

A MONTH'S EXPERIENCE AT THE FRONT

by

E . L.

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P R O L O G U E

The events recorded in this book relate to the time the Writer was actively engaged "Up the Line," and do not include any "happenings" which occurred during his time of "Preparation" or "Waiting" behind the lines.

N.B. Actual dates are not given, as the Writer cannot remember them accurately.

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It was, as near as I can remember, about the middle of July 1917 that we ("D" Company, East Surreys) were ordered "Up the Line," which meant we were to move up and take up our positions in some Support Trenches. We understood we were to hold these for about six days, and then return for a few days' rest.

We marched off from our billets one morning, and in due time arrived at a pleasant spot in a little wood, and there had our dinner and rested for the night. Now, before I proceed further, I may as well say that at this particular spot we were "sorted out" a bit, or inspected, to see that everything was in perfect order for "Activities." This took place on the following


day, and, as there were several defects and deficiencies, we had to stay the following night, so we had two nights' rest. A few men (there are always some on these occasions) managed to get bad feet, or bad legs, or some other complaint which they had never had before, so they were left here for other duty when the rest of us marched off the next morning. One of these men had been in my personal company for quite a long time and I had hopes of his coming to the front with me, but now I discovered him to be what I call a SHIRKER. It is a surprising fact that many of these can be found at the front.

In due time (late in the afternoon) we arrived at the entrance track, or rough roadway, along which we were to go in order to get to our trenches. We halted here for some considerable time, and enjoyed the rest, for we were all very tired.

By this time I had made my first acquaintance with Heavy Gun Fire (Field guns, I mean), for we had passed close by one or two Monsters close to the road, and when they fired we were almost blown down.

At last we were ordered to "Fall in," and very soon we came to the first shell-holes I had ever seen. I mean, of course, battle-field shell-holes. They were so thick on either side of our road that it would have been well-nigh impossible to walk between them. There were plenty of empty shell-cases lying about too, and now and then an unexploded one. I was greatly interested in all this, and as these shell-holes did not appear to be

newly made, I thought they were old ones, and walked down the road feeling quite comfortable, never dreaming that horses and men tore up and down that road at top speed, for dear life sometimes. I discovered this afterwards.

We went down this road for about half a mile and could then see our trenches over to the right, so we branched off in single file over the broken ground and soon got into our place, - the other regiment coming out. We were told off, so many to each dug-out, and I had a decent dug-out, half circular in shape, thus:  and I had four other fellows to share it with. Their names were Brown, Whiting, Watts, and another fellow whose name I forget.

Brown was a young fellow, merry and bright, but who always used very filthy language. He had been a professional pugilist before the war.

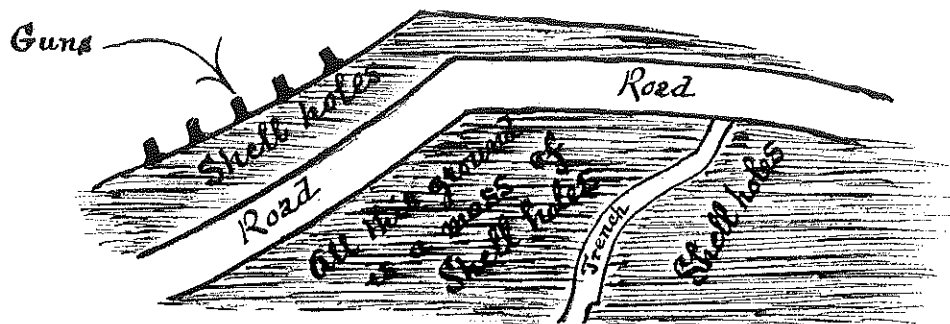
Whiting was an older man, quiet, and respectable, and swore very little. He had been "Up at the Front" before, so I told him I should look to him for advice if I wanted it.

Watts was a young fellow with a very active tongue, knew everything, and used filthy talk at all times. The other fellow was young, quiet, and sulky.

Just outside were two other chums of mine (I call them chums because we used to live in the same tent), Sabin and Lincoln. Sabin was appointed a Stretcher-bearer as soon as we got settled.

I now had time to have a look around, and I noticed that at our backs, at about 500 yards distant, were several British guns - in action, of course, and the shells they fired over our heads. The noise in the air sometimes was terrific, being like a lot of express trains rushing by.

There were other guns on our left, big ones too, for the earth used to rock when they fired. Between us and these guns was the road, as per Sketch.



It was now evening, and I noticed that some German shells were falling with a horrible crash near our guns. These shells also came over our heads, and we could always hear them coming. They soon came in larger numbers, and began to drop near the road, and a little later our trench came in for a fair share. I concluded by that that the Germans had evidently got the range of our guns, the road, and our trench.

Now, along this road, a lot of traffic passed, especially in the evening and at night. Red Cross vans, motor lorries, men, horses, water-carts, ammunition-carts and guns, and often in the middle of the night "Caterpillar Engines" would sneak

up with a huge gun, which in the morning would be giving the Germans "beans," or, rather, some big shells. It never mattered how fast the shells fell, there was always this traffic up and down this road - it never ceased. I used to watch it, by daylight, and sad sights met my eyes occasionally.

One evening a party of horse soldiers was going up, and a large shell dropped close to them, and three of their horses bolted off riderless. The poor riders were picked up later by stretcher-bearers. Very often when we looked out of a morning we saw an overturned ration-cart, or a dead horse, or a van, lying by the side of the road. After what I saw, I thought we were tremendously lucky in getting in as we did.

The first night passed uneventfully, except that we were shelled.

The second evening came, and rumours went around that there was to be a working party out that night. What the work was nobody knew, but we were to go to Head-Quarters first.

About 50 of us had to turn out, and we started at ten o'clock. Our Lieutenant leading, we picked our way in single file over the shell holes and got into the road. What a journey we had that night: it was enough to turn anyone's hair grey! Shells, of course, were falling all the time, some of them quite close enough to be uncomfortable. After going up this awful road about half a mile, we turned off on a side track, and, later, on to the rough ground again. Every now and then we

would stop, and then turn in another direction. I now concluded that our Leader had lost the way, which unfortunately proved to be the case.

Backwards and forwards we went, over shell holes, sometimes over a railway track, sometimes over a road, and once or twice we got in amongst our batteries of guns. The din was awful, and the blast from the guns almost knocked us down.

We continued floundering about for a long time, but at last we got to the right place. To our surprise, our Officer, after making enquiries, said, "There is no working party to-night, boys, so we are now going home." (We were really too late for the work).

After a long walk we arrived "Home" in the early hours of the morning. Another working party was formed (from the rest of our Company) for the next day, and their work consisted of carrying bombs and ammunition from H.-Quarters to a dump further up. They all returned safely, but said they had had a very warm time.

I went off again the following evening with another working party to carry up more ammunition. We started off about eight o'clock, when the shelling was very thick, but as it was still daylight we did not lose our way. We kept to the road all the way to Head-Quarters and had a very exciting time altogether.

While going down this road, a huge shell fell only about ten feet away from me, but it never exploded! (If it had done, you would not have been reading this book!)

Once or twice we ran for dear life, but managed to reach Head-Quarters safe and sound. After a few minutes' rest here, we were ordered off to the Ammunition Depot at the R.E.s' Quarters further up, and arriving here we had to wait quite a long time, so we sat down on boxes of bombs at the side of the road.

Now, this waiting about always used to nettle me, and we had plenty of it, I noticed, generally through some official's trifling neglect; and now, here we were right in an open space, amongst tons of explosives, with shells dropping all over the place, waiting, while our Officer was going from one official to another, trying to find out something connected with our mission. Nothing irritated me more than this infernal waiting about in such dangerous positions. There was a little cemetery close by, and I thought a bigger one would soon be needed if this sort of thing went on. However, after a time we were loaded up with two boxes of bombs each and were to carry these up to the dump at the Front Line.

Off we went, and very soon had to get into a trench for safety. This trench led across a large open space (all shell holes) up to Battle Wood, and we had a perilous journey across here, often having to stop on account of gas shells. At last we reached the wood and got out of the trench. This wood is a most awful place; it is full of trees standing, and it is also full of fallen trees, and shells from German guns sweep through

here constantly. The ground is strewn with limbs and trunks of trees, and is full of shell holes and a veritable death-trap! It requires some nerve to go through it. It is only about 500 yards through this wood, but it took us nearly half an hour to do it. Right in the middle of the wood is a pile of white stones, which is all that remains of a "White Château."

Having got through this, we were once again in open country and toddled on a little further and reached our destination, and also returned "Home" safely, but, as usual, very tired.

The next afternoon I was on another party, this time to go down to Head-Quarters and bring back some ammunition to our own trench. I have only one item of interest to record about this: i.e., I had a very narrow escape when I had nearly reached home. The enemy were shelling us with high explosive, viz., shells that burst in the air and scatter a shower of bullets down on you, and I and another boy, who was helping me to carry a box of bombs, had just arrived at the cemetery at the top part of the field where our trenches are, when a shell burst just over our heads and a shower of bullets flew around us and several fell quite close to my feet (within two inches, in fact). This made us hurry up, although I had a very anxious time with my boy, as he had bad feet and could not get along. However, we all reached home safe and sound. One fellow had a bullet strike his steel helmet and make a great dent in it, but luckily it did not touch his head.

At other times I often went across to the road to fetch up our rations from the ration cart. This was anything but a pleasant journey sometimes, as we often had to dodge shells. Then we had to fetch our own drinking water. No water cart ever came up to us, the East Surreys, so we had to go off up this awful road in parties of twenty with two petrol cans each. We had to fetch the water from an old building about three-quarters of a mile away, and I am glad to say we were always successful in getting home safely.

One night, we were experiencing an unusually heavy shelling, and it became so hot that our Officers actually "got wind up" (a very common expression out there for being timid or frightened) and about midnight we had orders to stand to. This meant we were to dress and stand ready for moving off at a moment's notice. Nothing happened, however, and after a time the shelling cooled down and we were ordered to bed again. I could not see where we were going if we did move off, for to advance or retire in that awful shell-fire would mean certain death to many of us; and I thought it was madness ever to dream of such a thing. It was bad enough to stay there, and to move would be ten times worse!

The Hampshires were just below me in the same trench, and in the morning when we turned out we discovered that a shell had gone right into one of their dug-outs and killed nine of the poor fellows! We saw them brought out the same day, and they were buried up in the cemetery at the top. A sad sight, I can assure you, and one which made us think.

On another occasion I went with another party in the afternoon to dig a trench at the far end of Battle Wood. We reached the place safely and commenced our task, which was just in the wood. Shells, as usual, screamed through the trees, but we dug on. We witnessed an air fight from here. There was a regular swarm of hostile aeroplanes overhead (nothing unusual) and a few British ones. We could hear them firing their machine guns at each other, and presently two of them got out by themselves. We watched these two firing at each other for some little time, when down came the British machine. The German had got the better of him. I have seen ever so many air encounters, but never yet have I seen the British get up so high as the enemy, or an enemy machine brought down.

We then continued our digging, but the shells troubled us so much that we were ordered into the West Kent Head-Quarters for shelter. We had to shelter so long that when the shelling cooled off it was time for us to return home, which we did in safety. I might mention that, during these journeys to and fro, it was nothing unusual to come across a dead horse, sometimes two, with great holes in their sides caused by shells, and now and then a dead comrade would be lying waiting for burial. Sometimes we saw them "knocked out." Sad sights, but it was War!

Sometimes, when we were on our homeward journey, we would find the road blown up in many places, but it did not matter as it would be immediately repaired. This particular road leading

to Head-Quarters was made of planks (oak) about four or five inches thick, and these were often splintered to smithereens.

It was from the lower edge of Battle Wood that I saw the famous "Hill 60," where so many of our brave lads laid down their lives. I don't wonder at it, either, and I realized that with the enemy on that Hill it must have been a terrible task to dislodge him. I stood watching it one day, and wondered where poor Edgar Springett fell; it was undoubtedly somewhere close to where I was standing. (He was in the East Surreys too, I think). I wondered if he was buried in the cemetery just outside, but I never had time to look in any of them.

One little item I have forgotten to mention. It was while we were floundering about during the night of our Working Party when we got lost, that we met two of those monster Caterpillar engines, each drawing a huge gun along in the dark. No matter what the weather was, or how many shells were falling, these tractors would creep up in the night, and in the morning the gun would be "Up Somewhere" and pestering the enemy with big shells. I used to admire the way in which they sneaked along.

No other event of any special importance occurred while at this Support Trench. There were two nights when I preferred to sleep outside of my dug-out because the shelling made it rock so much, and as I was in at the far end I had no wish to be suffocated or buried if a shell should knock it down. We had to wash in dirty stinking water all the time we were here, as

there was no other water about excepting that which half filled the shell holes.

Time went on, and we began to wonder when we should get relief. Our six days passed, and the seventh arrived. It was on this day, I believe, that the news went around that we were to go up to the First Line trench for about six hours, - it would not in any case be more than ten hours - and then we were to be relieved for certain. Several more days passed and we were not moved up, and I began to wish we did make a move soon, as every day the shelling on our trench became more violent.

At last, however, the order came for us to move up, and we cleared out of it, and in due time arrived in our new trench safe and sound but, as usual, tired, and still thinking that relief would soon come. We spent the first night comparatively quiet, and the next day passed uneventfully except for the usual shell fire. Orders had come up that an advance was to be made (we already knew it), and the West Kents and The King's Royal Rifles were going over the top, and as soon as they had reached their objective we should be relieved. We were to advance to the enemy trenches twenty minutes after the West Kents and King's Royal Rifles had left. We were to hold this trench until relief came.

Well, I thought this was coming it a bit thick! Tired troops to go over and hold newly-taken trenches! But still it was very characteristic of the East Surreys.

The British "barrage" was to start at a given time, and after four hours of that, over the top for the West Kents and K.R.R.s. I had no idea when this barrage was to begin, but early the next morning I was very greatly startled by it. The screaming of the shells and report of the guns just behind us was too awful. I thought it was German aeroplanes overhead bombing us out of it; but no, it was "our barrage." I soon got used to it, and soon saw our particular aeroplane coming and going, and signalling to the gunners as to how things were. The time passed, and the barrage ceased, but we had to stay till late in the afternoon.

We had a First Aid Station at the end of our trench, and the wounded kept coming in all day, and it had now begun to rain, which made it very miserable for us. Some of us had to take a turn at stretcher-bearing, taking bad cases from our trench across the open country at the back down to West Kent's Head-Quarters at Battle Wood. A perilous job that was. I did not have to go myself, for as I was waiting orders came that we were to get over to the next front trench at once, so away we went. We had to take a spade each, as we were to go forward later into "No man's Land" and dig ourselves in.

Now we understood that the West Kents and King's Royal Rifles had failed to reach the final objective (the German third line), so the East Surreys were to do it. Yes; always the East Surreys if there was any finishing off to do. Yes; the East Surreys

would go through, even with tired and worn-out troops. If any regiment went short of rations, it would be the East Surreys always.

It appeared that the enemy had got too many machine guns to allow their third line to be taken, so we were to work around a bit and attack in a different direction.

We got over to the front line trench safely, and here we waited for some considerable time, being re-organized and told off in our respective parties, viz., machine gunners, followed by bombers and rifle grenadiers; the riflemen (I was a rifleman) were to be on the flanks and well ahead of all the rest, so we formed up, and waited the order to start off.

At last it came, and we started out into that piece of land which lies between the British and German trenches and which is known as No Man's Land, and it is rightly named too. We made our way through mud and slush up to our knees in places, and it was such a struggle that some of our men threw away their spades (they were fools to do this and the N.C.O.s ought to have stopped them). We soon came to what had been the enemy front line, and of course we now saw plenty of dead Germans lying about. What a sight it was! The British "barrage" had played terrible havoc with them.

We passed on, and noticed in front of us a huge pile of bricks and rubbish, and from this a German sniper began to worry us. It was necessary, therefore, to hunt him up before we could continue

our journey in peace, so we immediately began to try and spot him. No easy job, as a sniper is a picked man and knows how to keep under cover. We had to take cover in shell holes, and behind a hedge, and then go up by rushes. Brown (of my dug-out) was shot dead, also another man whose name I do not know. We got up to this pile of bricks at last, and managed to get the better of the sniper by driving him off. We now discovered quite a lot of brick dug-outs, and no end of brick rubble and rubbish of all descriptions. This was formerly a village, but this was all that was left of it. Not a single building of any description, nor part of one, even, except that which was in the ground, and all these old cellars were used by the Germans and converted into strongholds. They were now empty, except perhaps for a sneaking German who might be hiding in them (I believe there were several). We had orders to search all dug-outs, bushes, or anything else that afforded cover, or where it was likely any enemy might be lurking. I noticed that none of the appointed men cared to enter these dug-outs, in fact, I did not see one of them entered. I saw a bomb thrown into one, but I don't believe any of them were really entered. Some of these dug-outs were afterwards occupied by us.

We pushed on a little further and halted. This was where we were to dig in. It was now late in the evening, but quite light. We could see the Germans in front of us, only about 300 yards distant, and of course they could see us. I thought

it was a very foolish piece of business ever to come down there in the open, in broad daylight, to dig in, but it is just like the British Army, more especially The East Surreys.

We started digging, and, of course, shells began to drop near us. It wasn't likely the Germans were going to let us dig in there by daylight in front of their very eyes without giving us "a warm reception."

Now, as I said before, many of the men had thrown away their spades, and they had to use their entrenching tool, which was absolutely useless for rapid work, so many of them were exposed to the fire longer than the others. I had my spade, and lost no time in getting into the earth. Our Corporal was working next to me, and the shelling was so terrible that I said to him quietly, "We shall never get out of this, Corporal." He said, "Oh, yes, we shall; you are all right."

I did not think any of us would be alive in the morning, neither did the Corporal, because one of the Sergeants came along to him a little later, and I overheard their conversation. The Sergeant said it was "Suicide," and we should "soon all be killed," and so on. Very pleasant, wasn't it! However, we stuck it, and I soon got down deep enough to get temporary cover, so I handed over my spade to someone else. We had a most awful night, but did not suffer any casualties.

We finished off our trench the next day, near enough to provide us with a certain amount of protection. It was very wet,

however, and it soon became so muddy that we were continually employed in chucking it out. At my end it was so soft that we sank in nearly up to our knees, and as we could not keep it cleared we had to make the best of it. We got into a pretty sad state altogether. Mud all over our equipment, mud all over our rifles, and mud over everything! Our N.C.O.s had left us to it, and had gone into a dug-out, and there they stayed for the rest of the time, so far as our trench was concerned. The Sergeant (my Sergeant) came round once a day with a ration of rum. A teaspoonful seemed to be sufficient for the East Surreys, for that is about the quantity we each had.

The Captain came round once in a while to have a look at us. He was a very quiet man indeed, and never worried us. He was a Boer, and had fought against the British in South Africa. He and the Lieutenant were round one day and the Germans started sniping at them, so they had to get back to their dug-out in the best way they could.

I often wondered how it was that the Captain hadn't been shot, for he would get out in the open and expose himself so. This sniping used to be a perfect nuisance to us, as we got it regularly every day and we could never discover the snipers. There were two of them at times. One afternoon, however, the Captain and Lieutenant took a stroll out on the quiet, and the Captain caught one behind a tree and promptly shot him with his revolver. I saw a good bit of sniping while I was here. At

the bottom of the field, directly in front of us, was an old building. Some Germans had got possession of this building (it was in their lines) and away to their left was a party of British soldiers in a wood. They were about 500 yards off, and some of these Germans were a constant nuisance to them. About five of them would sneak out of a morning (we could see them, but for reasons best known to ourselves we never fired on them), and would get into a covered position somewhere and continually snipe at our fellows in the wood. Of course the British used to send out snipers as well, so the enemy did not have things all their own way.

One day I was very interested in watching these Germans. They had been pestering our fellows as usual, but they had been spotted and were making for home as fast as they could, taking refuge behind trees occasionally, but every time they got in sight we could hear the report of a rifle. I saw two of them fall in the field when they were running at full speed, and I believe a third fell among the trees. Anyway, it so scared the remainder that they didn't do any more sniping while I was there. Those two fellows lay out there in the field for days. No one of the enemy dare go out to fetch them in, so they were left there.

Now we had been in our trench for several days and nights, and, as usual, no relief was coming, so one by one the fellows left the trench and went into the various dug-outs for a rest.

Personally I didn't like these dug-outs, as they were so often under heavy shell fire, and sometimes when one had got in there he had to stay till it was possible to get out. There was a big one just behind us, and only about twenty yards off. From this down to our trench was all that remained of a hedge, but it afforded us just a little covering while we went to and fro. A terribly perilous journey it used to be for some of our fellows although only twenty yards. They would be shelled, and often had to run (when it was possible) to get in. I used to go up and down there, and not once was I fired on. I bore a charmed life, it seemed, for I was never touched. I used to use my brains, and choose my time to go out and in. I used to study this shelling business, and my judgment proved correct. I never went into this dug-out, because I did not think it safe. It was a big place made of concrete. The top of it was of concrete and steel, and was about 12 ft. by 7 ft., and about a foot thick. Absolutely impervious to shell fire, you would say; but not so. It was already perched up on end at an angle of 45 degrees. The British gunners had done this when driving the enemy out of it, but it afforded a good shelter, our fellows thought, so they took possession. I never had any rest, however, except when I sat down in the muddy trench and dozed off for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour.

I was now left with four men in my particular length of trench and I began to get a bit ruffled, as I did not think it fair that

we should have it all to do, and I made up my mind to strike in the morning, regardless of consequences. We had nothing to eat for two days, and also nothing to drink (I find my memory has led me on too fast, so I must go back a day or two, as I have omitted one or two important details).

It was about the second night, I think, that a certain Corporal, while strolling around about midnight, discovered and caught a German in our lines. I knew this sort of thing would occur, unless we kept a sharp look-out, and no doubt some of our sleepy-headed fellows had let him through. He was brought down to where I was and it was decided to let Sergeant Critton take him over to Head-Quarters. He started on this mission, but whether he ever got his prisoner through or not nobody seemed to know, as Sergeant Critton was never seen again in our quarters. A little later on another prisoner was captured by the same Corporal, and he was likewise sent off in charge of another Corporal. That Corporal was never again seen in our quarters. A little later on, again, a third prisoner was brought down to Corporal Sewell (my Corporal) next to me. They stood there arguing who should take him down. Corporal Sewell did not know the way, and did not want to go either. The other could not take him, as he had to keep a look-out, so they decided to leave him in our trench under Sewell's care. We had him in, and he sat down between Sewell and myself. I immediately searched the beggar, and asked him if he had any knives about him. He put up his hands, and

made me understand he had nothing whatever except his smoke helmet. Even this I made him open so that I could look inside. I would run no risks, if the other fellows did. He had nothing harmful about him, so I began to question him as to how many mates he had with him, and where they were, etc. He told me there were four others out there, indicating the direction, so search was made, but they had evidently made off, for we didn't find them, and no more troubled us that night.

We kept this prisoner in our trench for an hour or more, and then I suppose Corporal Sewell thought he had better get off with him, so he went.

Well, I thought, this is a nice state of things, and very foolish too, to go off with prisoners single-handed in the middle of the night. Now, I know what I should have done if I had captured any of them. I should have marched them straight up to the nearest dug-out, where about a dozen of our fellows were resting, and said, "Here you are, chaps; look after this prisoner till the morning, and then hand him over to the Sergeant." That is what they would have done with all three of them if they had been wise. My private opinions and suggestions I kept to myself. It didn't do to say too much, besides I was only a private. Well, I thought, someone would have to suffer for this in some way or another; and sure enough they did, for the order came round in the morning that no man was to leave the trenches; so that meant I should have to stay in the trench for still longer, and

I thought it very hard. We stuck it (the few of us who were there) all the next day.

Now I had a chap next to me in the Corporal's place (I might mention here that Corporal Sewell did get back late the next day) whom I shall describe as a fool, for fool he was for certain. Well, night came, and when it was getting dusk one of our officers came round and said to me, "Who is in this trench?" I said I was, and he said, "How many others have you with you?" I said, Four. He said, "Well, do you know it is very important that you should have a sentry at night." I said, "Yes, I know that." Then he said, "Well, you must take turns at it." I said, "Very well, Sir." So I took the first turn, about 10-0 o'clock. Of course I had always my eyes skinned at night all the time I was in the trench, and woe betide any German who got in front of my rifle while I was on the look out. At about 11-30 I aroused one of my mates and told him to keep a sharp look-out, so he took his turn. He stood up looking over the parapet for about ten minutes, and then he dropped off to sleep. I knew this would happen with all of them in turn, for they were all so sleepy. I was sleepy too, just as much as they, and quite as tired, but I wasn't going to sleep with such danger lurking around. I kept knocking first one and the other to keep them awake, and sat down in the trench while they were awake. The night passed in this fashion, and in the morning they wanted something to eat, so two or three went up to the dug-outs to see if there were any rations about. They

came back later on and said the Sergeant would send something down shortly, which he did, so we had bread and jam, and mud, but no drink.

Now another little incident occurred which ruffled me. I noticed two or three Germans at the bottom of the field were very busy doing something outside their dug-out and facing us. I wondered what they were up to, and soon discovered that they were putting up a machine gun. They ought to have been stopped at once, it could easily have been done. About two shells from our Artillery would have blown the place to pieces, but no, they were allowed to fix up, in front of our eyes, and I knew we should suffer for it. Sure enough we did too. That very evening the Captain had about a dozen men out in the open, not far from the dug-out near me, and was giving them certain orders, when this deadly machine gun began to play on them. Before they could get into the dug-out two of them were killed outright and several were wounded, including Whiting, "the quiet man" who had been in the trench with me. Watts I never saw again, nor the other fellow whose name I forget.

I now arrive at the time when I was left with the four men in the trench. These four were in with me for the night. Well, night arrived and I did a turn at "Sentry," and got 'the Fool' to do his turn, but after that I did the whole thing right through the whole night! I got so sick and tired of trying to keep the other fellows awake that I gave it up in disgust.

Now, in the night, 'the fool' was sitting down on a bank of earth which separated us from the adjoining trench, and he was "nodding" off to sleep as usual, when I shouted out to him, "Ford, (his name) "if you fall asleep there and fall backwards into that mud, you know what it means, don't you?"

He muttered "Yes," and, later, after he had had a narrow escape, he turned round and so had his feet in it. Well, in the morning he was so deep in it that I actually had to dig him out! I wasn't very complimentary to him either while doing it. I certainly did let him have it, and I told him to clear out of it, which he soon did, and the other three also went later to see if there was any dinner knocking about.

They did not come back, so I had a length of trench to myself. Now, I thought, I can make the trench more comfortable; so I started making it deeper and wider, and in the middle of the afternoon a party of machine gunners came up and immediately began to make arrangements to fix up a machine gun close to my trench and just at my back.

Well, I thought, here's another fine piece of work. Come down here in broad daylight and fix up a machine gun with the enemy looking on! Well, the Germans soon began to shell them with whiz-bangs, a shell that skims along instead of dropping straight down. Awful things when close! This shelling became so hot that they could not put up with it, so they got into my trench! Well, I thought, this is worse still for me, for I was

sure the enemy would see them getting into my trench. I expect they did too, for the shells began to pepper along close to us. I experienced an awful quarter of an hour there with these men. Never do I want to undergo such another ordeal. The shells were exploding quite close to the edge of our trench, and mud and dirt flew in all directions. I was expecting every moment to have a shell in the trench. It was lucky for me I had deepened the trench, for if I hadn't our heads would have been blown off. As it was, one shell came right through the side of the trench and out at the other. This was only two inches above my head and I was stooping down at the time. Another one followed almost as close, and I thought it was time to clear out. So I told the machine gunners to get out of it (I could not get out before they did), and they did so, and so did I. I noticed all the others that were in the adjoining trenches had also gone. I made my way as fast as I could up towards the dug-out, not with the intention of going into it, but I thought I might take refuge behind one of these places for the time being; and I had just got up to within a couple of yards of this dug-out when a shell crashed into it and exploded with terrific force, blinding me for a few minutes and killing two of my mates inside and wounding several others. Their cries were terrible to hear as I went past. This shell, I might mention, must have passed very close to me, in fact, it must almost have touched me. I stumbled on over broken bricks and stones, through shell holes and mud, and others joined me,

and we laid down behind a huge mass of brick, etc., which was another dug-out. The Germans were intent on driving us out of it, however, for they began to pepper this with big shells. We could not stay there, so cleared off to another. Neither could we stay here, for the shells began to drop there also. I could plainly see the Germans had spotted us running about in a party, so I decided to go off by myself. I wandered about, looking for shelter, and hardly knew where to go. I looked at one place, and then at another, but they would not do, so I came up to a huge piece of concrete which I thought would hide me for a time. It was really the dug-out that was struck by the shell, only I did not know it, as I had approached it from another direction. I looked at it and thought, well, it might be all right, but I did not like to risk it, and looking ahead I saw a trench and a man I knew getting into it. I stumbled down to him, and he said, "Where are you off to?" I answered, "Into this trench." He said, "Look sharp about it, then, or else you'll get sniped." I got in close to him, but he was in a part by himself - I mean, there was a division between us, and we started chatting about "the event" we had just gone through, and so on. As yet I could not make out where we were, so I asked him, and to my great surprise I discovered I was in the very trench out of which I had been driven about half an hour previously, in fact, my own trench! I was some time before I could grasp it, but it was so. I had approached it from another

direction, and the shells had altered the surface a bit, and I was so shaken up that I did not recognize it at first. No one (except those who have gone through it) will ever realize what it is to be driven about as we were that afternoon. It was something awful, and no words will ever describe my feelings accurately.

Well, there were no shells to speak of about now, so I thought I would dig myself in still deeper and cut a shelter in the side of it, so I set to work. I hadn't been there long when the Sergeant came down with the rum and gave me a drop. Not a big drop, either, so when he had finished with the man next to me I asked him for another drop, which he gave me (not without a little murmur, oh, dear no!). I continued my digging, and later on another fellow came and joined Wells (the man next to me), so we three kept each other company by chatting over the top.

Presently Williams (this new chap) said he was going to find us something to eat, so off he went, and came back with plenty of bread and several tins of jam. He threw me a whole tin of jam, and gave me some bread, and now, I thought, I really would have some jam, as five or six of us usually had to share a tin of this size. I tucked into it, and laid it on thick, and enjoyed myself for a little while. When I had nearly emptied the tin, I thought it would be polite to ask if anyone else was to have it, so I asked Williams, and he said, "No," so I finished

it off and threw the tin over the top, thoroughly satisfied to get such a meal.

I resumed my digging, and just before dark the Captain came round and had a look into my trench, and said, "That's all right; you'll be safe in there. That is very good." He went off without saying anything further, and I wondered what was coming off next.

The Sergeant came round afterwards and said they were going out on a raid that night and the machine gunners were to be at their posts to keep the enemy from running up this way. He also said he would see if he could get "us chaps" relieved presently, but I didn't expect it now.

I then began to consider my position. I had to stay in that trench, alone, and stand against a German barrage fire, which would inevitably be the case as soon as the raid started. I concluded that would "finish me up" so far as this world was concerned. However, as the raiders were about to start off word came that every man was to leave the trench and enter the dug-outs for shelter. This we did, Williams coming in with me and Wells going into another place where some of the others were.

My dug-out was a fairly strong one, being built of bricks, concrete, and steel girders. It was originally in the German hands, and it was now occupied by about ten of us altogether. It was full of water at the bottom, and to get into our seats we had to wade into this water which was up to our knees in the deepest part.

For three days and three nights we sat in that dug-out with our feet dangling in water, and twice we had to bale out some of it, as it kept rising. My seat was a box of German bombs. I thought at first it might be a case of bottled beer or whisky, and I got a bayonet and opened it, and found, to my disappointment, it was a box of bombs. This I even had to raise up occasionally or I should have been sitting in water.

Even in this dug-out we weren't without excitement. One night our guard saw two men whom he took to be Germans, walking about, and so we were soon on the alert with our rifles in our hands, and standing in the water all ready to rush out at once if necessary. There were two men, and they came up by us, but it was not light enough to see if they were the enemy or our own fellows. We could see others, too, creeping about in the open, and concluded a German raiding party was about to raid us. Shells were falling thick and fast (they always were). We were never free from this horrid shell fire, and we thought the best thing to do was to keep quiet, at least for a time.

For an hour we stood there, watching, and we fancied we could see them creeping up.

I said, "We must not let them get close enough to throw a bomb inside here, or we are done. The best thing we can do is to wait until they are nearly close enough, and then rush out with a yell and fire rapidly, and they will think there is quite a lot of us, and probably make off."

Nothing came of it, however, for the shadows moved off, and in the morning as soon as it was light enough we discovered that a good many of these Germans were nothing more than a few short willow shrubs waving about in the breeze. We had a good laugh, but they had given us a fright. There were, of course, one or two real bodies about, as Head-Quarters was only a few yards from us and we had seen several go in here. But they were, of course, our own men.

Nothing else of any importance happened here till the fight began. We each took our turn at guard, or sentry outside, a hot job at times, especially when machine guns were on us. Deadly things these are, and I had a horrible dread of them.

We had our meals regularly, and had a tot of rum each day. This tot was half a mugful amongst five of us. For drink, we had water from a shell-hole just outside. We selected this hole as being the cleanest one, and reserved the water for drinking purposes only. It had a very peculiar taste; I don't know quite what it tasted like, but I had to drink a certain amount of it as there was nothing else. There may have been a dead German lying in the bottom of that hole for all we knew. There were more unlikely things than that, especially in this horrible spot.

The Sergeant used to tell us, when he came in with our rum, that relief was coming to-night, or to-morrow, but it never came. The last time he came in he said, relief was coming to-morrow for certain. I had made up my mind to have my relief to-morrow,

shells, or no shells, for I was intending to go down to the doctor and have my feet seen to. They were getting into a bad state through being in water so long.

We had orders that night to form up outside in a certain order, which we did, and that, we were told, was exactly what we were to do should there be a counter attack. I concluded by this that the officials were evidently expecting something to happen, but we retired into our dug-out once more and took our rest.

At about four o'clock the next morning we were ordered to "Stand-to" (I am not sure of the time, but think it must have been about four. It may have been a bit earlier, as it was quite dark). We clambered out, and discovered the Enemy close on us, in fact, they were so close that we could not form up at all. The din and confusion were something awful, and we scattered immediately, some going one way and some another. Bullets were flying in all directions and shells were dropping all over the place, and it is a marvel to me that we were able to get out of it as we did. I, with four or five comrades, rushed round by the back of our dug-out, and I had only gone a few yards when a shell falling just behind me knocked me down flat on my face in the mud (I was a little way behind the others as I could not keep up with them). I struggled up and went on through the awful mud and caught up my mates who were now halting and having a look round. An officer had joined them too, so I thought we should now be all right. He said, "Hang together, boys," and started off again,

we following. We went on for some time, struggling over shell-holes, often up to our knees in mud, and now we had reached a barbed wire entanglement. This we scrambled through and went on for a bit further, when we again halted and had a look round to take our bearings.

Dawn was now breaking and we could see a little better, and looking to our right we discovered we were close on to a large body of Germans who were advancing. I had now only three chums left with me (the others must have broken off and gone in another direction, or been shot), and the officer on seeing these Germans flew off for all he was worth and was soon out of sight. I shall never forget it, or respect him either, for rushing off and leaving us to our fate. Of course he had no equipment to carry, excepting his revolver, so he stood more chance than we did. If he had only said "Good-bye, lads!" when he left us, I should have thought more of him, but he had properly got "wind up" and left us without saying a word.

The Germans had spotted us, and with a yell several of them "made for us." They were quite close, and in trying to get away I stumbled into a shell-hole in the mud and gave myself up for lost. I saw one German who had his eye on me, preparing to throw a hand grenade at me. I was now lying on my back and facing my opponent, but as he flung the horrible grenade, which I saw was going to hit me right enough, I turned over on my chest so as to receive it on my back. This, I thought, is the End, so far as

I am concerned. The grenade struck me on the lower part of my back (it must have been on my entrenching tool), and exploded, and beyond giving me a "big push" into the mud, did me no harm.

I looked over my shoulder, and saw my opponent about to throw another at me, which he did immediately. This also was a straight aim, and I received it higher up on my back (it must have been on my haversack), and, like the other, it did me no harm beyond giving me a shock. Where the fragments of the steel cases went to, I don't know, and it was only Providence that kept them out of my body.

My opponent had now come up, also several others, and I saw my escape was impossible.

Now, I could have shot my captor and several others with my rifle before they had time to get up to me if I had chosen, but I quickly decided not to do so, because if I had, the Germans would undoubtedly kill me without mercy and my mates as well. So as my opponent arrived on the scene I threw up my hands and surrendered. My chums, I noticed, were still trying to escape, but as I saw they were surrounded I shouted out, "Chuck it!" and they chucked it.

Now, during all this (it was really all over in a few minutes) I never lost my nerve, and even when, on various occasions, I gave myself up for lost and thought the end had come, I was quite prepared to die calmly. I got up out of that shell-hole and felt quite comfortable, for I was greatly interested in these Germans.

It was a new sight for me, and I took stock of my captors (for private reasons of my own) in view of future events. I was now a Prisoner of War, but I never intended going to Germany, not me! There would be some rough work before I reached that notorious Country!

One of my chums, Williams, was a very quick-witted chap, and I knew he would understand a nod or a wink from me, so I had not yet given up hopes of escape. We threw off all our equipment, handed over our rifles and knives, and three Germans were told off to march us away - to their Head-Quarters, I presumed. These three fellows were very decent chaps and gave us a drink from their coffee bottles, and treated us much better than ever I expected.

We started off, and I noticed my chums had stuck to their gas helmets, but I had forgotten mine. I was a fool for doing this, for if gas shells, or a gas cloud, came along, I should be a dead man. However, no gas of any kind troubled us, so I did not have the bother of the helmet, and I was not such a fool as I thought.

We were marched along in single file, one German in front, leading; I was next, with my chums behind me, and the other two Germans at the rear. Sometimes we had to hurry up and run for a few yards, and we continued our journey for some time.

My brain worked while doing that journey if ever it had! I looked up at my captor in front and thought, "How easily I could

have you over on your back and disarm you!" Yes, I boast, that I could have had that man over and had his rifle in less than two minutes, but it was the two "beggars" at the rear who would want reckoning with. For the time I must dismiss all thoughts of this, so we still toddled on.

Now I began to notice our captors were a little doubtful about their direction, and once or twice we halted and they had a look round. We continued on, however, and presently in front of us I saw a hedge, and while looking at this hedge I saw a rifle fired through it. My leading German was shot through the shoulder and fell at the top of a shell-hole, shouting 'Kamerad, Kamerad!' I received a wound in the leg at the same time and fell into the shell-hole, while the others took refuge in another.

Shells were now falling pretty freely and a machine gun began to sweep the ground. The shelling increased and we were now experiencing a terrible time. I was half covered with muddy water and my leg pained me terribly, and, I considered, my shell-hole was none too deep for me to feel comfortable, as one side of it was broken away and this allowed my head to be partly exposed in one direction.

As the shells skimmed along just above my head and machine gun bullets began to strike the earth on the opposite side at the top, I decided I must get down, so I dragged myself down further into the water and began to scoop away the mud and slush with my hands, piling it up in front of my head to screen it from view.

I endured the most awful agony in that shell-hole; what with the pain in my leg, and the thoughts - sad, some of them were - that flashed through my brain, the groaning of the wounded German at the top, and the horrible screech and explosions of the shells, it was awful! No words will ever describe the horror of it all. I wondered what my dear Wife would do when I was gone (for I never expected to get out of that hole alive), and many other such thoughts crossed my mind. Of course my chums were enduring the same shell fire, but none of them were wounded (thank the Lord!), and "home affairs" were not quite so much to them as they were to me, so they did not experience the mental agony that I did.

Well, this awful shell fire lasted about three quarters of an hour and then practically ceased. I could hear my chums talking, and in a few minutes they came rushing by and shouted, "Come on, chum; let's make a bolt for it!" "Ah," I said, "I can't, my leg is done for; but remember me, if there's a possibility."

I began to think now what chances I had of escape, and it also puzzled me as to what had become of the other two Germans. Had my chums quietly put them out of further trouble? or had they run off? I thought afterwards, they must have got frightened and run off, because - it is rather remarkable perhaps - if you can only make one German squeal, you will frighten a dozen, and the wounded man was squealing all the time. He, even now, kept shouting 'Kamerad,' and I told him to be quiet. He said, "Here,

Here," but I could not get to him. I would have given him his drinking-bottle if I could have got to him, but I could not, so he continued groaning and crying, 'Kamerad!'

I wondered what was the best thing for me to do, and how long I should have to lie there. I considered it all very carefully, and concluded I was in a very sad plight. I had no hopes of my chums returning, and my chances of escape were very remote. I felt certain the German success of the morning would be a temporary one only, and I thought if I stayed here I might get picked up by the British when they drove the enemy back again. Then I immediately realized that if the Enemy was driven back he would pass over me first, and as it is now a common indulgence of Germans in Retreat to bayonet all wounded of ours, I dismissed that idea. Again, if the British put up a barrage fire and started it behind me, I should have to go through it, or rather, it would pass over me, and that meant certain death. If the barrage started in front of me, I should be safe as far as that was concerned. I then wondered how long it would take to crawl over to the hedge where the shot came from, but no, that wouldn't do just yet, anyway, so I continued thinking the matter over.

I was still "thinking," when up rushed my chums, and said, "Come on, chum; we'll have you out of this, but we must be quick!"

They pulled me up, and I found I could not walk, so I had to hang on to two of them and they dragged me across into where some of the Hampshire Regiment were holding on. This party of Hamp-

shires had got cut off and were in a perilous position. I was taken across to the officers' dug-out to enquire the way, etc., and to report.

While one of my chums was enquiring for the officer, I asked Williams to bind up my leg. This he did with his own field-dressing. We all carried this, but mine was all mud and slush, and useless.

The officer directed us as well as he knew, and added, "You had better get off as soon as you can, for the Germans are digging in all round here."

We started off (we were going to our own Head-Quarters if possible - Battalion Head-Quarters, I mean), and we had got a long way to go, over shell-holes and through mud, and with a leg like mine it was a hard task.

We struggled on, and picked our way as well as we could (it was all shell-holes, and there were no tracks here on this part of the battle-field) till we had travelled about a mile. Then we came on to a wood and went along the edge of this till at last we came to open ground again. Up to the present we had not been troubled with falling shells, but now the horrid things began to drop.

We now fell in with a few of our own men, so we enquired our way again. We had still a long way to go, and we continued our journey. I had found a stick, so was now able to help myself along a bit. My ankle was now swelling up and the pain in my

foot was very severe, but I struggled on, and we now came to a trench, and to our surprise met two of our own Company men. They were surprised, too, to see us. We exchanged "soldierly greetings" and passed on. We now began to see dead Germans, and our own fellows as well, lying about, and a little further on we came across a comrade, who was in our dug-out with us, lying, badly wounded, by the top of the trench. He had got a great hole in his thigh, big enough to put one's doubled fist in, and was still bleeding profusely. Poor fellow, he was still conscious, and nodded his head at us. We could not do anything for him, it needed a stretcher for him, and I thought he would soon be needing nothing but burial.

Shells were now dropping quite close enough, so we hurried on, and we met a party of West Kents and asked them to direct us to their Head-Quarters, thinking it might be nearer. We were told to keep along "that track" till we came to a "tape," and then to follow the tape, which led to Head-Quarters.

Now we had at last come to a track, and walking was a little easier, so we pushed on and reached the tape. We followed the tape and quite accidentally came across The East Surrey Head-Quarters. We went in and reported, but I was told my wound could not be seen to there, as they were so busy with more serious cases, and I was to go on to the West Kents. I knew the West Kents Head-Quarters very well, but as we were approaching it from another direction I was quite ignorant as to where it was from here.

We went on a little further, and we saw ahead another wood, and Williams said, "Now I know where we are. Isn't that Battle Wood over there? Don't you remember digging that trench over yonder?"

My GOD! didn't I remember! Shall I forget the horrid place? Never! And now we were to go down to the bottom edge of that horrid wood to get to our destination.

We reached it at last, and here my chums left me, being told off to carry some bombs up to the Front Line. I was told to wait, so I sat down, glad of a rest, on a pile of empty petrol cans; shells were as usual tearing through the awful wood, and they came so close that at last we (there were others beside me) were ordered inside.

Here we had to wait for a long time before we could get attended to. I had plenty of cold tea to drink, so did not get faint. At last I had my wound dressed, and I was told I must now go over to the Red Cross Ambulance Depot, which was on the other side of this awful wood. I had got to walk without assistance, too, but a guide would be sent, as there was another fellow to go through.

We got ready, but had to wait till the shelling had died down a bit before we dared venture on such a journey. We then started, and although our progress was slow and painful, we got to the Ambulance Station safely, for which I heartily thank GOD! This Station was a dug-out, situated in open ground some little distance

from the horrible wood, and the occupants were twelve men of the R.A.M.C. who acted as stretcher-bearers.

About 300 yards from here was a light trolley track, and it was the duty of these men to carry all wounded to this track and place them on a trolley and push the trolley along to the Motor Ambulance Station which was about half a mile away. They also had to bring all stretcher cases over from the West Kent Station from where I had just come.

Can you realize it, dear Reader, that these men went to and fro night and day through that awful wood, carrying wounded men on stretchers while shells were dealing out death and destruction all around! Brave lads these, but it was their duty, and they did it. Now and then (so they told me) one of their number would get "hurried into Eternity," but another was immediately sent up to take his place. Sometimes it would be the wounded who would be "knocked out" by a shell. One fellow told me that it was only two days ago that a shell dropped almost under their trolley and blew it upside down, killing several of the wounded and also one of them. Can you imagine a wounded man's feelings or thoughts while coming through that horrible wood on a stretcher, especially in the middle of the night, with shells screaming all around him!

The Reader must remember that, as I stated before, the time is picked when the shelling has cooled down, yet this wood and its surroundings are never free from it. It is an awful place at the best of times.

I had to wait at this Ambulance dug-out for a long time before I could be taken off, and, as usual, while waiting had the pleasure of seeing some shells drop just outside, and one fell so close to the entrance that when it exploded it blew a lot of mud and dirt all over me. But what did that matter? Mud didn't affect me now, and the Germans could not kill me, nor let me alone. I could peg on yet.

At last my turn came to be shifted, so I was duly placed on the trolley and finally reached the Motor Ambulance without mishap. I was not out of danger yet, for I knew the road now, and I also knew what perilous journeys those Motors had at times up that shell-stricken road. It was no uncommon sight to see a broken and overturned Red Cross Van by the side of this particular road.

I was put inside one of the Vans, and to my astonishment, the man who was put in next was none other than the poor fellow who had the horrible wound in his leg whom we had passed in the morning lying on the battle-field. He was still conscious, and I told him I had thought he would never trouble anyone long. He said he didn't think he could last long, as he had lost so much blood.

It was now evening, and we started our journey by Motor, our destination this time being a halting station about two miles or so up this road that I knew so well. The road was very rough at places, and now and then our driver had to dodge round a shell-hole in the middle of the road. Sometimes the wheels would sink

in mud almost up to the axle, and occasionally we had to run over a stray plank that had been dislodged by a shell, so our ride was not altogether a pleasant one.

We arrived at our destination in due course, and here we had our wounds re-dressed, were given food and drink, and were labelled, and then waited for the car to take us to the next resting-place, which was an old brewery with the roof practically blown off and the walls propped up. The cellars and vaults made a safe refuge, so these were used for this purpose. It was about another mile and a half further up the road, and we arrived there just before dark. I knew the place well. Here we had a good rest and were given cocoa and biscuits. There were a lot of wounded here, and we were able to talk things over and find out how things were "Up the line."

My Captain was killed, and one Lieutenant, and all our Sergeants and Corporals - with the exception of one - were also killed. One trench, too, was reported to be full of our dead comrades. This was sad news to me, but I had the satisfaction of knowing that the Germans were driven back, and driven back 60 yards further than they were before. It was good news.

I began to feel very tired and cold, and wondered how long it would be before we moved off again. I was covered with wet mud, and should be glad to get my wet clothes off.

At last we started, this time by Horse Ambulance, and our destination was a Casualty Clearing Station (a temporary hospital

under canvas). Where, or how far it was, we did not know, but after a long ride we arrived and I was taken inside and was attended to by "Sisters." I had my filthy clothes cut off, had a wash, and was finally put into a comfortable bed! After what I had gone through, this place seemed to be like Heaven to me, and my eyes were wet with tears of thankfulness that night.

This clearing station was a large and beautiful place, and I spent five days there, having the shrapnel removed from my leg, etc., and was then sent down by Red Cross train to the Base Hospital, which was about 180 or 200 miles away. This was also a beautiful place. I had marched past it many a time before I went "Up the line." I had three days here, and then was finally sent over to dear "Old Blighty," and here I am, truly thankful that I escaped as I did.

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This, dear Reader, concludes the account of my experiences at the Front. In no way have I exaggerated any detail, nor allowed imagination to play any part in it. It is all absolutely true, incredible though some of it may seem, and it is sufficient, I hope, to convince you that my time "Out there" has been a period of Real Active Service.

(Pte.) EDWIN LAMBERT,
12th East Surrey Regt.

This German counter-attack took place on Sunday 5th Aug. 1917. My time at the front lasted about a month. I mean a month of real Activity, being under shell-fire the whole time, often going without food, and expecting to get relieved after the first six days. This relief arrived while I was waiting at the West Kent Head-Quarters to get my wound dressed, three weeks late, - another fine piece of strategy of the Army.

I can find a lot of fault with the British Army. I have seen and suffered a certain amount as a result of these faults. I refrain from stating what they are.

One little episode I have forgotten to mention. I was watching a party of men burying some dead comrades in the graveyard near our trench, and a huge shell fell in amongst the graves and blew the graves out of recognition, and the bodies had to be re-interred.

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During my time behind the line, I had some exciting times, being in the midst of many air-raids, and always coming out uninjured.

E. L.