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*Six Days in March, '18.*

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## DEDICATION.

*My dear Mother,*

*You recently upbraided me on the ground that I had never given you any personal stories of the War. Obviously, at that time, it was not possible to say much about things out there, and when it was all over, I was too busy getting back to Surgery to have either time or inclination for referring to the past in any detail. But I have thought at various times that my experiences in the March Retreat were really worth recording, for we did indeed have an interesting share in that tremendously important period, and so—on its tenth anniversary—I have written this account for you.*

*One thing I can say for certain about it is that it is accurate, for when I rejoined the Battery on my return from hospital about a month after the Retreat, I wrote a fairly full account for the Brigade War Diary, and I have a copy of this. Also, after Armistice Day, during December, 1918, I gave a series of lectures to the Battery on our doings in the War, five of which were devoted to these events. I prepared these lectures with considerable pains and after consultation with the officers and N.C.O.'s who were with me during that time, so that they represented a correct account of things checked from several different points of view, and I am glad to say I still have very full notes of it all.*

*I have been very careful not to overstate things, as, for example, not to write "very heavy shelling" when, as a matter of fact, only a few odd shells were falling round about, and yet I have tried to give a fair account of that most intensely anxious period.*

*You have occasionally reproached me because my letters to you tend towards brevity; here at least is one of adequate length!*

*Your affectionate son,*

RONALD OGIER WARD.

*Reprinted from the Journal of the  
Honourable Artillery Company.*



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## Six Days in March, '18.

BY MAJOR R. OGIER WARD, D.S.O., M.C., H.A.C.  
(Late O.C. "C" Battery, 293rd Army Brigade, R.F.A.).

On being asked recently what was the most strenuous experience which I had ever had, I replied at once, "The March Retreat." Most certainly during that period my energies were more severely tried than at any other time in my life, even including some endeavours in the High Alps and certain surgical operations.

Being the Battery Commander of a unit to which I was intensely devoted, whose officers and men, horses and equipment, were my most precious possessions, I lived in those six days through a period of intense anxiety. The risks to my own life were not more than was reasonable to expect, and far less than those faced by infantry, but there was, of course, a real chance of losing the Battery to the enemy, as indeed nearly happened, or of exposing it to disaster; and the desire to fight it to the limit and yet avoid such dangers made me extremely conscious of my responsibilities.

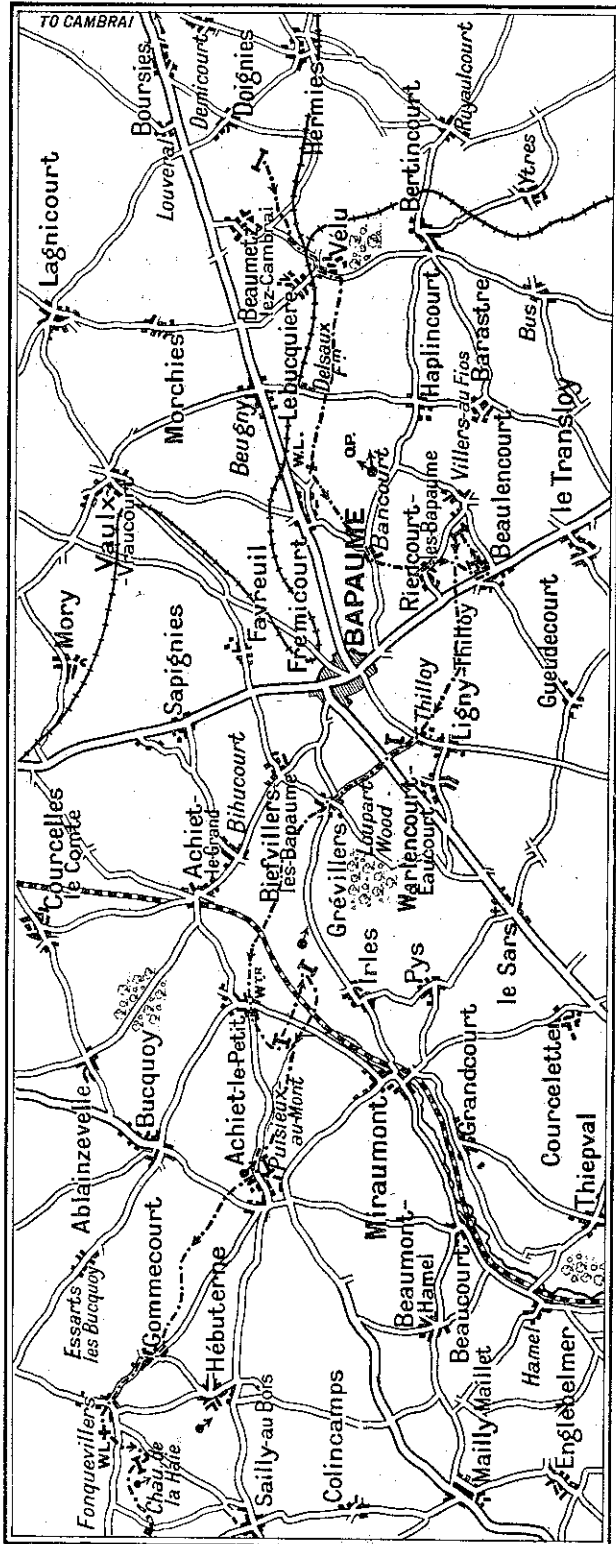
Fortunately, "C" Battery (18 pr. Q.F.) formed part of a fine Brigade, which was handled with quite exceptional skill by its commander, a splendid regular soldier, Lieut.-Colonel Arthur Main, D.S.O. (now commanding the 1st Brigade, R.H.A.). Being an Army Brigade, we were never long with any one Division, for it was our function to be attached wherever extra artillery was at any time required. I think that for this reason all units in the Brigade were inclined to be specially self-reliant, and to regard the Brigade Commander as the only senior officer who really mattered. As will be seen later, "C" Battery itself was in all respects a very good show. I had the advantage of knowing personally every officer and N.C.O., and almost every man in it; they all, I know, trusted me, and it was only natural that this very personal interest made my anxieties even greater than those which are naturally felt at such times by a Unit Commander.

On January 22nd, 1918, "C" Battery, 293rd Army Brigade, R.F.A., had made a move of about five miles, changing from a position at Mørchies to one near Doignies, a ruined village midway between Bapaume and Cambrai, and there we remained until the Retreat started.

The Battery position was about 1,500 yards behind (to the S.W. of) the village mentioned, which itself was 2,500 yards behind our Front Line, and the range from the guns to the enemy Front Line was about 5,000 yards; this is, of course, a long range, but desirable in view of the expected enemy offensive. I found, on taking over the position, that the guns were to be arranged as follows\* :—

Three were in shallow gunpits made of sandbag sides and covered with camouflage, which had been dug on the forward slope of a slight hill. From this little hill a shallow valley ran towards the ruins of Doignies. Two other guns were in deeper and much more protected pits placed 400 yards more to the left (or N.W.); they were on lower ground and separated by a little hill from the other three. During the two months before the battle these two guns did all the firing from the main position, the three guns first mentioned being "silent" guns, that is to say, they were never to be used until the enemy opened his attack. It will be seen later that as a result of this well-thought-out plan the enemy was unaware of their existence, although he had the two active guns "properly taped." In addition, one "forward gun" was placed in the village of Doignies, and another more to the right

\* See Map p. 9.



STANFORD, LONDON.

MAP SHOWING THE RETIREMENT OF "C" BATTERY, 293RD ARMY BDE., R.F.A., MARCH 21ST TO 26TH, 1918.

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near the Doignies-Hermies Road, in the valley between these two villages. Thus the Battery had seven 18-pdr. guns in action when the battle started, and also an old 15-pdr. placed close behind our front line, near Demincourt, for anti-tank purposes. The five guns of the main position had also a good field for fire over open sights towards Doignies and due northward across the Bapaume-Cambrai Road, for the slopes in front were gentle and covered with grass, there were no hedges or other obstructions to view, except the village of Doignies, 1,000 yards away, which entirely obscured the view of our front line. This was held by one of our best Divisions, namely, the 51st Highland (Territorial) Division, who formed the right of the IVth Corps of the Third Army. The Wagon Lines of our Brigade were near Favreuil, a village N.E. of Bapaume, and were fully seven miles away, as the crow flies, and not directly to our rear but to our left rear. This was not in any way the fault of our Brigade, but it was not a convenient arrangement when teams were required in a hurry by the guns. It had, however, many advantages, for, in addition to good shelter for men, there were excellent stabling and watering facilities. The winter had been severe, and undoubtedly the fine condition which our horses maintained throughout the Retreat was directly due to these suitable winter quarters as distinct from open horse-lines.

I am afraid that all these details sound decidedly dull when given you in March, 1929, but in March, 1918, they were supremely interesting. However, my reason for writing them now is that, unless you know something of our dispositions, it will be far from easy to understand what follows.

From January 21st, 1918, until March 21st, the Battery spent its time in registering the guns on certain points, in harassing fire, in constructing reserve positions, and in ensuring ammunition supply to them. The enemy, now that he had the initiative, spent much time in careful observation of our defences and in preparations for assault, and he was estimated, on the front held by our IVth Corps, to have increased his batteries by about one hundred during this period of preliminaries.

For the four weeks preceding March 21st, I was in England for a fortnight's leave and then for a Senior Officers' Gunnery Course on Salisbury Plain. England was full of anxiety about the impending attack, and I shared particularly in this when, arriving on the afternoon of March 18th at Victoria, I found that the "Staff" train had been despatched an hour earlier than usual; such a strange happening seemed full of significance, especially as the Station staff refused to give any explanation. But, leaving England on March 19th, and travelling through France all the next day, I found things much as usual, and Ogilvie, one of my subalterns, who received me on my arrival at our Wagon Lines near Bapaume shortly before midnight March 20th-21st, also seemed to take a peaceful view of the immediate future. He was a cheerful little Scotchman, keen in all respects, and, because he was particularly good with horses, given charge of the Battery Wagon Lines for that important period. He had begun to doubt if an attack was really pending on our front, though everyone was tuned up; indeed, for several nights past special artillery fire had been put down on possible enemy assembly places just before dawn, and the main enemy attack had been definitely predicted for March 13th, and again for the 18th.

I was in bed by 1 a.m., and asleep at once, for I had not slept at all in the train during the previous night. It was the last sleep that I, like many others, was to have for five days and nights.

At 4.40 a.m. or, as it seemed, just so soon as I had got really comfortable, I was wide awake. The humming cadence of a long-range shell passing overhead was a sufficient summons to full consciousness; a few seconds later there was the sound of its distant explosion and of others following. These shells were destined for Bapaume and also for the IVth Corps Headquarters, which was at Bihucourt,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles behind the Wagon Lines, and more than 10 miles from our front line. Long-range fire was also concentrated on the exceptionally large R.E. dump immediately behind our Wagon Lines, and also on our Casualty Clearing Station at Grevillers. It was quite clear that the long-expected battle had begun, and I can honestly say that my first feeling was one of thankfulness that I had not missed it.

For I had spent two years in training "C" Battery and to have been away from it at the time of its supreme trial would have left a life-long feeling of bitter regret.

Within a few moments after the first shell had passed over us the full roar of distant gun-fire developed. It was the first time I had ever experienced this, for during the time I had been in France, which was from shortly before the battle of Arras, there had been no big enemy offensives; also, I had, of course, always been with the Battery during our attacks, so that I had never before listened from a distance to intense shell fire over a very wide area. It was most impressive. In addition to the continuous roar from the front lines, every few minutes other long-range shells passed over our heads, and a few small ones fell in the Brigade Wagon Lines, and I believe wounded one or two horses, though none belonging to "C" Battery.

I dressed quickly and then found Ogilvie and the Battery Sergeant-Major. Everyone was awake and dressing, and for the moment there was nothing to be done except to get ready for an immediate move and wait for dawn, and this was not long in coming. When there was enough light we saw that it was very misty; but we did not then realize how serious this was from the point of view of our front line defence, and indeed around the Wagon Lines the mist was never quite so thick as it was more to the east, where our infantry were in action.

With daylight the Kite Balloons began to go up, but each one was promptly shot down in flames by Bosch aeroplanes, which every now and then appeared suddenly out of the mist.

(It should be remembered that about this time of year, the equinox, dawn is nearly an hour earlier in France, near Arras, than it is in England, near London.)

One Balloon Section was situated about three-quarters of a mile away and I went there hoping to get news, but I learnt nothing except that they were getting a few long-range shells into their camp.

It was by now about 6.30 a.m., and you may wonder how it was that I was not already on my way up to the Battery, so I will explain that I remained at the Wagon Lines for a while because it seemed that there I should be most useful, for just then everything pointed to serious trouble very close at hand. Judging by the noise, it seemed that the battle was chiefly on our left front, since from that direction the roar was intense, whilst on the right front, where the 293rd Brigade was in action, things seemed fairly quiet. The explanation of this state of affairs is to-day clear. Firstly, owing to the forward bend in our line, known as the Flesquieres salient, and owing to the fact that our Wagon Lines were not in rear of the guns of the Brigade, but to their left rear, the nearest part of the front line (east of the village of Vaulx-Vraucourt) was only six miles away, whereas that part of it in front of Doignies which our guns were facing was more than 12 miles distant; and therefore the enemy attack on the village mentioned sounded from the Wagon Lines specially prominent, a fact of which, at the time, I did not realize the importance. But it was not only a matter of distance, for in actual fact the enemy did not assault the 51st Division at dawn except on its left, and my officers afterwards told me that they received no S.O.S. from that part of the Divisional front which the Battery was covering. I believe that the enemy plan was not to press the attack on the front of the 51st Division, but to turn its flanks, and particularly its left flank. Lieutenant Greenfield, who had spent that night in charge of the old anti-tank 15-pdr., near to Demincourt, confirmed this opinion subsequently, when he rejoined "C" Battery.

But there was also a stronger reason which decided me to remain temporarily at the Wagon Lines. Early in the morning, about 7 a.m., a cyclist messenger came down the road from Vaulx-Vraucourt and, as he passed me, I stopped him and asked for news, and he told me that the enemy was already in that village. As it was only  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles away, the news was disturbing, especially since it appeared to agree with the noise of battle. As a matter of fact Vaulx was not taken by the Bosch until the following day, but the village of Lagnicourt, only two miles in front of it, was taken during the morning of March 21st; so at the moment it seemed reasonable to believe him.

Putting all these considerations together, it seemed to me that the

Brigade Wagon Lines, with its numerous vehicles and its rations and forage, might soon be cut off from the Brigade itself, especially if any force of enemy cavalry should get through, so I sent a message to Colonel Main to say that I was fully prepared, if necessary, to move the Wagon Lines to a position E. of Beaulencourt, that is, directly in rear of the gun positions, and we set about making all preparations for this.

Let me relate now what I afterwards learnt about the opening of the battle at the Battery position. Up there things were not going too well. Starting at 4.45 a.m., the two left guns of "C" Battery had been shelled with 5.9-inch, 4.2 inch and gas shells, but as no S.O.S. was received it opened fire, at the orders of Brigade H.Q., on "counter B" targets, that is, on suspected "assembly places." By 10 a.m. the enemy, aided by the thick white mist, had taken Boursies, the village on the Bapaume-Cambrai road 3,000 yards to the front; by 11.30 a.m. he was in Doignies, less than a mile away, and a few machine-gun bullets reached the Battery. A Corporal had been in charge of the forward gun in Doignies, and had kept it going until a direct hit put it out of action. The other forward gun, under Lieut. Welsh, had to be abandoned about the same time; the sights, breech-blocks, etc., being removed by the detachments, who got back safely to the forward Wagon Lines in the evening. I may add that these two guns were no longer effective, as they were among buildings and had no field for direct fire. I cannot give more details, but I know that Lieut. Mackie, who was commanding at the Battery, and Lieuts. Greenfield, Morris and Welsh, out in front, had plenty of excitement during that morning and many good targets to shoot at. Greenfield especially, a tough Canadian Scot, enjoyed himself immensely, even after his telephone line had been cut, for he joined the infantry holding Demincourt, and we saw nothing of him for more than twenty-four hours.

In giving you an account of how things were developing during the morning of March 21st, I have spent some time in explaining my own movements, because there cannot be many who had the experience which fell to me of being at the start of the Battle in back areas, and a few hours later going up to our extreme front line. Indeed, this is my chief reason for writing these pages.

Soon after noon, a message reached me from Colonel Main, telling me to go up to "C" Battery, and I was glad to get it, though I felt fully justified in my delay at the Wagon Lines, especially as I should probably not have affected the handling of the Battery during the morning, for I had been in England for a month and was quite unfamiliar with the latest schemes of defence. Whereas, had the Bosch broken through as far as the Wagon Lines, an event which seemed from all available information to be so imminent, then the rapid moving of all the horses, vehicles and stores of four batteries, and of the Brigade ammunition column, first to the right and then forwards to withdraw the guns, would have been no easy operation, and it would have taxed fully all the energies of the few officers who would have been available to execute it. Now, however, my course was clear, and I was quickly away, mounted on Prince, with my Trumpeter on his pony as my horseholder. The mist had now entirely gone, and in fine spring weather we cantered across the wide grass-covered space opposite the Wagon Lines, for the roads and cross-roads nearby were still being shelled; and then we made good going over open country towards Fremicourt. The main Bapaume-Cambrai road passes through this village, and in it was situated 51st Divisional Headquarters and for these two reasons it was being very heavily shelled. We, therefore, passed between it and Beugny, and then again eastwards. It was about 7 miles to 293rd Brigade Headquarters and shells were falling on many points in this distance, but I knew the country well and noted that fire was chiefly on cross-roads and other important points, which could easily be avoided by two mounted men. During this ride I learnt much about possible routes for the guns, information which was to be useful later; for the roads through the villages were obviously marked down by the enemy for harassing fire and already were much damaged by heavy shells, and so I saw that it would clearly be folly to attempt to lead a battery through them.



We pushed on towards Lebuquiere, which was being very heavily "bumped," and passing south of it arrived at the village of Vélou. This is a small village with its château standing in a large wood, big enough, as I shall mention later, to conceal several battalions of infantry. Although our troops were not making use of it for this purpose, yet there was good reason why the Bosch should shell the wood, for within it was one of our long-range Howitzers on a railway mounting. The enemy fire directed at this, rather unsuccessfully it is true, made it a particularly unpleasant place to pass through, and I decided to leave the wood on my right. About 200 yards to the left front of the village three roads meet at a level crossing and this point was an enemy target and being shelled. Before entering the village I halted and watched this place. The Bosch is always very regular in his rates of fire, and having settled on a target he sticks to it, he never "splashes things about." After a few minutes' observation it was clear that he was firing salvoes of a couple of 4.2-inch Howitzer shells at the cross-roads about every three minutes; and so I told Cleator my plan. It was to advance up to the entrance of the village, halt there until a group of shells had fallen, then gallop along the street for 500 yards and swing round a corner to the right and so into open fields and safety.

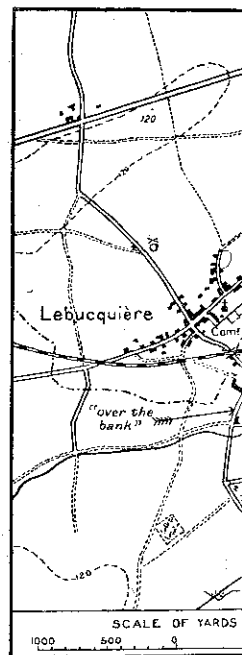
We waited for the next fall of shells. "Now then, Cleator, gallop," I said, and away we went, the Trumpeter a horse-length behind me. We covered the five hundred yards, swung round the corner to the right, according to plan—and in an instant Prince was up to his girth in coils of telephone wires, which the shelling had brought down on to the road. Now Prince was a horse who would shy at anything. Once in England he climbed a steep embankment to avoid a perambulator. But he was really full of wisdom, and he showed it at this time. Cleator, who had pulled up at my warning shout, dismounted quickly and carefully lifted and cleared each of Prince's legs from the wire. During this operation, which took several minutes, Prince stood quite still, although the next pair of shells dropped, when they became due, less than 200 yards away and splinters flew by us. The moment the horse was free, Cleator mounted again and we galloped forwards a few hundred yards, considering ourselves well out of a nasty corner.

I had now to send Cleator back with the two horses for we were getting into country intersected with trenches of reserve defence lines and also exposed to the view of the enemy; he got back to the Wagon Lines all right, but after a rather exciting ride.

I went forwards by myself to the 293rd Brigade Headquarters. This was in a sunken road about three-quarters of a mile away. I was glad to recall that it had recently been shifted 50 yards to the S.E., for, as I approached, I could see that the position which it had occupied before I went on leave was being intermittently but effectively shelled. I found Colonel Main and was glad that he appeared satisfied with the part which the Battery had played that morning. He had taken over command of the 293rd Army Brigade whilst I was on leave in England, so this was my first meeting with him as Brigade Commander, though as a Corps Staff Officer he had once visited a position in which "C" Battery was in action. Our present interview was short, but long enough for me to realize that we were in luck in the matter of our new C.O. He told me that the last reports from the gun-position were bad, but that perhaps I might manage to get the guns away by night. This news filled me with bitterness that I had not been able to leave England early enough to have been there from the beginning of that day, and encouraged me quickly to cover the remaining three-quarters of a mile to my Battery. There were a certain number of shells falling, but I got to it without difficulty, though as I walked along I noticed with some anxiety how many trenches had been dug whilst I was in England, and how difficult it might be in the darkness to find a way for teams through them, so I made a careful and accurate mental record of a possible route for use that night. When I arrived at the Battery, it was not at the moment under shell fire, and Lieutenant Mackie was able to hand over to me without interruption and to explain the situation. He told me of the fate of the two forward guns, which I have already mentioned, and he explained how two guns of the main position, four hundred yards away on the left, had been heavily shelled during the morning with H.E. and gas shells, and were now

under machine-gun fire and damaged. The three forward guns were being shelled owing to the fact that they were in position until that day, so that they had been dealt with as a result of the previous two days.

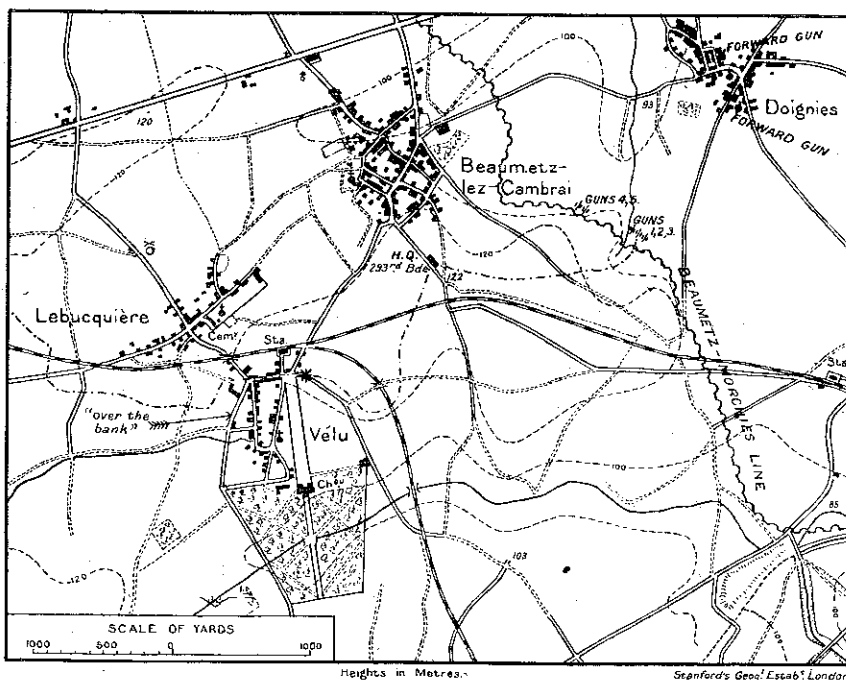
But although the situation was bad, the breeches having been shelled and had been dragged out of position along their usual zero line, it was made because of the nature of the area a gentle valley which we had an uninterfered parts of the Wiltshire. Rather less than 1½ miles from Louverval, clearly seen as our position. The 51st Division, in which a battalion of infantry had been sent to noon their infantry had been shelled, three guns had been shelled, the situation looked bad, but other gunners had not been shelled. Lewis guns had fired and the field was lost somewhat.



as I have said, he was around Demincourt, were falling on the p anywhere in front; few yards in rear of. In other words, the be expected to adv

under machine-gun fire from Doignies, and how their pits were much damaged. The three right-hand guns had so far escaped, and this was clearly owing to the fact that these had always been maintained as "silent" guns until that day, so that the enemy was unaware of their existence, whereas he had dealt enthusiastically with those two which had done all the work of the previous two months.

But although these three guns had not been hit, two were out of action, the breeches having jammed as a result of long continued firing. All three had been dragged out of their pits and were, I saw, no longer pointing N.E. along their usual zero lines, but nearly due north, this switch having been made because of the rapid advance of the enemy on our left. Looking down a gentle valley which runs northwards from the little hill on which we stood, we had an uninterrupted view across slopes of grass country, resembling parts of the Wiltshire downland in its freedom from fences and hedges. Rather less than 1½ miles away in this direction is the village and wood of Louverval, clearly seen because it stands on ground about the same height as our position. The enemy had, as I have said earlier, turned the left flank of the 51st Division, and by 11 a.m. had taken the village of Louverval, in which a battalion Headquarters was placed, and Mackie told me that by noon their infantry had been seen on the crest just S.W. of it, and that the three guns had been swung round to the left to deal with this target. The situation looked bad. My Battery was reduced to one gun in action. The other gunners had manned the trenches close by with rifles, and our two Lewis guns had fired away all their ammunition at various targets; Greenfield was lost somewhere out in front, quite possibly a prisoner (actually,



as I have said, he was not captured, but did much fine work with the infantry around Demincourt, before he rejoined us next day); machine-gun bullets were falling on the position, and there were none of our infantry to be seen anywhere in front; on the contrary, they were now manning a trench a few yards in rear of the gun position (part of the Beaumetz-Morchies line). In other words, the guns were now fully exposed to the enemy, who might be expected to advance at any moment, and we had no protecting force

in front of us. It was now about 4 p.m., and no teams could possibly arrive for several hours. Presently, the only remaining gun in action, which had been shooting at the Bosch infantry advancing W. from Louverval, began to fire with open sights at a most exciting target, namely, a Bosch battery of three guns, advancing in column of route along the same high ground, and thence winding their way down the hillside. They must have been a so-called "infantry" battery, i.e., one used in close support of infantry, though they were, of course, horse-drawn, and were armed with 77 mm. guns. We got a few shells into them, but our men were tired, and the firing from our one gun, its breech now so stiff that it could hardly be opened, was not fast enough to stop them from getting quickly down the slope and out of our sight into a little valley less than a mile away, and though we continued firing into this, it was easy to foresee what would happen directly. A few minutes later a salvo of three shells burst amongst us, and then two more salvos. The enemy battery had certainly got into action pretty quickly. We had only four shells left and, as it seemed useless to risk the men in getting these fired, I ordered them to take cover in the trench nearby, and we were really lucky to get off with only one casualty, for the enemy had got the range well. When, in December, 1918, I visited our Battery position once again, I examined that which the Bosch guns had taken up. It was well covered from view and the range to us was 1,600 yards. It seemed probable that they belonged to enemy forces which had begun the day by attacking towards Morchies and, having turned the left flank of the 51st Division, had then swung southwards in our direction. For at that time the British line rather more to the south had not been assaulted, and indeed, ultimately, was lost by being bitten off by attacks on its flanks.

It was now 5 p.m. at that time, so at 5. the men away at once to withdraw the guns be effected before the were therefore removed, carried, such as telegraph detachments would not rise steadily for near view and to machine trench of the Beaumont 15 officers and men (I hoped by moving first a target as our number trench, I did find a shell treks across exposed. Acting on the respect I sent the others on allowed to get out of business three were w done; he was very hour or so, but I left last, I got a good machine intact. Here, I may the gun position in the

"Then again we ever were able to get 21st. To withdraw machine ground in clear view watching with machine of it, but as we looked

Once over the hill through Vêlu, but it was the shelled cross-roads Brigade Wagon Lines, towards Fremicourt to near there he was positioned and others from the machine now it was quite dark. the idea that guns might with enemy tanks, show was in command and Headquarters. Unfamiliar concerned with other the guns, and so he had of his teams. But when of Morchies to get information attack to be made than

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## CHAPTER II.

It was now 5 p.m. and it was clear that the Battery could do no more at that time, so at 5.30 p.m. I ordered the retirement. My object was to get the men away at once, and if possible to get teams up, as soon as it was dark, to withdraw the guns, although it seemed very improbable that this could be effected before the enemy captured them. The sights and breech blocks were therefore removed, and also all important equipment that could be carried, such as telephones. I could see that the withdrawal of the gun detachments would not be easy, for behind the battery position the ground rose steadily for nearly a mile and all this was now open to the enemy's view and to machine-gun fire, so I began by leading the way along the trench of the Beaumetz-Morchies line towards the S.E. We were about 15 officers and men (for I had sent most of the gunners back earlier), and I hoped by moving first to a flank to find a safe line of retreat for so tempting a target as our numerous party. After half a mile of movement along the trench, I did find a slightly less-exposed way over the hill, but it meant two treks across exposed grass slopes, with a brief rest in a dip about half-way. Acting on the respectable sea-faring rule that "the Captain is last to leave," I sent the others on ahead over these open spaces, only two at a time being allowed to get out of the trench and being told to run their fastest. In this business three were wounded by machine-gun fire, one having to be abandoned; he was very seriously hit, and I doubt if he lasted more than an hour or so, but I left one man to take care of him. When my turn came at last, I got a good move on, and was decidedly glad to reach the next cover intact. Here, I may perhaps quote from a letter written after my visit to the gun position in the December after the Armistice:—

"Then again we marvelled, as we stood on the old ground, that we over were able to get the men away from the guns in the afternoon of March 21st. To withdraw meant moving over some four or five hundred yards of ground in clear view of the Bosch in Doignies, and ground which he was watching with machine guns. We did have three men wounded in the passage of it, but as we looked at it to-day, the wonder is that any got clear."

Once over the hill our difficulties were ended. Of course, we had to pass through Vêlu, but it was easy with only dismounted men to handle to avoid the shelled cross-roads, and I then sent all the officers and men, back to the Brigade Wagon Lines, near Bapaume, whilst I myself, with one man, made towards Fremicourt to find Lieutenant Stebbings. I knew that somewhere near there he was posted with some gun teams and limbers, and with these and others from the main Wagon Lines, I hoped to collect the guns, for by now it was quite dark. These advanced Wagon Lines had been formed with the idea that guns might be rapidly collected and moved in order to deal with enemy tanks, should they attack, and with other quick targets. Stebbings was in command and had been placed directly under the orders of Divisional Headquarters. Unfortunately, Division—no doubt being very fully concerned with other matters—had not decided to send him forward to get the guns, and so he had been fuming there all day unable to make any use of his teams. But when I arrived he was absent, having gone off to the village of Morchies to get information and perhaps arrange to assist in a counter-attack to be made that evening by the 6th Division, who were on our left.

Stebbing had chosen these advanced Wagon Lines exceptionally well, as we all realised the following day, for they were S.E. of Fremicourt behind a slight bluff on the hillside, which screened them from the E.; whereas, the much more obvious positions in the main valley, more to the south, were exposed to the enemy balloons, and when the mist cleared on March 22nd they registered a battery on the masses of transport there, causing

much damage and confusion, which we escaped. When I arrived I learnt that all the limbers, firing battery and first-line wagons were assembled there, having been quite properly moved up by Ogilvie during the afternoon, thus leaving at the main Wagon Lines near Bapaume only the G.S. wagons and stores, under the charge of the B.Q.M.S. It was by now quite dark, except for the beam of one of our searchlights which had been established nearby.

We set about getting teams ready from those on the spot. During the time I was at work on this, Stebbings returned. He had had a narrow escape from being killed by a shell and both he and his horse-holder were wounded. I had to say goodbye to him, for it was clear that he had at once to go down as a casualty, and I felt very sad about it, for he was a fine officer and, having been in the Battery from its very beginning, he was specially valuable to me, for he knew every man and every horse in it, and I knew that I should miss him greatly, not only on this night, but also in the days ahead. Fortunately, he rejoined some weeks later, and before the advance started.

After a little time I got together five teams and gun limbers, with five gunners, Ogilvie and myself. I would gladly have had a few more men, but none were available, and now that Stebbings was wounded there was no other officer. At 11 p.m. we started forwards, but I cannot say that I was very hopeful, for it seemed most likely that by now the guns would have been captured, since when we left them in the afternoon they were already in front of our infantry. We pushed on to Vêlu, avoiding all roads as far as possible, for they were by now impassable for wheeled traffic in many places. Through the village there was only the one way along which Cleator and I had galloped, but all was quiet. Not far from the level crossing some sappers were clearing the line for a locomotive, and they did so with success, for during the night this withdrew the long-range Howitzer from Vêlu Wood. Beyond this the way was inevitably difficult, for there were many new trenches and a good deal of barbed wire. But a more serious and unexpected difficulty was the mist which now settled down again, very thick and white, so that one could only see two or three yards, and for a mile and a half I had great trouble in maintaining direction through it, whilst finding a way in and out of trench lines which made several complicated detours necessary. But, checking myself by compass every now and then, and aided by my reconnaissance of the afternoon, I made only one mistake and fortunately realized this before I had lost my way, for if once I had got really astray, it might have been a long time before we had got right again. We moved slowly forwards, the teams keeping well closed up, each one close behind the other, and so at last we passed through the gap which had been left in the main trench and thus we arrived in good shape at the Battery position. There stood the three guns just as we had left them, looking very lonely and forgotten, each faintly seen in the hazy light which pierced the mist from the low-lying moon. Now was the most anxious time. The trench 200 yards in rear of the guns was manned with scattered infantry. This was good, but it showed that this trench had definitely become our front line and that the guns now were in No Man's Land. In the evening, when we had withdrawn, the enemy had been only 1,000 yards away in front and on the left flank, and it seemed to me certain that by now they must be quite close up, and all ready to prevent us from saving the guns. I had given strict orders as to silence, and from now on all instructions were given in whispers and every effort was made to keep the horses and limbers clear of anything that might make a noise. In silence I led three teams forward to the three right guns. The drivers did their work beautifully and in almost complete quiet we limbered them up and then moved back about 50 yards. There I had to leave them, whilst Ogilvie and I took teams to the other two guns 400 yards away from the main position over the hill to the left. I dared not send back the three guns now limbered up, for I was sure that in the darkness and mist they could not possibly find the way, and that once lost, I could never find them again, and I also felt sure that I should need Ogilvie's help to recover the other two guns. Yet I hated to leave them where they were, for every moment I expected a burst of machine-gun fire or shelling, and to either of these they would be entirely exposed. But during the hour that we were on the position everything remained wrapped in complete silence, which was made even more

intense by the fire; all was strange contrast the enemy su occupied in ge fire that night the mist. Als Division made yet no doubt

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intense by the deadening effect of the heavy mist ; no gun fire ; no rifle fire ; all was as peaceful as a night on Salisbury Plain, and it was in very strange contrast to the tremendous noises of the day just past. I suppose the enemy supports were too busy moving forward, and those nearby too occupied in getting ready for the attack at dawn to bother about harassing fire that night and, as I have said, all distant sounds were damped down by the mist. Also, I learnt long afterwards that during the evening the 19th Division made a counter attack towards Doignies, and although this failed, yet no doubt it had checked the enemy's advance for the moment.

The removal of the other two guns was a much more difficult job, for the effect of all the firing which they had done since they had been put into these gun pits two months previously, and of the enemy's shelling on March 21st, had been to cause the heavy roofs of the pits to sink, so that there was not sufficient overhead clearance to run the guns out of them from the back. After a lot of hard work and some digging, we were still no nearer clearing them in this direction, when fortunately in the trench behind I found an officer and about 30 men. He willingly brought these to help on the drag ropes, and with all this man-power now available, in a few moments we had hauled the guns out of the fronts of the pits up on to level ground. At the time I did not realize that during this work inside the gun pits, I and Ogilvie had absorbed a good deal of mustard gas, for these two guns had been heavily shelled during the day, and this gas evaporates very slowly, and twenty-four hours later I became very sick from this cause. During all this hard work I was very conscious of the intensity of the silence about us, which made each of our movements sound terribly noisy, and I have never in my life been so anxious as I then was, for it seemed certain that the enemy infantry must know of our presence and of our intentions, and I expected to see their grey uniforms appearing through the mist at any moment.

But the worst work was now completed, and I led these two guns along to the other three and, delighted with our success, moved off all five together. But immediately we met with bad luck, one team passed too near a huge shell-hole and their gun sank into it. The team could not pull it out, even with all of us pulling on drag ropes, nor could the infantry shift it, for I soon sought their assistance once more, but unavailingly. Time was passing quickly, and it was clearly necessary to make sure of saving the other four, so I told the N.C.O. in charge of this team to retire it some distance and to await my return at an agreed place, for I intended to return and make another attempt to withdraw the gun.

With Ogilvie and the other four guns I now led the way back along the track towards Vêlu, and to the roads there, which were strewn with branches of trees, telephone wires, dead horses and smashed vehicles, and much damaged at some points by many shell holes. When near the village, I parted from them. Ogilvie was at once to push on to the Wagon Lines and collect detachments, and the guns were to follow him promptly, whilst I returned to seek the remaining team and to try again to pull out the last gun. It was a mile and a quarter back to the position, and I went as fast as possible, for dawn was not far away ; but when I got there, although the gun was still where we had left it, I could nowhere find the drivers and the horses. I learnt afterwards that in the mist they had lost their way, and it was indeed a matter of luck that they were successful in rejoining the Battery safely the next afternoon. Clearly, there was nothing more to be done for the moment. I reflected that in the past twenty-four hours the Battery had done some useful firing, and it was good to feel that no more guns had been lost. I was terribly tired, for I had had no rest at all, and nothing to eat, and had been working pretty hard throughout, but it was a cheering thought that we remained an active unit, for I felt sure that the Battery positions more to our left, which I knew well, must have been captured early in the day. It was getting light and the enemy's artillery was beginning to open fire all along the line, so I galloped, in good spirits, back to Vêlu, on my way to the Wagon Lines. But as I passed through the village I had a nasty surprise. It was now daylight and there I saw, parked beside the wall in that straight stretch of road which I knew so well, my four guns. No men, no horses anywhere. To this day I do not know what had happened, but somehow my orders had been misunderstood, and the N.C.O. in charge had thought

that the guns were to be left there ready for detachments who were to come up from the Wagon Lines. It was a bitter disappointment; once again the guns seemed as good as lost, for by now it was obvious that another great attack was developing. Shelling was becoming more intense and rifle fire could be heard in increasing volume. Was it possible to get the guns away before the village was taken? I doubted it, for I had seen but one slender and broken line of infantry in front and nowhere any reinforcements. I hastened back towards the advanced Wagon Lines near Fremicourt, two and a half miles away, and there I quickly collected four teams and limbers and two gunners. No one else was available except the drivers in charge of the other horses, and obviously they could not be spared to help us. With this small party I returned at the trot to Vêlu. Firing had now re-opened on the village of Lebuquiere, half a mile distant, and indeed it amounted to a considerable bombardment with 5.9-inch and heavier stuff, but we reached the guns quite safely, limbered up immediately and then faced homewards. But by now the route which I had previously used to pass between Lebuquiere and Vêlu was under heavy shell fire, and I knew that if a team should be hit, the guns in rear could not hope to pass by it, for the road was very much damaged. Only one way out remained, and that involved some really difficult driving.

When I joined the H.A.C. in 1908, it was as a Driver, and, though never an expert performer, I had always taken a great interest in driving; consequently I had spent much time with my officers in training the drivers of "C" Battery, and can fairly say that I had been very successful, for they were as good as any in France and better than most; indeed, a few months later, one of my teams won the 293rd Brigade Driving and Turn-out Competition, Colonel Main giving them full marks for driving, which was very creditable as the teams in the competition from other batteries were very good indeed. And here we were faced with a practical test of driving. The only certain way of getting out of the village was to go down a road not more than four yards wide, with the wall of the château on the left-hand and on the right a bank over five feet high; a hundred yards down the road there was fortunately a depression in this bank and its height was here only about four feet. Over this part of the bank the guns must go. I explained carefully to the drivers what they had to do, and then sent the best team at it, the others being told to follow in turn. I watched them very anxiously indeed, for if any driver made a mistake—if any horse jibbed—then failure must inevitably follow. A leg over a trace, the wheel made too late, or the turn up the bank made too sharply, and certainly the gun would stick there and possibly overturn, and if either of these things happened it was most unlikely that I could clear it, even if I made use of the only two gunners who were with me and all four centre drivers dismounted. Shells were falling in the wood and on the level crossing, just as they had done the day before, and it was an anxious moment when the first team started off at a trot; presently they broke into a canter and then into a gallop; down the narrow road they went, and as they reached the place where the bank was lowest the lead driver, holding back his hand horse for an instant, swung his ride horse hard round to the right, up the bank they sprang and the centres followed them. During the wheel the traces had been nicely left just slack enough to allow the wheel driver to keep the gun and limber well against the wall on his left hand, and when the proper moment came, he made a fair turn of it and the limber and gun took the bank squarely. An instant later all traces again were taut, and with every horse in the collar, the gun bounced up the bank and into the field of grass beyond. The other three 18-pounders followed in perfect style. It was a great moment. Not only was my anxiety relieved, but I was happy, for a regular battery of Horse Artillery could not have driven its 13-pounders more surely. It was a good end to an important job. With the four guns I returned to the Advanced Wagon Lines.

The remainder of the day was spent there. Guns were overhauled and sights tested. In the afternoon Mackie and I, with one team, set out on a last attempt to recover the abandoned gun, but before we had gone far we found our infantry withdrawing from Beaumetz and to the right of that place, and, as it was clear that the Battery position was now in enemy hands, we gave up the attempt. I was sad at having lost three guns out of seven, but

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felt that things might have been worse, for the two "forward guns" were risked deliberately, and it was good to have cheated the Bosch of four which he must have expected to find waiting for him when he advanced on that morning of March 22nd.

At 7 p.m. I moved the Battery to safer ground, as it was by now coming under long-range shell-fire, which we had escaped until now, whereas all day I had seen other wagon lines in the main valley suffering considerable casualties from the shelling. At 9.30 I received orders from the Colonel to move to Bancourt, one and a-half miles to the S.W., and when we got there I found the rest of my unit in readiness. Here I received reports as to the condition of the Battery, and then at once seized the chance of a little sleep, for the mustard gas of the night before had by now made me feel pretty sick, and I got into my sleeping bag, hoping to get at least a short rest before the next orders to move should reach me. But no sooner had I lain down than instructions arrived to move on to Beaulencourt; this must have been at about 10.30 p.m. (March 22nd). Our journey thither was a difficult one, for I had no local knowledge of this area, and the route, except where it passed through the ruined village of Riencourt, was for the most part over cross country tracks not so good as they usually are in England—and some of these can be pretty difficult to follow in the dark. It traversed ground so much altered by war that if once the way was really lost the chances of finding it again would be small; especially as the night was very dark and mist was forming again. However, using my compass to prevent gross errors of direction and working carefully by the map, I led the Battery successfully to some cross-roads which could just be recognised as such, in Beaulencourt. This village was also a complete ruin, for all the country into which we were now retreating had been the scene of much hard fighting and of long bombardments during the battle of the Somme, and it was quite desolate. The road on which Beaulencourt stands is important, being the main one between Bapaume and Peronne, and therefore the enemy was likely to make special efforts to capture the village and thus upset our lateral communications. In the dark the journey from Bancourt, though the distance was only one and three-quarter miles, had taken a considerable time, but at least we had to be thankful that we had not been fired on, for many heavy shells could be heard falling into Bapaume throughout the night. I got the guns into action and some of the vehicles off the road, but most of them were for the remainder of the night parked close to one side of it. I remember that I was not at all pleased to be told by someone who passed by that Germans were already coming northwards up this road from Peronne. Happily this proved to be untrue, but the rumour did not encourage a sense of security.

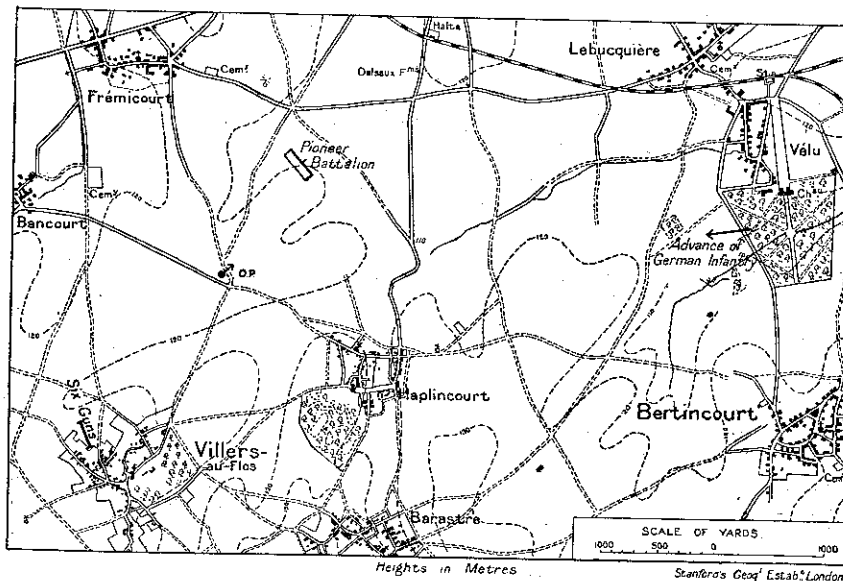
Soon after dawn on March 23rd, having received orders, I chose a position and brought the Battery into action about three-quarters of a mile forward of our halting place, just behind the road between Riencourt and Villers-aux-Flos on the outskirts of the latter village. As soon as the mist began to lift, I went forward with signallers and chose an observation post just in front of the road between Bancourt and Haplincourt, and midway between those two places. This was a mile and a-quarter in front of the Battery, and, though it gave a splendid view of all the countryside up to Velu Wood, yet it had the disadvantage of requiring a great length of telephone wire, a fault which was to become painfully obvious on the next day. But so long as it was occupied, I had at least the satisfaction of knowing that no frontal attack could develop against us without my knowledge, and I was still cheerfully confident that our flanks were secure, as indeed they were for the moment.

During this day (March 23rd) I went to see Colonel Main. Riding Prince and taking with me one horse-holder, I went off to Fremicourt, for the Colonel was now installed in what had recently been Divisional Headquarters. The village was being shelled with salvos from two 5.9-inch howitzers. But the Bosch is very regular in his habits and, when settled down on a target, he rarely varies range or line or time intervals, so, leaving my horse outside the village, I made a dash for it, lying flat whenever I heard a salvo coming to avoid splinters, and thus soon reached the dugouts, where I found the Colonel. He was anxious about "A" and "B" Batteries, for it seemed most unlikely that their guns could be saved, and as the event proved they were lost on that day, after putting up a fine show against advancing infantry. Later



after I had left the Colonel, I went forward dismounted to Delsaux Farm, doing from there some registration with flag signalling to the Battery, and afterwards I had a look at the infantry thereabouts, and it was clear that our left was being heavily pressed ; and so was our right, for on that day Peronne, eleven miles to the South, was lost.

We did not change our position during March 23rd, but did lots of harassing firing. I remember finding with delight supplies of biscuits in some deserted huts and getting them collected for the Battery, for food was rather scarce owing to delay in delivering rations, but I myself had not yet recovered sufficiently from the gas to enjoy them. That night there seemed a good chance of sleeping, but it was not to be, and before long I was summoned to the Colonel, for he had now moved back from Fremicourt to our neighbourhood. At 3 a.m. on March 24th the Battery opened a slow rate of fire on ground N.W. of Beugny, where the enemy was considered to be forming for attack at dawn.



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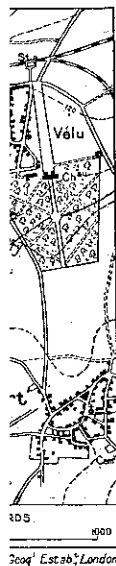
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### CHAPTER III.

During the morning of this, the fourth day of the battle, we remained in the same position, but now I had six guns again, for in the afternoon of the previous day, in addition to one which had been issued to me from the 51st Division to replace one damaged during the day, a section, that is two guns, had joined from "A" Battery, for they had been able to draw them from Ordnance. This was cheering, and during the days that followed "A" and "B" Batteries, who were now no longer equipped with guns, did all they could to keep up an abundant ammunition supply to "C" Battery. Once again the day had opened on a countryside wrapped in the thick mist which, it will be remembered, so helped the enemy at that period, and which helped him even better when he attacked in Flanders on the River Lys. When it had cleared, I went forward on foot in the direction of Beugny, which at that time seemed fairly quiet, though, from a study of Haig's despatch, I believe the enemy had already taken that place. I returned to the Battery and at 12.30 p.m. went forwards again, with two signallers, to the O.P. already mentioned as having been selected the day before; but when we got there we were pretty heavily shelled for about three-quarters of an hour, so, leaving the signallers to repair the telephone wire, which had become cut by this shelling, I walked on another three-quarters of a mile, for out to the left front I saw some of our infantry digging a trench on a little hill. They proved to be a company of a Pioneer Battalion, troops which were not usually employed in the front line. I always wore the bronze letters "H.A.C." on my shoulders in addition to the regimental buttons, and I remember being considerably bucked when the Captain in charge said, "It's all right if the H.A.C. are here." But it was not all right. For, as he and I stood looking down over the gentle grass slopes that lay between us and Vélú Wood, he suddenly touched my arm and pointed eastwards. And indeed it was a surprising sight; a few moments before all had seemed comparatively peaceful and no place more so than Vélú Wood. This presents on the west a straight side, 900 yards long, bounded by a hedge. A moment before this had been only a hedge; now it had suddenly become a continuous grey line of infantry advancing, with about three paces interval between files, and, as the foremost cleared the wood, others followed them. It was very impressive, for the ranks extended for more than half a mile; and what a target! They were 3,500 yards away from me. The range from the guns was a bit long, it is true, being about 5,800 yards, but H.E. would have had a wonderful effect from six guns at Gun Fire.

Obviously, at the moment I could do nothing, for I was a long way from my telephone, and so, having exchanged good-byes with the Pioneers, I hurried at top speed back to the O.P. But alas! there were no signallers to be seen anywhere and no telephone; they had worked almost back to the Battery in repairing the wire and had not yet returned to the O.P. It was tragic enough to miss such a target, and more tragic still not to be able to support the Pioneer company. One British 18-pounder Battery was firing at the line of Bosch infantry from somewhere far away on my right, but alone they could not stop the attack; neither could two of our tanks which I saw advancing from that side. I trust the Company Commander of the Pioneers realised all this promptly, for, while we two were talking together, I had noticed that there was no one at all visible on our right, in which direction the country was quite open for  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles, and as our left was certainly retreating, he was entirely "in the air." It was useless to stay where I was, and so I hurried on, but I had to cover a total distance of two miles to reach the Battery, and it was a very long and depressing journey until, when nearly there, I met Lieut. Morris going forward mounted with some signallers to start a



new O.P. about 600 yards in front of the Battery. I told him my news and then went on to the guns. When I got there, I learnt that I had been given up as missing, and certainly it was a not unreasonable view to take, for there had been a lot of shelling and I had been out of touch for a long time. During my absence the Battery had not been too comfortable, for in the morning they had been shelled from the direction of Barastre, that is from the east, and several horses had been hit, and at midday eight enemy aeroplanes had come over low down, and one driver and a few more horses had been wounded.

The Colonel arrived just as I reached the guns and gave me the order to retire at once, and so at 4 p.m., having called in Morris and his signallers, we "front limbered up," and moved off, just at the very moment when the position again came under shell fire, no doubt as a result of the aeroplane reconnaissance. To move out of the position it was necessary to do so from the left flank, the teams coming up from the left rear and then in front of the guns. I kept the Battery firing throughout this movement, each gun stopping only for an instant whenever any team crossed its line of fire, and "Cease Fire" was not ordered to the left flank gun until the last limber, No. 6, was in position beside it ready to "front limber up," all the other guns being by then withdrawn. Thus fire was maintained until the last possible moment, to the credit of all the men and horses concerned. It was a very good thing that we moved when we did, for we learnt the next day that by then the enemy had already taken Villers-au-Flos; and the centre of the village was less than half a mile from our right-hand gun. And worse still, by the afternoon of that day (March 24th) they were well across the Bapaume-Peronne road near Le Transloy, and, at the time we pulled out from our position, their infantry were less than three miles away on our right rear. It was on this day that the gap between the 3rd and 5th Armies developed and then became serious.\*

Ogilvie saw something of the danger here, for, after leaving Beaulencourt, he was detailed to endeavour to locate some ammunition wagons which had gone astray under a junior N.C.O. He took a track leading slightly south from Beaulencourt, and, finding it jammed with all sorts of transport, had to ride over the broken country alongside it. There was a fairly high crest to the left with a long slope to the westward, the top being about 700 yards from where he was. Quite unexpectedly, tanks began to appear in retreat over the crest, each tank having a square of some thirty Highlanders fighting a rearguard action around it. The enemy infantry soon appeared in pursuit over the crest, advancing in open order, our tanks firing at them steadily, as also were the surrounding infantry. As it was impossible for anything to travel faster than at a walk, it seemed at the moment that all the wheeled traffic on the track must eventually be captured, and there were miles of it. Our wagons could not be found, for they had gone further south to Le Sars and we saw no more of them until they rejoined us at Fonquevillers on March 25th, so Ogilvie rejoined the Battery alone.

In the Journal of the United Service Institution for May, 1924, appeared the translation of an article by a Major Holthausen entitled "The German 24th Division in the offensive of March, 1918." This officer was commanding a battalion and writes very accurately about its operations. He describes how, after being in support for the first two days of the battle, they passed through Doignies on March 23rd and by 10 a.m. attacked Vélou, which they took by 1 p.m. That night they bivouacked in Vélou Wood. I think his battalion must have been one of those which I saw as they began their advance from the wood. He speaks of the 139th and 179th Regiments attacking side by side, towards Haplincourt, his battalion being one of them. And he describes the British tank attack upon his battalion which I saw in its beginning, and how his machine gunners, firing armour piercing ammunition, destroyed one tank as it crossed the skyline 50 yards in front of them. In five days' fighting his Division captured 1,300 prisoners, 5 guns, 9 tanks and 250 machine guns. Their casualties were 141 officers and a little over 3,000 men. After describing the fight with some of our tanks he says: "The advance was resumed and the resistance of the enemy around Villers-au-Flos stubborn as it was, was overcome before nightfall, which found us in full

\*Haig's Despatch dated July 20th, 1918. Para. 30.

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possession of our objectives, Beaulencourt and the Bapaume-Peronne road in its vicinity." It is clear, therefore, that our retirement was well-timed; indeed, all through the Retreat the Colonel always kept us in action until the moment arrived when a retirement could no longer be delayed; and that is good soldiering.

As we got clear of the shells and passed through Beaulencourt, it was evident that there was a long and difficult march before us; it actually worked out at nine miles, and half of it was done in the dark. But I felt very thankful that we were a complete unit and in good form, for the gunners and drivers and horses had had a pretty good rest during the day (March 4th).

It was 4 p.m. (March 24th) when we limbered up and said good-bye to Villers-au-Flos. Our orders were to proceed to Ligny-Tilloy. This village was only three miles away, but those three miles took us two hours. For part of the way the road was only a single track of railway sleepers, and this route was filled with a continuous line of traffic, like Bond Street on an afternoon in June. No vehicle could leave the track, for we had now entered well into the country of the Somme Battle of 1916, and the surface of much of the ground was composed entirely of shell craters through which it was not easy to pass, even on a single mount or on foot; so we were very pleased when presently we had done with the sleepers and were no longer quite so jammed together.

I know that, according to the Drill Book, the O.C. Battery should come last when retiring, but in all these retirements, except one on the following day, I led the Battery myself. In the present instance, I began by following in rear, but later on I saw that the route had been mistaken and that we were heading in the wrong direction—a mistake that was very easy for anyone to make, and I daresay I should have made it myself. But it showed me that I ought to be in front, for a real bad error in such shattered country might easily have placed the Battery in a position from which it would have been extremely difficult to extricate it, for if it had become necessary to reverse and go back by the way we had come, there would have been very little chance of turning the vehicles round by "wheeling" them in such a rough ground; it would have been necessary to unhook the teams and unlimber the carriages, and although we had often practised this, yet it was clearly to be avoided as a manoeuvre which always takes time, especially on bad ground. Fortunately, we went on steadily though slowly, and at 6 p.m. reached Ligny-Thilloy, a village just like all the others in that it consisted of a pile of rubbish.

Just outside the village and to the north of it are three cross-roads on the top of a little hill, and here was a sight that made one think a bit. A battery of 6-inch Howitzers was in action firing briskly, and in so far a cause of good cheer. But it was a grim fact that the two sections were in action almost trail to trail. In other words, two Howitzers were firing due north, and the other two were firing in almost exactly the opposite direction, namely, south-south-west. The peculiar disposition of these four Howitzers made it rather painfully obvious that the situation was serious. We passed them and moved on a few hundred yards more to the north, and there came into action beside the road; in half an hour the Howitzers had limbered up and left the position. It should be realised that 6-inch Howitzers are very heavy, and, of course, much less mobile than 18-pounders, and so need more time for journeys. At our new position we found mountains of ammunition awaiting us, for the wagons of the other Batteries and the Brigade Ammunition Column had dumped beside the road about 1,200 rounds. From the map I laid out lines of fire on the important cross-roads in Beaulencourt, the village which we had passed through only two hours before, and on the roads entering it from the east. The guns opened fire at once on these targets, the object being, of course, to check the advance of the enemy and so enable the retirement of our troops to be effected. And, judging by Major Holthausen's account quoted earlier, we were certainly firing in the right direction. I remember that I was terribly tired and would have given much for a few hours of real rest, or indeed of any sort of rest, but so would many another at that time. At 9 p.m., I received orders to retire, and by then most of the ammunition has been fired. We and the two 4.5-inch Howitzers of "D"

Battery of our Brigade, who had been in action near by, were once again quite the last units to retire from anywhere in that area. After  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles we passed through Gréville, which had just recently been a casualty clearing station. Here were a large number of tanks, perhaps 15 or 20, and some supporting infantry with them. These were the first reserves I had seen for a long time, and though they were all too few, yet their presence made one feel a little less lonely. We were marching to Achiet-le-Petit. The road to it from Gréville was very easy to follow on the map, but not so very easy to follow on the ground, for by now it was quite dark. I made a mistake here and bore off to the right, that is to the north, and had I continued unbudgingly on that road and not chanced to meet some kind friend, I should have marched the Battery straight into the hands of the Bosch, for he was by now well round the north of Bapaume. Fortunately, before "C" Battery was fully committed to it, I realised the error of my ways and confirmed my impressions by consulting my luminous compass. The road I wanted was little more than a track, but happily it was found and proved correct, and off we started again. As we moved along, it was definitely unpleasant to find several light shells whizzing over our heads. Now shells in the dark always sound much nearer than they really are, but their unwelcomeness on this occasion was not so much due to their apparent proximity, as to the fact that their trajectory was almost exactly at right angles to our line of march, for they came from the direction of Sapignies. This confirmed the impression which had been created by seeing the Howitzers in action trail to trail, that the Bosch, on our little bit of front at any rate, was getting round our flanks.

We reached Achiet-le-Petit at midnight on March 24th-25th, and here we had luck. Until a few days ago this ruined place had been well away in back areas, and as I entered it, reflecting on its complete desolation, for there was not a soul anywhere, I was much pleased to find some water troughs nearly full; so I gave the order to park the guns and ammunition wagons near the troughs and to water horses. The need of water was always a serious problem at times like this, especially as the Somme country has few streams, being, for the most part, high, rolling grassland. The difficulty of finding water was very great, both during the retreat and again in August when we advanced through these very same places, and watering animals required much hard work and patience on the part of both officers and men, and of the horses too.

Whilst the horses were feeding, the men got a chance of resting, and most of them went to sleep immediately, and gladly would I have joined them, but whereas the gunners and drivers were able to drop down and go to sleep whenever we halted, and the horses slept as they stood in their traces (the poor animals were only off-saddled twice during these six days, though the drivers did what they could to care for them), yet some of us had further responsibilities, and the O.C. of a Battery probably as many as most people of his rank. A Company Commander can post his sentries, and, having made other arrangements for defence, can then, if he is lucky, sleep for a spell until he is needed, but a battery at such a time is either on the move or in action and in the latter case is either firing or getting ready to fire, and all these things require the close attention of its O.C.

On this particular occasion it was necessary that I should get into touch with Colonel Main. From the time we left Villers-au-Flos, and for the rest of the retreat, he was never very far away, though very often he was out in front between us and the Bosch; and so, leaving the Battery in enviable peacefulness, I started off hopefully to where I was told I should find him, but I failed to do so, though from 1 a.m. onwards I wandered about for more than an hour. I remember exploring a huge canteen which only a few days ago had been well away in back areas. Now, although tins of biscuits and cigarettes still stood on the counters, it was entirely deserted, except for a few sappers who were about to set fire to it, and shortly afterwards its flames lit up the night. I may remark that these nights were very dark indeed, but I had an electric torch, and it was just as useful as that used by a police constable when he makes his night rounds; with its aid one could study a map or follow a track without making even as many mistakes as often occur in finding the route over a moraine and on to the glacier when on the way up a mountain

in the Alps. Having been unsuccessful in finding the Colonel, I returned to the Battery and, soon after I got there at 3 a.m., orders arrived to retire again.

This time it was to a "map square" position, that is to say, a reference to a spot on the ground where certain lines on the map intersect. In daylight it is usually a simple matter to find such a "map reference," for example, it may be a point where two roads cross, or at some building easily recognised, and anyhow with a prismatic compass the problem can always be solved. But in the dark it is not so easy, and in this particular instance the position which I was ordered to occupy was in open country, on the side of a small hill about half a mile S.W. of Achiet-le-Petit. In spite of the darkness, we got there pretty well, indeed at dawn we found ourselves only about a hundred yards wrong. The method I used was to identify a certain corner of the village which could also be found on the map, and then walk away from it by compass bearing for an estimated distance, and note that the ground over which one passed agreed more or less with the contour lines. But it was impossible to be certain where I was, and so, although I moved the Battery at once, I did not actually bring the guns into action until daylight, which, by the way, occurs earlier in that part of France than it does in England in March. It was intensely cold, and one stamped about trying to keep warm. But dawn (March 25th) was near, and when it came I laid out S.O.S. lines for the guns on an area W. of Gréville (for I did not know that at that time we still held the place), and brought the Battery into action "in observation," as it is called, that is to say, not firing, but ready to fire. We had some food now, tea and bread and jam, and although all this happened ten years ago, yet I can clearly remember how very welcome it was, for the cold was intense and we had all been rather short of food during the past days, both on account of the difficulties of supply and of the lack of opportunities to settle down to eat. I am pretty sure that this was the first real meal I had eaten since breakfast on the first day of the battle, partly owing to not getting many chances, and also owing to having been so sickened by the mustard gas that I did not care for food in any form.

At 10 a.m. we got fresh orders and were pleased to find that they were of a cheerful kind; for we were to advance a mile to a position N.E. of Irles. There the Battery came into action on open grass slopes, in a countryside meant for grazing cattle. It was the sort of position that I liked, as indeed were most of those which we occupied, namely, not near any cross-roads or in a village likely to draw the enemy's fire, but out in the open country and on good soil, where shelter trenches could be at once dug for the protection of the detachments, a method of protection which I was always very particular about; and, of course, the guns and their flashes were concealed from the direct view of the enemy by rising ground in front. From this position we did some good shooting at enemy infantry advancing against Loupart Wood, for Gréville was taken by noon (March 25th). This firing was directed by Colonel Main and Lieutenant Welsh, who were out in front, and in close touch with the infantry holding the front edge of the little wood; I myself remained at the Battery.

Soon after mid-day, it again became clear that things were not going well. For, looking across the village on our left, we could see our infantry retiring from Achiet-le-Grand, one and a half miles away. Achiet-le-Grand is a station on the railway between Arras and Amiens, and it was specially important as being the junction for the branch to Bapaume, so that its loss was clearly very serious. The lines ran in the bottom of the valley about 600 yards behind the guns, and I was presently startled by unexpected explosions from that direction; these proved to be due, not to the enemy, but to our own Engineers, who were blowing up sections of the railway track to prevent the Bosch from using them. It was a further sign of the seriousness of things. A little later one of these men walked up to the Battery. He was a large American sapper, enlisted as one of our private soldiers; he carried outside him a rifle with the bayonet fixed and some cartridges, and inside him a large quantity of whisky and a burning zeal to discover the enemy. I think it must have been the duty of burning the canteen the night before which had so fired his courage, for he asked me more than once just exactly where the Bosch might be found, explaining that he was finding demolitions

too dull. I gave him precise details, and, having shaken me warmly by the hand, he set off in the direction indicated, though rather slowly. I saw him no more, but I fancy that discretion took control over valour before he had gone very far.

We had by now dropped our range to about 2,300 yards and were firing on Loupart Wood itself, which our infantry had by this time evacuated. It was about 1 p.m., or a little later, and other batteries which had been in action in the neighbourhood had all disappeared; we were entirely alone on that long, open stretch of hillside, the last battery in position, our six guns firing slowly. The Wagon Line had been formed about 200 yards to the left rear and it consisted of the six gun-teams and limbers, the six teams of the firing battery wagons (for the first line wagons were away with the Brigade Ammunition Column), the officers' chargers, and the single mounts of the sergeants, signallers and horse-holders. A battery commander is always glad at such a time to have his whole Firing Battery under his hand, ready for a move at any moment in any direction. It struck me then how very like it all was to many of those days of firing practice which I had so much enjoyed on Salisbury Plain in times of peace. But the present scene had also a decidedly unpleasant yet close resemblance to those pre-war days, for now, as then, there was not a single infantryman in sight anywhere. There was no doubt still a thin, shattered line of them out somewhere in front, but they were the other side of the hill, and we were quite alone on our side of it, not even the Gunnery Instruction Staff were there to comfort us! But soon a mounted man appeared in front, galloping back over the hill towards us. He brought me orders from Colonel Main to retire at once. But even as I gave the order: "To retire Rear Limber Up," and the signal, "W.T.—G.L." (wagon teams, gun limbers) was passed, the first shell whizzed over us, and fell between the advancing teams. No doubt the enemy aeroplanes, who had several times been over us, had once again reported our position; but the shell did no harm and only encouraged smart work on everyone's part, and we moved off in line to the right rear, at the trot, so getting nicely clear before the enemy battery really got going on the empty position.

We next occupied for a short while the place where we had been in observation at dawn that day (March 25th), but an hour later a further retirement was ordered towards Puisieux-au-Mont.

By reading Haig's Despatches, one can see how serious the situation was that afternoon; not so bad as that of the Fifth Army, of course, but quite bad enough. For by now there was a gap in our line extending from Gréville for seven miles southwards to Montauban. The right of the Fourth Corps of the Third Army (Byng) was being pushed back, and had now lost touch with the Fifth Corps on its right, which was being carried away in the retreat of the Fifth Army (Gough) more to the South. This gap had begun to form on March 24th, when we were at Villers-au-Flos, but was by now much more defined, and there was a real danger that these two Armies might become separated. Of course, we did not then realize how bad things were, nor did we know that during the afternoon Courcellette had been lost and that, having taken this, the enemy was now advancing towards Pys and Irlès. He was not far from the latter place at the time (3 p.m.) when we began to move towards Puisieux.

I remember well that march of one and a-half miles, for it was terribly slow, the roads being crowded with ammunition carts and with infantrymen, whom we gradually overtook. Infantrymen retiring after five days of such fighting were a sad spectacle. They were wandering along the road, wearily, in little groups, men of one regiment mixed up with those of another, and this confusion of battalions was particularly noticeable because some were Highlanders in kilts and some were from English units. There was, of course, no sort of panic and each man still carried his rifle and his kit. But they were dead beat, and utterly "fed up." As one passed in and out amongst these exhausted men, toiling along the rough track, one felt ashamed to be riding a horse. I do not think I saw an officer anywhere, except at one place where a young staff officer was rather excitedly trying to form a line. It was a useless task, for, though the men stopped at once and faced about, yet he could not give them any detailed orders as to occupying positions and as there was no enemy in sight they felt his efforts futile, and presently,

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as more tired troops drifted up, they wandered on again towards the West. It must be realized that there were by now very few infantry officers left, and that some units in actual contact with the enemy were quite out of touch with their own Infantry Brigade Headquarters. Indeed, I know that during this and the following day much of the information that got through, on our little bit of front, was collected by Colonel Main, as a result of personal visits to the infantry in the front line, and then transmitted by his orderlies direct to Fourth Corps Headquarters.

We moved slowly along the road until at last we left it and came into action near some deserted huts just outside and to the east of the ruins of Puisieux-au-Mont. This village had been the scene of much fighting in 1916 and the ground was so covered with shell holes that it was not easy to find a position. Presently, however, we got the guns into action on the pitted grass slopes of one side of the valley, about 200 yards south of the road which enters the village from the east. I chose an O.P. on the other side of the valley, north of the road and 400 yards to the left rear of the line of guns. The lines of fire having been laid out towards Irlés and a telephone line arranged between the O.P. and the Battery, I gave the order, "Stand Easy." A few moments later, looking at the Battery through my glasses from the O.P. I could not see a man anywhere, except the signallers. They had all got into shell holes in little groups of three and four, covered themselves over with blankets from the wagons and were fast asleep. The men were by now utterly worn out. The gunners slept whenever there was a "Stand Easy," and at night the drivers went to sleep in their saddles as soon as their teams got off rough ground and were travelling smoothly along anything resembling a road. I do not think the men felt that they were in any way beaten, for the moment any call was made upon them—as, for example, when rapid and accurate fire was necessary—they became as alert as any Battery Commander could possibly wish. Whilst they rested, I stood where I was, with my sergeant-major and two signallers, feeling rather like a father watching over his family; soon the last of the retiring infantry had passed us by, and "C" Battery was once more alone.



## CHAPTER IV.

I had taken the rather unusual course of selecting an Observation Post in rear of the Battery, because from there one had a very wide field of view; this was important because by now I was really worried about the safety of our flanks, for there seemed to be no infantry at all.

One officer, with a signaller, had been sent out towards our right to see if he could get in touch with any of our troops in that direction, and another had gone forward over the ground directly in front of the Battery. Both returned after about three-quarters of an hour to say that they could not find anyone at all, either artillery or infantry. This sounded bad, as I myself had observed the retirement which had been taking place on our left, and my officers now reported no troops in front or on the right. Moreover, we had not been in touch with anyone on that side since our first day at Villers-auflos. But though I was anxious, it was not until many weeks later, when I reflected upon the events of the day which followed, that I realised how entirely alone we were that evening. It then became clear to me that we were quite by ourselves and out in front of all other troops when at 8 p.m. on March 25th, we "pulled out" of this position at Puisieux. "Although Colonel Main had, unknown to us, been watching our right flank from the village of Puisieux during the evening."

A study of Haig's despatch\* makes it certain that for a few hours on that evening "C" Battery was, all unknowingly, the extreme right-hand corner of the unbroken British front line, all the infantry having retired past us; and that south of the Battery's No. 1 gun there was a breach of more than seven miles. For things had not gone well with our Armies on that day; the attempt to hold the line of the river Ancre had failed, owing to our troops being few in numbers, much exhausted, and without reserves. Had we realised how honourable was our position, we might have been earlier in saying good-bye to it! As it was, after a period of inactivity we opened fire on the roads round about the village of Irlles, this shooting being done from the map, and after that there was another "stand easy."

The day was fading and I was wondering when I should get orders to retire, for by now we were all ready to move, some wagons which had been sent off earlier in search of ammunition having returned successfully. I had examined the sky line before us from time to time, and now, as I put up my glasses, suddenly on the crest of a hill in front I saw enemy infantry advancing towards us, their figures showing clearly against the evening sky. "Action" brought every man to his post at once, the guns were already laid nearly right for line, a switch of only about five degrees being necessary to engage this fresh target; the angle of sight and range (about 2,600 yards) were easily got from the map, and in a few moments the Battery was at "Gun Fire." We were firing shrapnel and the "corrector" was a good one, giving nice, low bursts, so that our fire was very effective, and as I watched it, making the alterations in range when necessary, I had the great satisfaction of seeing the slow advance gradually come to a standstill and then become changed into a rapid scurry back over the crest and into the obscurity of the sloping ground behind it, whither we followed the enemy with searching fire. Had they only known it, the check was but a light one, and yet I believe that it made that enemy advance-guard think the ground was strongly held and must only be attacked when more supports became available. Anyhow, I saw no more of them, but had I done so, I should have been far from pleased, for soon after this, at 8 p.m., orders to retire reached me, and we began a very slow and difficult trek, more than a mile long, across country blown to blazes in the heavy fighting of 1916. We traversed it in "column of route,"

\* Dated July 20, 1918, para. 39.

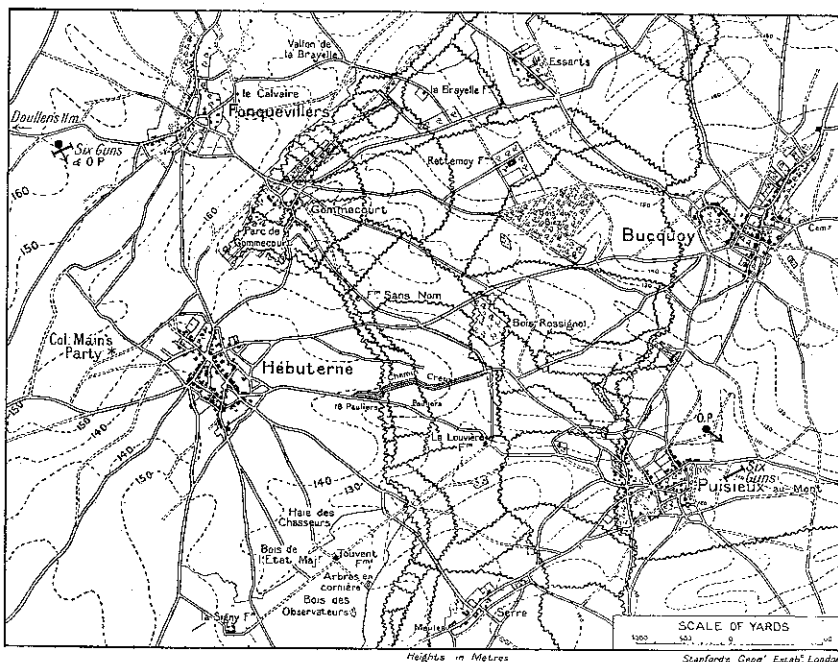
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the teams moving at a slow walk, threading a way in and out of shell craters and the heaps of rusty barbed wire which every here and there offered a further hindrance to rapid progress. I had chosen this line of retreat because, though by no means attractive, I could at least see that it existed, whereas the ground the other side of the village was unknown to me, and I had an uncomfortable feeling that if we took that direction, we might find ourselves welcomed by figures in the grey uniforms of Germany. But I began to doubt if I had chosen well, when presently, from where I was riding in rear of the Battery, I saw a gun sink into a huge shell-hole. Promptly all gunners got to work on it with drag ropes, and after a struggle they got it out, and the column once again moved on. During the episode I had been anxiously watching the high ground to our rear, still just visible in the fast passing day. Were we about to hear a machine gun open fire, or would an enemy battery get on to us whilst we were stuck on this beastly piece of shattered ground? But everything remained peaceful and by the time we reached the Gommecourt road it was dark. The remainder of the journey was uneventful, except that soon after we had passed through that place we found a dump of forage beside the road, and stopped for a few minutes to put some sacks of oats and trusses of hay on to each ammunition wagon. At the weary hour of midnight we reached the Brigade Wagon Lines, which had been formed just west of Fonquevillers. I learnt afterwards that our return to the fold was something of a surprise, as it was thought that we had all "gone West," or rather East into enemy hands. But at the moment I was too interested in the fact that hot tea and rum were being offered me to bother about the past, and I speedily dealt with these luxuries. Half-an-hour later, without taking off anything except my British Warm, I crawled into my valise, which had been spread out beneath the Officers' Mess Cart, and went to sleep. But at 1 a.m., Rimmer, our Adjutant, wakened me. It seemed that the Colonel was lost, probably dead or a prisoner, and that, as orders from Division had arrived, I, being the senior Major, must issue instructions to the Brigade to move off at dawn. Now I was very conscious that there was no time to waste, that dawn was not far off, and that these orders were very important, for I knew better than anyone how near the enemy were, and so I made a very special effort to cope with the situation, but it was a terrible undertaking. For Rimmer was quite as tired as I was. We were crouched under the Mess Cart in a little circle of light given by a candle which burnt steadily and restfully in the still air, he writing whilst I dictated, and it took us an hour to compose about ten lines. Whilst I was studying the map, trying to comprehend its obvious truths, and then thinking out what to say, he dropped off to sleep, and when at last I had succeeded in framing a sentence, I found I had to wake him up; and so soon as I had succeeded in rousing him and started him off writing the orders, then at once I slept. He went to sleep three times and I went to sleep twice, how long for I don't know, but on the last occasion I was only reawakened when my fingers began to be burnt, for the papers I was holding had caught fire in the candle. But the job was done at last, and I remember no more until the first light of March 26th woke me to the full consciousness of another day.

But what a splendid promise that day held, at any rate to begin with. First of all there was no mist, and very little firing was to be heard from any direction. Then there was a real breakfast in peace and comfort, followed by a shave and a wash, and no real need to hurry over either. All this because new orders had come in from Division, and jolly good orders too: The enemy's advance was stopped and he was not expected to attack that day. Batteries were to advance to the high ground south of Hébuterne, and choose positions there, just behind that crest where our front line had stood in 1916, before the Battle of the Somme was opened. As soon as the guns were in action, Battery Commanders were to see that the men got some rest and a chance to clean up themselves and their equipment. This was really bright news; clearly the day was going to be in every way perfect; I was greatly cheered, and quickly there faded from my mind the memory of infantry advancing, seen against the evening sky.

At about 6.30 a.m., Colonel Main arrived, very tired, of course, but—fortunately for England, as will presently appear—neither dead nor a prisoner.

He remained for a few minutes only, but gave me orders to send out two Officers' Mounted Patrols, each of them to consist of one officer and three gunners. One was to go forward through Hébuterne, the other was to explore Colincamps, a village just over four miles to the south. They were to be armed with rifles and to act as cavalry scouts and, as there were no infantry, it was their job to ascertain just exactly where the enemy was and what his wishes might be. I started them off and then gave Mackie orders to advance the Battery towards Hébuterne, whilst I went on ahead with a mounted staff of six signallers to join the Colonel.



My horse, Prince, had been worked fairly hard during the last few days, so I was riding a rather fussy little bay mare instead, and it was very pleasant trotting for about a mile over open country, and across a long, straight road lined with trees, towards the high ground in front, which entirely shut out all distant view in that direction. The road we crossed, and another road which lay behind us, was covered with transport, ammunition carts, G.S. wagons, and led horses all jogging along cheerfully; a 60-pounder battery was amongst them, its teams of eight huge horses pulling those splendid heavy guns along slowly. It was a typical "back area" scene, and the absence of infantry fitted the piece nicely. Up the easy grass slopes we went, towards the long, level skyline, and about a hundred yards short of it we found Colonel Main and his small staff. He had not long arrived and was still engaged with the Colonels of three other artillery brigades in dividing up this stretch of ground, nearly a mile in length. It offered very suitable gun positions, for the hill continued to rise steadily from where we stood and so gave ample cover from the front. It was going to take some time to get everything settled, for in addition to the Colonels and staffs there were a lot of battery commanders with their own staffs awaiting orders; in all, perhaps some fifty or sixty officers and men, with their horses, were there assembled. It was about 7 a.m. and I was just getting my instructions from the Colonel, when suddenly a gunner subaltern came running back towards us from the crest a hundred yards in front, and as he drew near he called out, "Do you know the Bosch are just the other side of the hill?"

This really was a shock: only a few minutes before everything had been going smoothly forward to the beginning of a perfect day, and now in another moment we were to see enemy infantry against the skyline front, and then we

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should probably all be blotted out at once ! Orders to mount were heard all round, and very swiftly all the officers and staffs were up and galloping down the slope, back to their own batteries. Honestly, I am certain that this was done more from a desire to clear the batteries back into safety, than to keep a whole skin. For it was obvious to everyone that if once the enemy reached that crest, there was before him a wonderful prize. The wide open valley was crammed with helpless transport of every possible kind, a few machine guns in action against it and awful chaos would result. But more important still, if he once gained the line of the hill, he would be even more strongly placed than he was before the Battle of the Somme, for from it he would have an uninterrupted view for many miles to the N.W., and all movements in that area would be under his eye. It is certain that had he actually seen so much, he would promptly have recognised the lack of our reserves, and the bright hopes of further success if his advance were boldly pressed at once.

In describing how rapidly the once cheerful party of gunners had dispersed from the ridge, I have not included the 293rd Army Brigade, or rather what was left of it, namely, Colonel Main and his tiny staff, ourselves from "C" Battery, and a small party from the two howitzers of "D" Battery. I, personally, was entirely willing to mount at any moment and pass on, but I did not get the order to do so, because Colonel Main, alone of all of us who were there that day, did the right thing—a very obvious thing to do, and yet by everyone else completely neglected. He called out to me to wait and then ran up to the crest. I saw him reach it, pull out his glasses for a brief look, and then come running back again. Orders followed at once. The enemy infantry were there all right, skirmishers in front and about two battalions following, but, what was all important, they were not in actual fact just the other side of the hill, but still crossing the bottom of the valley, which lies south of the village of Hébuterne, on their way to mount the gentle grassy slopes and over the crest to where we stood. I was to bring "C" Battery into action and to open fire into the valley. Off I went at the gallop with my men, down the hill towards the Battery which I could see approaching. Before me was a wild scene ; all the transport was reversing and trying to clear themselves away to the rear and one of the 60 pounders had been upset in attempting this ; the need was pressing, for already the tale was spreading that enemy cavalry were through. When I reached the road I found that it was jammed tight with transport, and I halted for a moment to see what best to do. I had faced round to the front, and my mare was standing on the top of a bank just over four feet high above the road ; someone galloped past us and brushed her nose, she threw up her head and jumped back and her hind feet slipped over the edge. Down we went into the road, and as she fell on me she neatly twisted herself almost clear, but just planted one fore-foot on the inside of my right knee. It did not hurt much, though I was a bit shaken, but I was disgusted to see a great swelling of the knee-joint appear immediately. Clearly some biggish blood vessels had been ruptured. After a little time someone gave me a pull from a whisky flask and presently I felt well enough to stand up. Then I saw that Mackie had taken charge with fine promptitude, and seeing that the Battery could not cross the blocked road, he had wheeled the head of the column to the rear and was forming line on the right. During this manœuvre an ammunition wagon passed me and I halted it ; someone helped me on to its limber, and there I rode whilst "C" Battery came into "Action Rear." Then I climbed down, put the nearest gun on to its line, and gave the extent of target to the section commanders, who threw their guns into the right direction. This is known as the "B.C.-lays-the-first-gun method." It is only intended to be used with targets which can be seen, but certainly here it was very quick and answered well. The angle of sight and range were got from the map and we were immediately at Gun Fire. Really it was a good show, done quickly when everyone was terribly tired, and done accurately, for Colonel Main and Lieutenant Greenfield, who had joined him, observed our fire from the crest and they saw that it came down where it was wanted. They were having an anxious time up there. The Colonel had found a few scattered infantrymen, about twenty ; these he had formed into a firing line and told to open up for all they were worth on the advancing enemy. It was not easy to make much of a

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show with so few rifles, especially as some of the other batteries had now got going and were firing, not into the valley beyond the hill as we were, but on to the crest itself, and this did not encourage the few infantry there to good marksmanship! But the Colonel kept them at it, and presently signallers made things clear to the guns behind, and they lengthened their range.

And so, on that morning of March 26th, 1918, the Bosch was stopped on our little, but very important bit of front; and stopped for good and all, for they never advanced any further. No doubt they thought that we were in strength and that supports would be necessary before the ridge could be assaulted successfully; and so they waited, and waited until success was out of reach. It was a great show, and just as I love to think that "C" Battery played a great part in it, so I treasure the memory of the man to whom the whole of the credit belongs.

After our first very intense burst of gun fire, we presently slowed down, and gradually got more settled. Greenfield was now established in front in an O.P. and we had lamp signalling from him to the guns, so that fire could be accurately corrected. As showing how tired everyone was, I may mention that one of my best signallers was unable to read the Morse from flag or lamp, and became quite incoherent in the attempt. He had to have several days' rest before he recovered and could again do the signalling that was really second nature to him.

Presently Colonel Main came back and gave us orders to retire. It was about 11.30 a.m. and I was by now dead lame. My knee was so distended that it was almost bursting through my riding breeches. It was clear that I was useless to everyone, and so I handed over command to Mackie, and was then helped by a gunner to climb into an infantry ammunition cart passing along the road nearby. Never before and never since have I felt so unhappy as I did just then. To leave my Battery in such a crisis, no reserves anywhere and the enemy just over the hill in front, and also on the right and on the left—for Hughes had run into them in Colineamps, and one of his men had been knocked off his horse by a bullet striking the butt of the rifle slung across his back; and so had Morgan in front of Hébuterne, where two of his patrol had been wounded.

What bitterness! Not even wounded, only a cursed fall and a swollen knee; I had commanded "C" Battery for more than two years; how foul to have to leave it like this! I had plenty of time for those bitter thoughts during the weary journey which followed. The cart in which I sat was the last vehicle but one in a slowly moving column, stretching as far as one could see along the road towards the West. It was composed not only of military transport but also of civilian carts with refugees walking beside them, people who had hoped that never again would they have to leave the homesteads which they had been trying, during the months just past, to recover from the destruction of 1916, but which they now saw passing once more into the grasp of War. As we dragged slowly and unhappily along, I remember that presently we came to three 18 pounder batteries in line "action rear, limber supply without unhooking," a method used only in extreme emergencies. They were not firing and they never had to, but the news of the threatened assault had reached them and they were posted there to do their best to replace the infantry which were so much needed. The batteries were a fine sight, but a depressing one, for everything seemed at its worst just then. One did not know that the New Zealanders were already coming forward and that by night the line would be held, indeed it was not until I got to Gaudienpré, six miles away, that I saw any fresh infantry ready to come forward.

After a fortnight I was very happy to receive a letter from the Colonel, in which he said:—

"General Oldfield (C.R.A.) sent us a very nice letter from the 51st Highland Division, which has pleased all batteries much. Your battery did splendidly, and on the morning you left it, before you left, saved a certain and very nasty break in our line, which is now made good and held."

But after the lapse of a further fortnight I was more happy still when, one sunny morning, I opened the gate into a field and walked slowly up to "C" Battery, busy at mid-day stables. I was a surprise to them, for letters

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had been irregular in delivery and nobody expected me; and, of course, compared with their healthy sunburn I was pale and thin after being in hospital, and pretty lame. Everyone stopped grooming and stared at me, even some of the horses turned their heads to see, and as I heard, spreading round the Battery, the hushed yet friendly exclamation: "It's the Major," I knew how glad I was to be there.

The orderly officer called them to attention and, with the Sergeant-Major, came up to me and saluted. I gave the order "Carry on."