Douglasses which, though new, had been

standing in the open at Southampton for some months.

We were to have had one night only in a rest camp but had to stay two or three days before we had our machines fit (or so we thought!) to take us to the war. The motor industry before 1914 had relied almost entirely on the German Bosch magneto but these Douglasses had American Dixies (Splitdorfs on the Triumphs we later had), and we blamed these very largely for our necessity after only a very few miles to heave-to at Yvetot for the night. Here we treated ourselves to a night at an hotel where our assembled personal equipment was so heavy that it pulled the hall hat-rack off the wall. We did little better the next day, and spent another night at our own expense, this time in Neufchatel, where one of our party surprised madame at the café by expressing our willingness to sleep even "sur la plafond" (ceiling) when he should have said "sur les planchettes".

Eventually, we came within the sound of the rumbling of the guns and we realised we were now really at the war when, as we settled for the night with other troops in a big barn, the Company Sergeant Major read to us an order of the day recording that some unfortunate individual had been shot for desertion. (My school-days friend, my best man in 1921, once had to give the order at one of these dreadful events).

The Division was soon established in and about a village named Bus-les-Artois, set in gently rolling country with a little village every two or three miles or so.

Headquarters was in a chateau in the grounds of which we DRs had the use of a hut – a light timber construction covered with wire netting and roofing felt. We used this for cooking and eating and some of us slept in a gardeners cottage nearby. In an upper room were two layers of wire netting beds and as I slept in one next to the glass-less windows it was on this bed that I first felt the patter of tiny feet across my legs as the rats came up the ivy and roamed around in search of our 'iron rations' – hard biscuits in a bag (excellent rat bait but soon useless to men).

The old hands we met had many tales to tell. One was of a man who disappeared one night in the chateau woods after some shelling and it was not until the leaves fell that his body was discovered in a tree top.

We were much impressed by some Holt Caterpillar tractors – the first I had ever seen – parked near us. They had displaced horses in some of the batteries, but there were not many of them and their engines never seemed to me to run very smoothly.

On one of my runs I found myself following a GS wagon with a load of bodies wrapped in blankets and their boots showing at the back.

There was some confusion over the pronunciation of place names. Generally, they were anglicised, but Mailly-Maillet brought us a laugh. When the O.C. picked up his phone and asked the operator to "give me Mailly-Maillet exchange" he got the answer "But this is your exchange sir."

It could have been about this time that I had my first field-bath. Strictly, it was in a tent, in which some enterprising individuals had dug a hole, lined it with groundsheet, and put in some hot water. Although I was permitted to join them as a mere visitor arriving when the work had been done it was a privilege to go in third – or was it fourth?

It was from Bus that we made our first runs into the battle area. The system was for the Corps HQ DRs to run forward to the Divisions, and the divisional men to the Brigades, the further communications being by men on foot. From Bus one our routes lay in part on a road and on the top of a wide plateau which had been under observation (followed, of course, by fire) by the Germans until our side had erected a sackcloth screen to cover our movement.

Our destination lay to one side of this road, so we had to leave our bikes and complete the journey on foot, over ground which had seen such bitter fighting a few months earlier. All this area and for miles around, the earth had been churned into dust, rained into mud, burst up again, and scattered time after time – with all that had been upon it, living or dead. No building, not a tree, had survived, and all that still stood were some stumps and stakes which had supported barbed wire and perhaps some of the wire itself where it had retained its original coiling and had not been chopped into short lengths. Littered over all this desolate, tortured landscape, were pieces of wagons, limbers, water carts, broken rifles, unexploded shells, shells which had ejected their shrapnel but had not fragmented, scraps of shell with razor sharp saw tooth edges – and corpses.

We had all read of how the tide of death which had been set in motion on 4th August 1914 had risen at 7.30 on the morning of 1st July 1916 to an intensity of slaughter never reached before or since, Eleven British divisions – 100,000 men or more – left their trenches in the expectation and belief that they would find a weeks unbroken bombardment by all weights of artillery putting over some 40,000 tons of shells had eliminated the forward Germans and that they had merely to walk forward and occupy the enemy lines. But at the end of the day their penetration was nil and 57,000 of them had become casualties, 20,000 of these being dead. More losses in one day than in the whole of the Crimea campaign or in the entire Boer War.

By the time the 62 Division reached this area it was frozen hard, for the late months of the 1916-17 winter were the most severe for a generation or more. Some of the July dead had been buried, others lay merely under a scattering of the earth thrown on by later shell-bursts.

One of my most vivid mind-pictures of this area is of an unbattered khaki-clad figure laden with equipment lying face down on his bayoneted rifle held at the ready, with a mere sprinkling of frozen mud to cover him. And more than one tin hat I turned over in curiosity revealed a skull picked clean by rats and insects.

However, across this awe-inspiring area we made our way – bad enough by day and worse by night – following the duckboards which had been laid to make practicable the passage of this soft and slippery expanse of slime and provide a guide-line avoiding the innumerable shell-holes of all sizes, some dry and some water filled.

Our destination on this run was a signal office in a German dug-out which was officially known as OMA (O emma ack in Signals speech). This place made clear why 1st July had been such a costly failure.

Picture the area on the German side of the screened road where motor-cycling finished as a huge tea-cake rising gently in the middle and ending north side in a wide and shallow valley and on the south in the steeper valley before Thiepval and the Ancre. Before this tea-cake lay a wider valley joining the two mentioned.

In the last-named lay the railway from Albert to Arras and from this the Germans had laid a light railway right into and under the higher ground within these three valleys. From the tunnel, some hundreds of yards long and 30 or 40 feet below the surface, they had made chambers, alternately right and left, each capable of sleeping (on the usual wooden framed wire netting beds) a score or more of men.

From each of these chambers rose part way to the surface a flight of steps towards our lines but ending with a landing which ascended another flight inclined away from our side and leading to a long series of connected trenches. It had been on these empty trenches and perhaps the topmost flight of steps our bombardment had been expended whilst the Germans waited in safety below until the infantry assault began. And the bitterness of the tragedy is intensified by the knowledge that the nature of these defences was known on our side before the action began.

My first visit to this memorable place ended after nightfall. I had had trouble in finding it after much walking and was tired, so as there happened to be no despatches to be returned I obtained permission to spend the night there. There was a bed in a corner of the signal office and on this I thankfully lay – but the night was not entirely without incident.

I should explain (for not everyone knows the details) that by this time the Mills Bomb was in common use. This deadly device consisted of a cricket-ball-size case with grooves to make it burst into small pieces, packed with explosive and having a detonator actuated by a small pin driven down by a spring which operated when the little controlling lever at one side was released. This lever was held down by a split pin and the system was that when the bomb was about to be used the safety pin was pulled out so that as soon as the bomb left the throwers hand the side lever was released, the detonator pin struck the fuse, and five seconds later the bomb exploded.

I have already referred to the rats. These creatures were innumerable – they had much on which to feed. But I have never seen such big and bold ones as those which inhabited OMA – though they were courteous enough to move to one side if you met on the steps. The tunnels of OMA had planks for floor and roof but sides were usually of untrimmed round timber, spaced a few inches apart and a few inches in from the earth behind them. Before I fell asleep in OMA I noticed a few Mills bombs in the space between the wall poles and the earth but it was not until I woke for the day that I realised that the clankings and tappings I had heard in the night had resulted from the scamperings of rats over these bombs. And it was not until much later that I read of the casualties which had resulted from the rusting away of the safety split pin, which were subsequently made of brass.

It was on the road in the shallow valley on the north of this area that I first saw a case of shell-shock. I was passing a column of troops from which this young fellow appeared to have fallen out. He seemed to be just trembling with terror, turning this way and that, with another man apparently trying to steady him. There was nothing I could do, but shall never forget him.

The frost about this time was so severe that some of the shallower wells had frozen and water had to be brought from deeper wells further back. The usual water tank wagons were not sufficient for this, and extra tankers were contrived by laying a tarpaulin as a lining to an ordinary three-tonner. We cleaned two-gallon petrol cans and used them for our water and I remember trickles which splashed over during fillings freezing solid before they reached the bottom of the

outside.

Late in February 1917 came rumours of a German retirement on our front and the 25th brought firm news that the Germans had withdrawn for some miles over a wide front. On their way they had destroyed almost everything which had remained. Even the fruit trees in the village gardens had been cut down – though some which had not been completely severed were pulled back to their normal spread and put in splints but as the area was fought over twice more it is unlikely that any survived the war.

The German retirement had been to their Hindenburg Line, a well-sited and well-built series of fortifications which they had constructed during the previous autumn and winter. Thus the early weeks of 1917 saw the 62 Division – and others – clearing roads and generally preparing for the next move. We had the handicap of living in the desolate shelterless wasteland which had seen so much battle in 1916 and also of suffering booby-traps large and small, from explosive fountain pens to hidden mines.

One mine, on the outskirts of some village the name of which escapes me, left a crater so huge that troops cut terraces in its sides, built a stage at the bottom over the water which drained into it, and used the place for boxing bouts and theatricals. The Australians were greatly angered when Bapume Town Hall, which they had thought to have been deliberately spared and which they were occupying, proved to have been mined and blew up.

Just off the Bapume – Arras road was a village named Mory, where five roads met. On one of them was a row of 6-inch howitzers which nearly blew us off your bikes when we passed them; and it was here that Bert Ewbank stepped from behind a lorry and greeted me. This is just by the way. It was at Mory that a louse saved a mans life. Half-a-dozen of us were sleeping in a gardeners lean-to shed outside some big house, using make-shift beds left behind by the Bosche. We were settling for the night when one fellow decided he preferred to have his bed to himself and got out to find the intruder and dispose of him.

As he bent over his blankets, candle in hand to make a search, we were roused suddenly by a might rushing roar at which we all instinctively jumped up. For a second this was followed by silence and then came a crescendo of innumerable cracks and crashes, in the midst of which a foot-cube paving stone came through our thin roof and landed in the very middle of the mans bed. A mine at the principal road junction in the village had gone up – and with it a wagon and a team of horses as well as the traffic man.

Other things happened at Mory. On the forward side of this place was a large barn in which a Casualty Clearing Station was established and duly marked with a Red Cross on the roof, but somebody thought that the level space between the barn and rising ground in front of it would make a good artillery position and soon two or three 9.2 howitzers were installed there. It was realised that this was against the rules, however, and the guns were taken away – but not before some of us had some disconcerting moments for one of our runs lay on the road across the rising ground mentioned, right in front of these big guns, the discharge of which was, even to those behind, somewhat upsetting, to put it mildly, whilst in front for quite a distance, it was definitely dangerous.

We ran a rather similar gauntlet not far from where, at a bend in a hedgeless lane, which was slightly higher than the surrounding fields, a 60-pounder gun had been placed, but the lie of the land made its barrel rest almost on the road itself. We never liked looking into that ugly snout as

we approached and were thankful to leave it behind us.

I cannot recall with certainty the dates or even the sequence of many events but it was probably about this time that the 62 Division, like many others, closed up to the Hindenburg Line, on the usual basis of two brigades in the line and the others 'resting' (what a joke of a description!). One of my stations was with a brigade at **Achiet-le-Grand**, where the Arras-Albert railway had a branch line to Bapume. I found I could have to myself a dug-out under the ruins of the railway station. It had three tiers of three-high beds, and I chose the middle one of the nine.

The roads hereabouts were very battered and when I was called out one night with something for a unit near Miraumont, three or four miles away, I felt it would be best to walk. Most of my way would be along the railway, which had been shelled here and there but was fairly clear, and the map suggested that I might break off it for a short cut across open country to my destination. It was rough going, and when I tried to make my 'short-cut' I found it blocked by dense thickets of barbed wire, and I had to continue on the rail track. Walking at night on a semi-wrecked railway is not recommended as a pleasant pastime.

As a consequence of this I was very tired and slept soundly (even more so than usual) the next night so that when, some time in the small hours, an orderly came to call me to the signal office across the road for a run (I never learned where to) I heard no sound of him. This was hardly surprising, as he afterwards admitted, he simply called to me from the top of the steps and never even parted the gas curtains in the passage or made sure that I heard him.

The incident was reported to the O.C. and presently I was hauled before the officer in charge of the brigade signal office, Lieut. Womersley, from Halifax, whose words I shall never forget. "I have seen the O.C. and he says I am to stop you three days pay." Young as I was, I had enough court experience to know a defendant should always be allowed his say. I refused to accept this decision and asked to go before the O.C., Capt. Montgomery. This I duly did, and he told me that I must now give up my stripes and that if I refused I should have to go before a court martial.

At that time we knew there was a good deal of combing out going on and all who were fit enough were being transferred to the infantry so I thought discretion the better part of valour when he added that I could have my stripes back later. But I never did. I have also more pleasant recollections of **Achiet-le-Grand**, for the railway junction had three concrete ponds storing water for the locomotives, and in these scores of soldiers swam and sprawled during these warm spring days. And the fact that nobody had any swimming costumes (trunks had hardly been invented then) did not in the least disconcert either the men themselves or the nurses of the adjoining CCS taking their ease in the field just above the ponds.

Achiet has another, quite different, memory for me. By this time we had two of our men detailed for duty in the signal office, one for the morning and the other from middle day until morning. One bright morning one of the telephonists in the signals tent overheard suspicious sounds in German and we soon learned that they came from a German plane observing for a heavy gun in the distance searching for the near-by railway junction. His first round overshot the mark, his second about three minutes later dropped short, in the village. Our tent was in-between, and his third shot did not come for a quarter of an hour or so. Tin hats and a table top were negligible protection against nine-inch shells but were at least a little moral support. There were a dozen or so shells before he scored a direct hit on the Bapume branch line and the operation ceased.

Incidentally, it was at this junction, in a cutting, that a cook made his fire on top of an unexploded

shell which ultimately went off, and sent him to hospital. At this period, we DRs were living in what could be called a reconstructed cottage. It had been of the usual timber frame with wattle and daub filling, but had had a near hit and been pushed off its foundations and stripped of its wall filling and its roof tiles. We could not put the frame back but we put the tiles back on the rafters and I forget what we did about the walls, but it was summer and we lived there very comfortably for a time in this drunken looking dwelling.

On 3rd May 1917 the 62 Div. were amongst those engaged in the first attack on the Hindenburg Line, at a place called Bullecourt. The brigade with which I was at that time endeavoured to set headquarters at Ecoust, a village in front of the field guns practically within sight of the Bosche. I had had to leave my bike on our side of Ecoust and I was walking back towards it through that village when I 'hard one coming'. Such are the varied speeds of sound and thought and movement that when I first heard it I felt it would fall behind me – no, in front, wrong, in a house on left, wrong again, for it exploded on my right – and during all these expectations I had not had time to turn my head or take a pace. The headquarters was soon withdrawn from Ecoust.

Near here was a narrow sunken road (named on the maps – with grim foresight – L'homme mort) where an earth-covered shack housed the office of one of our units. I arrived here one soggy morning to find Ernest Crump, amidst all the mud and dirt, putting a magnificent shine on his leggings and buttons. It was not from here one night that a man on his own in a narrow trench would have been crushed by a tank if someone had not noticed him in time.

No success followed the Bullecourt action and our area went quiet whilst the Passchendaele affair developed. Tanks had first been used on 15 Sept. 1916, and we were greatly impressed to see wrecked ones near Beaumont Hamel and others sunk in the mud there had been on each side of the Albert- Bapume road. It was dry by the time we saw it, but the mud had been incredible. We DRs used to carry a shaped bit of wood with which to scrape it off from between tyre and mudguard where otherwise it would build up until the wheel became immovable. I once got off my machine to do this mud-clearing and the bike stood up on its own in the mud.

The summer of 1917 was bright and there really were large areas thickly covered with bright red poppies. Our sector continued to be free from any major action but the infantry had no peace from raids both ways across No Mans Land, sniping and intermittent shelling. We DRs had a comparatively easy time – including some pleasant swimming in the flooded marshy area next to the Ancre – after that is, we had carefully explored it and found no barbed wire lurking below the surface.

We found it impressive to watch a family of tanks entrain. Their 30-ton capacity eight-wheeled flat wagons would be drawn into a dead-end siding, No. 1 tank would rive on to the first wagon and then lurch over the buffers from wagon to wagon the length of the train, with the remainder following in turn, one tank to one wagon.

Not much mention seems to be made of supply tanks, as distinct from fighting tanks, but they seemed to be very useful, as they carried supplies over trenches and shell-holes without any bother. They were simply flat bodies on caterpillar tracks, with a little cabin at the front for the driver.

There were times when we took a walk and examined some of the scenes of the 1916 battles. One afternoon Arthur Grocock (his brother, older, was our artificer) and I had a little fun with some German 'Potato mashers'. These were their parallel to our Mills Bombs and consisted of a

canister (about the size of a small tin of beans) of sheet metal (I think) with a wooden handle about a foot long. The handle was hollow and had behind a loosely fitting cap a pot ring attached to a piece of string and the system was to retain the ring when the bomb was thrown, the handle giving a little extra length to the throwers arm. The ring pulled the string, the string actuated the fuse and about four seconds later came the explosion. We found that if thrown into a water-filled shell-hole the explosion sent up quite a spectacular little fountain. Looking back I fear that if anything had gone wrong we should have had difficulty in avoiding being labelled 'S.I.W.' (self-inflicted wound to the uninitiated)

There were similar but much more impressive fountains when German shells fell into a filled section of the Canal du Nord, much further south, during our expedition into the French area in July 1918.

Our sanitary arrangements usually consisted of a simple trench surmounted by a wooden construction with three or more large oval holes in it. If circumstances permitted there might be a light sacking screen around the affair and a sheet or two of corrugated iron for a roof and sometimes there could even be a little screen between and above the holes.

One sunny summer day I had an SDR despatch and orders to deliver it personally to the staff captain of a unit which had its office on one side of a shallow sunken road. Conveniently on the opposite side of this road was one of these 'sanitary arrangements', but nobody had troubled to screen it. And there in solitary state sat the officer I sought. Should I approach him or should I wait until he returned to duty? Whilst I pondered this problem he solved it for me by completing his performance and coming to me with hand outstretched to receive my despatch and to wish me "Good morning."

It was that run which took me along a narrow road through a shallow valley. This road was hardly damaged at all and therefore an easy ride, but on my return I found in it two new shell-holes which left me only just sufficient track between them. I did not loiter here.

It was across some canal the locality of which I cannot remember that I saw disaster follow a clumsy piece of engineering. One side member of an intended bridge had been assembled on the bank from its many parts and the plan was to draw it across to the other bank by means of ropes and pulleys attached to a scaffold or sheer-legs. Instead, however, of making use of any of the trees on the canal bank the teams of men who held ropes attached to the girder to keep it upright on its way across when it rocked, fell on one side, and bent and buckled. End of Act 1. The rest I never saw.

On the other hand, somewhere on the uncompleted Canal du Nord, the original civilian bridge and a German temporary wooden bridge, lay in ruins in the deep dry cutting. When our advance in 1918 reached this point again we made new tracks to a temporary site nearby, and in two or three days a New Zealand company of engineers had thrown across a 70 or 80-foot gap, a bridge which soon carried troops, lorries and even tanks.

It was not far from here, I think, that we came across a tank which gained some celebrity in one of the earliest tank attacks by advancing ahead despite all opposition but came to a sad end when it tried to cross the canal and sank the bridge. The crew must have drowned like rats in a basket.

This reminds me of the only German tank I ever saw. It seemed a clumsy thing, with a skirt

almost down to the ground. It had been burned, and the skeleton of the driver still sat upright before the controls when I peeped inside the doorway.

It was somewhere near Vimy, I think, that we had a run which included a stretch of concrete road. It was quite exciting to compete with slimy mud on this on a wet winter night. Just as bad but more bumpy was a length of corduroy road. We were told it was Canadian foresters who showed how to make a road over mud by laying small tree trunks side by side across the direction of travel. The mud worked through however, and so we had skidding as well as bumps with which to contend.

The undamaged but much used country roads leading to the front had their problems. The central pave was nicely wide enough for a single lorry but the water bound strips of macadam could not well compete with lorry-wheels when two vehicles or town convoys of vehicles had to pass. Thus a motorcyclist found matters distinctly difficult when he encountered one of these concentrations of traffic, especially at night, with no lights anywhere.

There was one period when we regularly carried a basket of pigeons – a two-storey basket, slung on our back. At the infantry brigade headquarters the birds were transferred to smaller baskets and distributed amongst the infantry, we taking back the larger containers. I think the home lofts were at Corps Headquarters.

For a time in the summer of 1917 we had units on each side of the Arras-Baupaume road which we crossed by narrow twisting streets which had been cleared through the debris of the villages of Behagnies and Sapignies, on the outskirts of which many troops and vehicles were encamped. It was not until weeks later when almost everybody had left the district that in the middle of one night a mine went up at the narrowest point of one of these village streets. No casualties ensued and no further damage was possible in such a devastated district.

An outstanding event for us in 1917 was the attack on 20 November at Havrincourt, towards Cambrai. The preparations for this were without precedent. German planes were not prevented when they came over during the day and they duly reported the steady entrainment of men and material and the movement of traffic by road and rail (with lights by night) towards Passchendale in the north; but they were unable to mark the return of it all and more by night (without lights). Nor did they pierce the camouflage which covered the tanks and guns, with stores and supplies, all taking up positions in the darkness, towards Havrincourt.

The traffic on these little country roads was tremendous, and in one place an entry had been made into the dry brick-bottomed Canal du Nord, the construction of which had been halted by the war, so that it could take some of this extra traffic. But, looking back, it should have been a pointer to the inefficiency of the planning that no-one had required the removal of a sand-bagged shelter which, during the quiet time of the summer, had been built half across one of these slightly sunken lanes and was a serious obstacle to men and vehicles.

However, at 6-30 on the morning of 20 November, 1917, with 1,000 guns to support them, nearly 300 aircraft overhead, and nearly 400 tanks to lead them, 62 Division was one of the eight which went forward and took the enemy completely by surprise.

Our lot had marched forward about four miles from their assembly area, made what was at that time the record advance of 7,000 yards, and had taken all the objectives allotted to them. But

Bourlon Wood and Hill, which overlooked the whole scene, had remained in German hands.

At the end of the day 62 Division and the others handed over to relieving troops, marched back their 7,000 yards and four miles, to their rest area, and had hardly taken off their packs when they were called out to do it all again. The Germans were attacking in increasing strength as they brought in fresh troops released by the Russian collapse; and within ten days they had taken back all the ground that had lost. They might well have taken much more but for the arrival of Americans who had been in France no more than a few days.

We had for a time a signal office in a German dugout in Havrincourt itself and it fell to me to be on duty there from time to time. One night others there included a telegraphist who was very timid and physically somewhat insignificant, an ex-P.O. man. Apparently something had gone wrong somewhere, but as it was no concern of mine I paid little attention at first when Capt. Montgomery came in, very cross. When he began heatedly to upbraid the unfortunate telegraphist I looked up, however, and was just in time to see him give the little man a clout on the head. The victim asked me to say nothing about it but I have never forgotten the incident, which could well have had such serious consequences for our company commanding officer.

Nor have I forgotten a much simpler incident in the same dugout when I saw a man fall asleep sitting on a six-inch wide board with his back against the dugout wall.

The duty of signal office DR was to receive and record all despatches, sort them and send the incoming ones by DR, usually three times a day. Sometimes a letter was brought in bearing the order, signed by a staff officer, for it to go by Special Despatch Rider.

At Havrincourt at this time our signal service was augmented by some King Edward's Horse (South Africans), and so it happened that I was on duty one evening when the Bourlon-Wood counter attacks were developing and I had to send out a quick succession of SDR messages (probably because telephone connection could not be maintained). It was not long before I detected some unrest amongst these Horsemen so I seized an opportunity to go to their settlement. As I suspected, they were blaming me for sending them out with single letters and it was only with difficulty that I convinced them that normal despatches were saved to go in a bunch together, and that all those they had been taking separately had been too urgent to wait for the normal thrice daily round but had been ordered by a staff officer to go by special delivery.

There was a curious spirit pervading this Havrincourt engagement. A mine-crater blocked the road at our entrance to the village and although men of the Labour Corps came out (by lorry or steam wagon) to fill in the hole by pick, shovel, and barrow, at five o'clock they knocked off, packed up and went home.

It was by this mine-crater one afternoon that off-duty troops (including me) doing a little sight-seeing watched a gun-team struggling to drag an 18-pounder up the slope from the road to passable ground to avoid the mine-crater. Eventually the young officer in charge called to the bystanders. They only needed to be asked and the gun came up the bank in no time.

Havrincourt fizzled out, trench war came back, with rain and the eternal mud. Occasionally we saw a plane battle, and now and then an observation balloon was shot down – the observer generally escaping by parachute. I once saw three of our balloons burn in not much more than as many minutes.

Troops in the line had to put up with not only mud and general discomfort as well as shells and shrapnel but also snipers. One of my family's friends (a little younger than I so I never knew him as well as the others did) has told us how he used to go out before dawn with a day's rations, climb a tree, and spend the day there doing the best he could against such targets as he could spot on the other side. 'The other side' of course, were doing the same.

Early in 1918 some of us came home on leave, two DRs at a time, but when the turn came up for Ernest Crump and me it was suddenly decided that only one of us might go. Crump won the toss and duly went and returned. It was then my turn, but Pontefract had just been shown in orders to be out of bounds because of measles in the town, so I had to miss my turn.

We were then at Roclincourt, a village a mile or two north of Arras, with the road thence to Lens near us but on ground a little higher than where we were. There was a bigish theatre of black corrugated iron backing on to the main road above, the roof level being slightly higher than the road. We enjoyed a show or two there, but the Germans one day developed a hate on the place and the corrugated iron flew briskly in all directions.

At last, a day or so later, I got my pass and set out to walk over the main road to the railhead three or four miles away. I lost no time over this, for the hate had already spread to our camp in farm ruins at Roclincourt, which I had left no more than a few minutes earlier.

I could not know it at the time but Pontefract's measles were a blessing to me, for on 21 March came the great German offensive which drove our whole front back and sent us nearly to the sea – and I was at home to read about it in the papers!

On my return from leave I found myself in a rest camp at Boulogne with thousands of others, leave men like me, men discharged early from hospitals, others released before their time from the 'glasshouse', men from probably every unit in the Army. The huts were already filled, and so were the supplementary bell tents. In fact, the tent to which I was allotted held so many men that I woke one morning to find I had lost the tail of my shirt because I had turned over whilst the man next to me had it under him.

We had some occasional entertainment when boisterous young airmen swooped over the dining hut and flew its length with a landing wheel running on each side of the roof ridge. No retractable under-carriages in those days.

Eventually my unit was located and I was sent on my way to them. When I reached them I found they had had a very busy time. We had lost Marshall, sent home with shell-shock (from which I am glad to say he recovered) At one of our post-war reunions by the way, he told us with glee how during the 1926 General Strike he had been entrusted with the driving of a passenger train "because I knew a little about steam." He became manager of Bawtry gasworks, set up his two sons in a haulage business and died two or three years ago.

Some of our fellows recounted with mixed feelings how they had been invited to help themselves to as much as they could carry from a Y.M.C.A. canteen before it was set on fire to prevent it from falling into German hands. Mostly, however, they told tales of up-and-away time after time. By the time I reached them a new line had been established, putting the Germans to make the best they could of the areas they had themselves devastated and had been fought over and still further devastated and now formed their back area, whilst we were in country comparatively

undamaged where we had spent some months during mid-1917.

After rejoining the Division one of my morning runs I well remember. The direct route to my destination – a unit at one end of the straggling village of Fonquevillers – was a simple run over ground I knew well. On this occasion a field battery on my left was being made the subject of a morning hate by the Huns and the shells which burst near the guns were near enough for me to see the instant dull glow and black surround which once seen is not likely to be forgotten. Things seemed to get worse as I approached so I turned about, retraced my track to the next fork in the village and my destination area reasonably quiet, completed my business, and returned to breakfast without further incident. What happened to the battery I had seen in trouble I never learned.

There was a somewhat similar incident much later, when we were beginning what became our final advance. My route was through a village where I found that the bridge across the stream which split the village had been blown up. I discovered however, that from a nearby farmyard a plank had been thrown across the little rivulet to which the stream had at that time shrunk, and this I crossed – to mild cheers from the onlookers.

A day or so later I had the same run to make, but a somewhat officious traffic man stopped me at a village a mile or two back, told me that the bridge in the village ahead was down and I should have to go by a road a few miles to one side. I told him I did not believe him and asked to see his orders. No sooner had he stepped into his billet to fetch them than I was on my way at high speed towards the informal plank bridge. I made my return by an alternative route – and I laughed to myself as I pictured the traffic controller waiting in vain for me to return, baulked by the broken bridge, so that he could stop me and report me for breach of orders.

When the Division headquarters was at Henu it was found that a series of tunnels extended from the cellars of the chateau and it was decided to extend them and construct an emergency exit in a field. Here a windlass was set up and a hole sunk – but missed the tunnels by some feet.

Outside this chateau we DRs lay asleep in a tent when we woke to hear a plane overhead and then a bomb or two whistling down. Next morning we found that they had fallen in our horse-lines in a little wood a few score yards away. In this wood two men had dug themselves a shallow shelter and had lined the two long sides with corrugated iron with a little earth banked against it. The, for comfort, they added a couple of wire beds the legs of which brought their bodies just up to ground level. One of the bombs carried their corrugated iron into the tree tops but the only casualty was that one of them had a few scratches.

During 1918, as the Americans joined us – and what a burden some of them, surprisingly, seemed to find the French summer heat and the war began to swing in our favour, the 62 Division was one of four of ours which were sent to spend their turn of 'rest' from trench service south with the French, ready to make an opportunity if it arose, of joining in a heavy attack.

Early on the morning of 14 July 1918 we entrained at Doullens – and had our departure delayed considerably when a big fat Canadian-made locomotive came off the lines. Our train had the normal composition of a military train – three or four ordinary coaches for officers and some men, a dozen or more of the common four-wheeled box-cars (marked 'Hommes 40, Chevaux (en long) 8"); then maybe ten or a dozen open flat wagons for cars and lorries, more box-cars, and a coach or two, but our train was a double one, with all that lot duplicated.

For this expedition, two DRs were allotted to the Divisional Field Artillery (310, 311 and 312 Brigades, each formerly of four batteries of four 18-pounders each but now of four six-gun batteries) With me, the other DR was Alf Squires, rather older than I, from Barnsley – a very steady, trustworthy fellow with whom I got on very well.

Many of these French box-cars had a little one-man cabin over the buffers high enough to permit a brakesman (their normal occupant) a view along the train roofs. Alf and I, though we knew nothing about operating the brakes and had no instructions either to use them or to leave them alone, set ourselves up where two consecutive wagons had their little cabins facing each other and made ourselves as comfortable as we could and looked forward to enjoying the ride and the scenery on both sides.

We had no idea where we were going nor of how long it would take, but the day wore on and we found ourselves in an enormous range of sidings in Paris. Why we stopped I don't know but we were there long enough to hear the bursting of a shell fired from the famous Big Bertha which the Germans installed something like 30 miles away.

At one stage in our journey we made a long descent through a tunnel, and it was fortunate that at the end of it our engine was stopped for water, for whilst in the tunnel one of the horses fell down, brought down others, and endangered the man in charge of the animals in that particular wagon. During the stop these horses were all brought out, walked about a bit and pacified before they were returned to their wagon and the journey resumed.

The weather was very hot and when night came on Alf and I realising we could not very well sleep in our three-sided perches, took advantage of a stop to move to one of the open wagons, and spent that night lying between the edge of the wagon and the wheels of the General's Daimler. And I do not think I have ever taken as much grit from my eyes as I did the next morning.

It was during this move that we had our most serious casualty. Our men who were still with the Signal Co. for service at Divisional HQ made the journey in a train of similar composition to that in which Alf and I had travelled. They were six or eight in number and had their bikes with them in one of the ordinary commonplace box-wagons. During the night one of them was seen standing at the open door in the side of the wagon but nobody thought anything of that. In the morning, however, one man, Fred Ward, a mining surveyor from Horbury, was missing.

It was several days later that we heard from his family he had dreamed he had been ordered to oil the brakes of the wagon and in his sleep had attempted to do so but he fell out on to the line and was run over so that he lost one foot and part of the other.

This happened in sparsely populated country, but unfortunately it was near a signal box, from which he was seen when morning came. He was taken to a French hospital, duly sent home, and eventually recovered sufficiently to be able to follow his occupation after the war and could even drive his car. He made a joke of the way in which he could use drawing pins as sock suspenders.

My lot de-trained at Chalons-sur-Marne, where I was sent ahead to warn the Town Major (at Mailly le Camp, I think it was) to prepare billets for men and horses. I was probably chosen for this because by this time I had learned some French, though when I arrived in France I didn't know enough to be able to buy a bar of chocolate and couldn't tell a boulangerie from a

brasserie without going inside.

From the villagers I learned that the official I sought was "A la Pêche", so to find him I had to wander along the river bank where he quickly packed up his rod and line and came back to duty. The river pool where I washed my hands and face seemed to change colour a little as I did so but it was much more muddy when the men and horses arrived and cleaned up after their journey and the clouds of thick dust through which they had marched for the last few miles.

We were now in unspoilt civilian France, though from the next place where we dropped anchor, on high ground, we could see Rheims which was then under fire, and also Epernay, the wine town. The Germans might have known we had arrived for one night we saw a big ammunition dump and store burned and blown up near Epernay. Another night they found an ammunition train in a siding in a wood, and that went up too. My billet in this big village was in the cellar of a house on such a slope that I could (and did) ride my bike from the lane at the side straight through a yard and into the cellar – which, by the way, was the only cellar I have ever known which had a little stream running steadily through it.

In another place, where the Artillery HQ was in a chateau, Alf and I shared a very commodious brick built dog kennel. At this period we took the runs alternately, first one of us and then the other. One night I went out with instructions to find a certain French General and put my despatch into his own hand.

I found him alright – in a cottage crammed with sleeping French soldiers, plus a guard at the cottage door and others at his bedroom door. M. le General was in bed but sat up and received me with great courtesy, which I returned as best I could despite his unexpected appearance as he sat up with a conical tasselled night-cap on his head.

It was on a daytime run in this French area that a guard turned out to greet me. We DRs usually wore a poncho over our ordinary uniform which included leggings or sometimes field boots (up to the knee), topped by the universal head-gear of tin hat (or steel helmet if you want to be formal). Thus our rank was not immediately obvious.

My despatch this time was for the Commandant of a French Colonial unit in a village where it was very unlikely that an English soldier had ever been seen and probably very few motor cycles of any kind. I duly found the unit and approached the sentry to ask to be directed to his office. I think these men were Annamites, and the sentry seemed to find the situation a bit too much for him, so he called his superior, who turned out the guard, and all promptly lined up and presented arms. This, of course, was putting me far above my station, but as I felt it would have been churlish not to make appropriate acknowledgement I gravely saluted, went inside, and left with another salute on my departure which I returned with unbroken gravity.

I hope these men were not disillusioned. On the other hand, we had a forward run to Rettemoy Farm which was sometimes rather exciting. The farm drive, a straight level approach, had a line of French 75s backed onto it with its ammunition stores on the other side of the drive. Apart from the racket these things made our trouble was that the gunners did not seem to know or care where their empty shell-cases fell when they threw them towards their mates at the other side of the drive. We had to watch what was going on and then dash past as each gun was being loaded.

It was during this spell in the French zone that I came across a Scottish piper in the most moving

circumstances I have ever encountered. It was at the cemetery in the midst of a quiet village of trees and flowers, peaceful and untouched by war, and the solitary piper, in full dress, was playing a lament as a prelude to the internment of a Scottish C.O., greatly esteemed by his men, who had been killed a day or so earlier.

The Scots, by the way, made a great thing of their pipers and at one time even half a dozen men going to the bath house would have a piper to lead them.

As our stay with the French drew to a close Alf and I were called together by our officer, who said he had a French medal for one of us. As the luck of the draw had given me chiefly rearward runs and Alf had had most of the forward ones we had no difficulty in deciding that Alf should have the medal (though I forget quite what the medal was.)

Before we leave this area I should mention that I was one of many who enjoyed some excellent swimming in the Marne and a nearby canal – though the midges were terribly hungry. Some women who had been washing clothes on the bank of the river complained of our intrusion for none of us wore any costume, of course.

On July 31 the 62nd and the other three divisions returned to the British area. This time I was one of several people who crowded into the last vehicle in the train, an English guard's van with a floor of cast iron slabs to weight it and give its brakes a better effect.

It may have been the local water, or perhaps some food, but my digestion had become very much upset, so much so that my plight eventually became apparent to the French railwaymen in charge of the van. Without a word he led me to a door at one end giving me access to a narrow platform next to the last wagon in the train. There he directed my attention to the casing of the buffers and I took his meaning at once – and with thankfulness, maintaining a continuous firm grip on a convenient handrail, I put a foot on one buffer of each wagon, made appropriate dispositions, and gratefully allowed nature to take its course.

Our return journey took us again through Paris, this time at night, and fortunately the train stopped long enough en route to permit me to give adequate attention to my digestive affairs, this time with both feet on the ground and one hand gripping the step back to the van.

The 62 Division was now back in its old familiar area, but a little further east than formerly. The ground lost in the March retreat had been largely recovered and the troops were now much thinner on the ground, for the war had become less static and everyone began to feel that it might really end some day.

From August 23 to September 8 our 310 and 312 Artillery Brigades were lent to the 38th (Welsh) Division and I went with them. By this time I had 'won' (men of the 1939 war would have said 'liberated') a wonderful collection of equipment. The official items included a Colt .45 revolver and a packet of ammunition never even opened (as far as I can remember) in leather holster with leather belt, the usual gas-mask (the haversack type, which had long displaced the clammy flannel bag first used), a standard flannel-covered enamel water bottle, a haversack with mess tin in which I kept one day ahead with some bread and bacon, knife, fork, spoon and mug, housewife and washing tackle. I succeeded in retaining from its day of issue well into civilian life my British Warm (which civilians would call an overcoat); and this and four blankets I carried in a

bundle wrapped in a macintosh groundsheet tied on the bike carrier.

In addition to all this I had an infantryman's valise with spare under-clothing, socks and the like, with letters and writing materials. The last named included besides the field postcards (bearing phrases to be crossed out where not applicable which were readily available, a few 'green envelopes'. These were not green at all but had green stripes printed on them and a certificate which the sender could sign to indicate that he had included no forbidden material in his letter, which was liable to be selected for censorship only at the base, in contrast with ordinary letters which had to be censored by an officer of a man's unit. I remember finding some of these envelopes scattered round what was obviously the kit of a dead or perhaps wounded man, and I had others given me by a wounded man on his way to hospital, on whose behalf I dropped a line to his relatives.

In a second haversack I had a German acetylene lamp (as they used in dug-outs), and a Primus type stove, which I made myself from 18-pounder shell-case material, a couple of rifle oil-bottles, a motor cycle spoke and a bearing ball, a bit of wire gauze, and the conical protector of an 18-pounder shell. Strange to say, it actually worked – and what's more, I managed to bring it home but it was stolen from the garage in which I had it.

Towards the end I even added my own tent. It was open at one end when I acquired it, having been intended to be placed with one like it, the pair then covering about twelve feet by four. The German groundsheet was of plain cotton, and from one of them I made an extension covering a space in front of my open end, so that two of us could easily sleep in it with our equipment stowed in the extension. This went on top of my blankets on the carrier (which I had strengthened) and its two four-foot poles I managed to tie to the side of my bike. A canvas water bucket hung from my handlebars.

Pigeon carrying was no longer called for, so I could carry my despatches in another infantryman's valise slung on top of my personal one. I collected a map or two wherever we went, only the one in use being in my official map-case slung over my shoulder.

It was in these months of 1918 that I encountered some unforgettable sights. There was one wide expanse of torn-up earth which had been muddied into liquid and was now dried hard in the hot sun, sloping gently up in front of me and on both sides with not a shred of cover anywhere with a number of our men lying here and there just as they had fallen, their bodies now decomposing – with a smell never to be forgotten (but not as foul as that of a decaying horse). At the top of the rise was the other side of the picture; a dug-out with earth on a propped up corrugated cover and trenches round it, a machine gun overturned and a ring of grey uniformed corpses decaying like the others I had passed below.

Another sad sight I recall was that of a group of cavalymen and their mounts scattered in a place where there had been an attempt to make a quick break through. It was another example of the miserable failure of some of those at the top who persisted in pursuing systems which were already being proved useless in the Boer War some twenty years earlier.

No-one had time for funerals at that stage, except the Graves Registration Officer and his men, whose work went on steadily but as unobtrusively as possible.

The old trenches in these parts had been battered flat and when new ones were dug in 1918 autumn bones were turned up in all directions and none could tell from which side they had

come.

On one of these occasions in a wide open area I came across the equipment left by some poor soul who had left the scene (though whether alive or dead I had no means of knowing), and amongst it I noticed a Webley revolver of Army issue type. This I felt might be useful if any of our party lost his own weapon so I salvaged it and handed it to our sergeant for safe keeping. It was ironic that when I had my wonderful collection of equipment stolen on the march through Belgium just after the Armistice I was ordered to pay for my missing Colt and in the meantime our sergeant had been demobilised (one of the early ones) and had taken with him the weapon I had salvaged. Fortunately for me a Staff Officer whose messages I had so often carried was himself preparing for demobilisation and gave me his revolver which was, I understood, his own property.

On September 8 we rejoined the 62 Division and I found my pal Alf (with many others) in a little wood a mile or tow from the nearest village. I arrived in the evening, in rain, and was thankful to squeeze in with Alf in a trench so small that we had to lie back to back with our noses rubbing the earth before us. Next morning we collected some German arched corrugated iron, some of their cotton groundsheets, borrowed a spade, raided by night an ammunition dump nearby for empty ammunition boxes, and within a day or two had a big enough shelter with a wooden floor and sides, a weatherproof roof, and a tiny table and two stools. Naturally, as soon as we had ourselves comfortable, we had to move on!

Our little shelter served us well, but it was absolutely insignificant by comparison with a German dugout I saw later set in a devastation of battlefield mud and wreckage. It was quite big – probably ten or twelve feet square, lined with beautiful oak panelling and complete with choice French furniture.

This brings to mind an occasion in mid-1917 when we had run to a Brigade headquarters in a well made dug-out with neat telephone lines running from it in different directions in tidy straight lines on posts of even height planted at regular intervals with uniform cross pieces set squarely upon them. But when we went there one morning we found that in the night the place had been blown to bits, with several casualties. Thereafter telephone lines were either buried or run in ragged short lines with no recognisable common terminal.

This reversion to 1917 brings back to me an incident in which I gathered some merit I did not deserve. We had run to a signal office in a bell tent on the side of a hill facing away from a village where a crossroads café was being used as an officer's mess. I arrived there one evening to find that the traffic man had just been taken away and the café had had a direct hit and broken glass and bits of house lay all over the road. I felt I had better get on my way with the least possible delay, but I found the signal office tent empty – and I thought I detected some trace of shame-facedness as the crew made their way towards me from the ditch at the bottom of the slope.

We DRs could not easily tell the direction and distance of the bangs we heard, for the sound of our machines impaired recognition. One night I turned a corner and found a score or two of men clambering out of a roadside ditch when I heard nothing to alarm me. They seemed slightly surprised to see me.

It was back in summer 1917 that I first made personal acquaintance with those tiny beings to whom practically everybody sooner or later became host. The occasion quite shocked me, but

like everybody else, I had to cope. The little grey ones, slow moving, were disposed of easily; but the brown ones jumped far away unless caught instantly, rubbed between finger and thumb to break their legs, after which they could be cracked without difficulty.

By the autumn of 1918 it had become obvious that the Germans were in trouble, but it wasn't over yet, and I had one or two somewhat exciting runs not long before the Armistice. The Foret de Mormal was a big place, five or six miles each way with a number of roads through it and a straight line North South road on its east. Across this lay an East West road, but making a misaligned crossing. Both these roads were crammed with traffic, and as we knew they were badly broken up I set out by horse one evening to go to a unit on the East. It was a curious rule that a motor-cyclist transferring to a horse had to be accompanied by a regular horseman – though why either of us could not have done the run alone was never made clear to us. However, on this occasion there was a queue on three sides of this lop-sided crossroads and a field battery in the North-East angle of this junction was receiving some enemy attention. I found it not at all soothing to sit high on a horse in the dusk waiting for the queue to move; and again, as my companion and I swung right and then left on to the less busy road on the east I noticed once again the dull red instant glow in a little black cloud on the ground as shells fell near our battery. I don't remember the return journey but I do recall that on the roadside was a driver taking the saddlery from his dead horse to salvage it according to his orders.

I think it may have been a distorted account of this little incident which formed the basis of the citation which announced the award to me of the Military Medal – an honour which any front line infantryman deserved a thousand times more than I did.

At last came the Armistice, 11am on 11 November 1918 – one day after what I felt was one of the saddest sights in my memory; half a dozen young bodies laid out side by side, on a grassy bank above a quiet road a few yards outside an undamaged village with an undisturbed civilian population – and it was little compensation to my feelings to observe that there were similarly still grey-clad figures on the other side of the road.

A scene of an entirely different character was of a rainy dull November afternoon and a long column of guns, wagons, horses, men, marching steadily across a village square on their way east followed by a farmers high wheeled trap drawn by a light horse driven by a sober faced khaki clad figure wearing a top hat and carrying an open umbrella.

There was rather sad satisfaction in seeing lorries load up with displaced villagers being taken 'home', though I doubt whether at that stage they knew whether their homes still existed. About this time motor-cycling was somewhat exciting for there was rain on the ice from earlier rain which covered the roads.

We had some quiet smiles at one chateau at which we stayed on our way to Germany, for we found that every door handle and every gas tap had been fashioned after a portion of the male human anatomy usually covered by at least a fig leaf.

Sights which gave everybody real satisfaction were the groups of German guns we now came across, surrendered in accordance with the terms of the Armistice – but not quite, for although it was a condition that guns should be handed over in working order all the surrendered guns I saw had their muzzles burst open like some monstrous flower. And there were miles of railway where alternate rail joints had been blasted so that every single rail had to be taken out and replaced. So we progressed steadily towards Germany, through Eupen and Malmedy, and the

Ardennes – with a pause to let the Guards Division go by and be first to enter Germany. At Dinant we found a road roller with the familiar Flying Horse trademark on its front, presumably captured in March 1918 but eight months later tidily sheeted and parked on the roadside ready for its old owner.

The sanitary arrangements at Malmedy seemed a bit odd. A little river flowed through the village over a stony bed in a deep declivity with houses perched on its banks. It was not clear where the village water supply came from but it was obvious where much of it went, for from each house projected on beams a little cabin which appeared to be only part floored. Whatever its drawbacks, it was a system which could never freeze even though perhaps its users did!

I had to leave from Germany, making the journey to the port in a German train, and I shall never forget how our very cheerful almost riotous passengers quietened to a thoughtful silence as we approached and then crossed in steady comfort the stricken country which had seen such dreadful activity only a few months earlier.

And there was a similar change of attitude as our train passed by the almost endless lines of graves in the war cemetery at Etaples where there had been a base hospital. I made the return journey from this leave in an English hospital train, with real bunks and great comfort.

My six months in Germany passed very pleasantly, and on demobilisation in June 1919 I made the journey from Cologne to Rotterdam down the Rhine in a German pleasure steamer, with a break for one night in a Rhine barge (a 2,000 tonner) moored in the middle of the mile wide river at Emmerich on the Dutch border. From Rotterdam we had a 1600 tonner (with interior walls covered with the pencilled graffiti of German prisoners) to Harwich, with lines of surrendered German submarines to greet us; then rail to Richmond, on to Catterick, and back home at last. I had four years and sixty days in uniform, of which two years and 152 days had been in France, Belgium or Germany.

Frank

H.W.

Holmes

Notes compiled July 1976