

39 St. James Street

London S.W. 1

25<sup>th</sup> February, 1927

Dr. L. G. Bourdillon,  
GORING-ON-THAMES

Dear L.G.,

It was very good to see you again the other day and I hope soon to be able to take advantage of your invitation to drop in and have a look at you. Meanwhile I enclose a MS copy of the Aisne story which I hope will bring back mixed memories to you.

With very good wishes

Yours ever,

Yump

XXXXX

To. Sir Lancelot

From Yump

In memory of the 8th Division in general and in particular on the afternoon when we debated turning a wounded German airman off the ambulance in the valley near Treslon. Do you remember how wild you were at the thought of saving him when so many of our own men were in need?

BETWEEN THE AISNE AND THE MARNE. 1918.

**Notes:**

1. Dr. Lancelot Gerard Bourdillon, DSO, MC and Bar.
2. From the War Diary, 8<sup>th</sup> Division, Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff (WO 95/1678/3).
3. Extract from: The Last of the Ebb: The Battle of the Aisne, 1918. Sidney Rogerson. 1937.

## **BETWEEN THE AISNE AND THE MARNE. 1918.**

*On May 5<sup>th</sup> 1918, the battle-weary units of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division de-trained at Fere-en-Tardenois, and, for the second time during the war, British troops found themselves in the country between the Aisne and the Marne.*

*The Division had been terribly shattered in both German offensives of March and April, and sorely needing rest and respite. But rest behind the line was impossible owing to the shortage of men, while the British front contained no quiet sectors where tired divisions could, while holding the line, recuperate their energy and assimilate their heavy reinforcements. Such homes of rest were at this period only to be found on the front held by the French Armies, and so it came about that at the beginning of May the IXth Corps was formed of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, and 50<sup>th</sup> divisions and, under the recently affected unity of command, was transferred to the 6<sup>th</sup> French Army taking over a section of line about 15 miles length between Rheims and the Chemin des Dames.*

*To the battered, battle-weary troops, whose only knowledge of France was based upon their experience of the Northern front, the Champagne country in the full glory of spring was a revelation. Gone was the depressing monotony of Flanders, drab and weeping, with its muds, its mists, its pollards and its pave; gone the battle – wrecked landscapes of Picardy and the Somme, with their shattered villages and blasted woods. Here all was peace. The countryside basked contentedly in the blazing sunshine. Trim villages nestled in quiet hollows beside lazy streams, and tired eyes were refreshed by the sight of rolling hills, clad with great woods golden with laburnum blossom; by the soft greenery of lush meadowland, shrubby vineyards and fields of growing corn. Right up to within two miles of the line civilians were living, going about their business of husbandry as if ignorant of the imminence of war.*

*Nor was the illusion of rustic tranquillity shattered by the trench area itself, although this had been the scene of the great French offensive of 1917, - one of the bloodiest battles of the whole campaign on the Western Front.*

*The ground was everywhere pitted with shell-holes, honey-combed with dug-outs and littered with tangles of barbed wire. Here were concrete “pill boxes”, super- “pill-boxes”, resembling square forts and all bearing the marks of artillery fire; there in a line, the remains of seven or eight French tanks – a grim memento of the disastrous first use of these “chars d`assaut”. But whereas only a year before it had been an area of death and destruction, in May 1918, Nature had reasserted herself and hidden the grosser evidence of battle under a mantle of green. Only the actual front line trenches, dug in the chalk, seared the landscape with white scars. The woods had been blasted by the shell-fire of the previous year, but now each shattered tree stump had covered its wounds with a wealth of close foliage. In the shell-holes grass had grown and water plants; near the gun emplacements in the reserve line grew lilies of the-valley, forget me nots, larkspur and honeysuckle. The whole battle area had become a shrubbery, a vast garden fashioned by artillery.*

*In places coils of rusty wire showed redly through grass. While derelict tanks and shattered pill-boxes still resisted all nature's attempts to conceal the evidence of battle. Occasionally, too, a shell would break the summer silence and wake echoes in the sleeping hills. But even the shells seemed tired, arriving in a leisurely sort of way and exploding apologetically, without injury to anyone.*

*These were small blemishes. They served, if anything, to increase rather than diminish the general impression that hostilities were impossible in such a setting appearing rather as relics from the dim and distant past, instead of as the coffin at the feast.*

*So forceful was the illusion that even the French command appeared to have been lulled into a sense of security, and this in spite of the fact that it was well-known that the Germans had [not] had an attack "mounted" on this front for a considerable time. Indeed, the French had themselves made extensive counter-preparations and had heavily fortified the Roucy heights, a range of steep, heavily wooded hills marking the south side of the Aisne Valley.*

*The actual sector taken over by the IX Corps lay between Bermicourt and Bouconville, north-west of Rheims, the 50<sup>th</sup> Division holding the left, the 8<sup>th</sup> the centre, and the 21<sup>st</sup> the right. The 25<sup>th</sup> Division arrived later and was placed in reserve. The 8<sup>th</sup> Division was disposed with all three Brigades in line, each on a one battalion front. Our own Brigade, the 23<sup>rd</sup> (Brig. Gen. Grogan) took the left flank and relieved the 371 Ieme French regiment (Commandant Villemorin) with Headquarters at Bois des Buttes.*

*The international relief occasioned some difficulty, but more amusement, much laughter being caused by the French relief orders which ended with two sentences. "Pas de manoeuvres de lampes electriques; en cas de bombardement on se couche!" Never did such simple instructions cover such a multitude of contingencies!*

*The forward trench system was only a matter of one and a half miles in front of the Aisne River, with which ran parallel at a distance of about one hundred yards the Aisne Canal. These two waterways in turn ran almost parallel with the line on our immediate front. According to the dispositions which, in conformity to French orders, we had taken up, the battle stations of all troops were on the German side of the Aisne, while the artillery were in emplacements used by the French for months, and, consequently, it is safe to say, well known to the enemy. Moreover, 8<sup>th</sup> Divisional Headquarters were in Roucy Village, where the staff were billeted in the Chateau, perched upon the hillside in full view of the enemy.*

*THESE WERE TACTICAL MISTAKES OF THE FIRST ORDER, as events were soon to prove, but at the time we pooh-poohed the idea of any activity developing which might necessitate battle positions being taken up.*

*Half-left from us, and on the further flank of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division, ran the hogs back of the Chemin des Dames, a veritable mountain range held by a dismounted French Cavalry Corps. Away to the right, in the 21<sup>st</sup> area, was the famous Cote 108, with its blasted crest showing dazzling white in the sun. On our own Divisional front the ground was uniformly flat, only broken by the Bois des Buttes, which rose like a giant mole-hill from the plain. An ideal aiming mark for the German gunner.*

*Except for this topographical prominence, the Bois des Buttes was an ideal headquarters. Around its base deep shafts led down to a regular underground barracks, thirty feet below ground level, excavated originally by the enemy and improved by the French. Apart from the burrows actually running under the hillock itself and occupied by the personnel of Brigade Headquarters, were three other sets of tunnels, all lighted by electricity and big enough if necessary to hide three Battalions, in addition to the heterogeneous collection of British artillery observers and French electrical mechanics, anti-tank gunners and heavy machine gunners already located in them. Indeed, an entire German regiment had been found in them when taken a year previously.*

*As living quarters at this time of the year they were suffocatingly hot, but into the sides of the Bois de Buttes roomier shelters had been built enjoying both light and air. Our mess, Officers and sleeping quarters were in these ground-floor dwellings, out of which opened the stairs to the underground bolt holes in case of emergency. The General's bedroom was a most pretentious apartment, containing an imposing*

*four poster bed, a legacy reluctantly left behind by Commandant Villemorin. At the other side of the hill in similar habitations and connected by the underground passages were the Headquarters 45 Brigade R.F.A. who were covering our Brigade front. This was at once a tactical and a social convenience – not only were we in close touch with our guns but we never lacked a fourth at bridge o`nights! From the dugouts a perpendicular chimney had been pierced through the centre of the hill. Opening at the summit in a heavily protected concrete lookout post. As a defensive position, the place might have been made one of great strength. The trouble was that the vast and ramified systems of tunnels were never half-used nor half explored.*

*Similarly with the trench system. In every direction ran trenches, some relics of German occupation, some dug by the French and never occupied, some filled with wire, some with grass and brambles. For ten days we endeavoured to follow them on the maps handed over by the French, but to no purpose. Dignified by high sounding names, “premiere parallele de doublement”, “deuzieme ligna de reduits”, “ligna de surveillance”, most of them were found to be disused and overgrown.*

*Despite much individual effort, it was never possible in the time at our disposal even to reconnoitre the system thoroughly, much less to organise it into some adequate scheme of defence. We had to trust to the parting assurance of the French we had relieved, “The line is very strong; there is much wire”, the last part of which remark was certainly true! There were such quantities that it was practically impossible to move anywhere except along a trench.*

*None of these things seriously worried us. We had come down to the trench front as a “rest cure”. We expected neither to attack nor to be attacked. Yet it was due to this very combination of circumstances that the enemy was able to successfully develop his offensive.*

*The first week in the line passed peaceably enough. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Brigade was a very happy family. Brigade Headquarters itself was a remarkably enjoyable “mess” and in the three battalions were as cheery a crowd as it was possible to meet. The Middlesex out at rest near Roucy instituted a regimental sports day, when Colonel Page found scope for his humour in some novel competitions.*

*The West Yorkshires in support lived a life of ease and the Devons in the front line could find little but the heat and an inadequate water supply of which to complain. The heat certainly was terrific, the chalk trenches having a way of converting themselves into ovens of glaring whiteness.*

*At Brigade Headquarters we found plenty of work to do in reorganising the area as far as possible on English lines, and when work permitted, there were many calls to be paid on friends in other units, whom we had little chance of seeing since the war of movement began.*

## *II*

*After eight days in the line the first relief took place, the West Yorkshires moving into the front line and the Middlesex into support, while the Devons went back to Roucy to rest.*

*It was about this time that people began to grow uneasy. The enemy was too quiet. Intelligence observers began to notice unusual signs – the enemy balloons especially one behind Juvincourt, were being pulled down and run up again and moved about with great frequency; more railway movement was noted; enemy artillery increased. True there was no shelling as we had become used to it, but there was an increase in steady, methodical “crumping” of battery positions, one shell at a time. This was the more significant as the suspicious observer could only put it down to ranging or to calibration of new guns.*

*Further colour was lent to this view by the fact that once on the target the shelling ceased.*

*8<sup>th</sup> Division G. decided that further information about the enemy must be obtained. “Patrolling must be pressed with energy and identification secured”. But this identification was found to be difficult to get.*

*The enemy were very much alert and had, moreover, withdrawn from their first two lines of trenches, which they had wired up. This fact in itself was disquieting.*

*At last something happened. A West Yorkshire patrol of one officer and three men succeeded in getting through the enemy wire when they collided with an enemy patrol of some twenty men. Bombs were thrown and one of our men killed. The patrol withdrew taking the dead man with them, but on regaining "No Man's Land" met a second German patrol. Another exchange of bombs resulted in a German being killed, but the English patrol had one wounded and were forced to retire, abandoning the dead man – a regrettable occurrence, as it told the enemy quite definitely that British troops were in the line before him. The officer on returning handed in a shoulder strap which he had found near the German wire and which bore the number of an enemy regiment not previously known to be on the Aisne front. Great excitement prevailed at Divisional Headquarters on this discovery, and the wires to all parts of the front were kept busy trying to get corroboration.*

*Eventually a report was received to the effect that the regiment in question had been definitely located at another part of the line, the particular unit in question being one with which we had been engaged with on the Somme. Still the mystery remained until one of the West Yorkshire intelligence section who had been out on patrol confessed that he had lost a shoulder strap taken from a German at Villiers Bretonneux. By which it is seen that whole armies can be much put about by such a casual thing as a private soldier dropping an apparently harmless souvenir!*

*No identification having been secured, the West Yorkshires again sent out a patrol, which went at once to the body of the German killed the night previously. But the enemy had been thorough. Every distinguishing mark had been stripped from the man's uniform, every incriminating document apparently taken from his pockets. It was to the lasting credit of O i/c patrol that he refused to admit himself beaten. With great care he searched the corpse and was rewarded by finding in a hip-pocket a scrap of envelope bearing the address and unit of the dead man.*

*The information was reassuring. The regiment opposite us was one which had been long in the line. They were merely holding troops. They would not attack. We breathed again.*

*Our respite was short lived. From that time events moved rapidly.*

*One morning three pathetic figures stumbled into the front line, French soldiers escaped from captivity. They were eagerly cross-examined. Had they noticed unusual activity behind the enemy lines? Yes, the prisoners' camps were being emptied, great masses of troops were arriving; everywhere was bustle and movement. In the German support trenches guns were dug in up to the muzzle.*

*A day later the Intelligence Officer 24<sup>th</sup> I.B. reported the presence of a number of black boards in the enemy lines. These could only be the direction boards known to be used for the guidance of tanks or heavy transport.*

*Then from the French on the left came the final blow. News of a great enemy attack was impending was elicited from three members of a German patrol captured on the Chemin des Dames. On further SPECIAL examination, the prisoners confessed that this attack would open at midnight 26/27<sup>th</sup> May.*

*Official information reached the Brigade about 3.45 pm on the 26<sup>th</sup> May. Millis, the Brigade-Major was stretching himself in the sun outside the dug-out. A signaller approached, saluted and handed him the little pink telephone form. "The enemy will attack on a wide front at 01.00 hours tomorrow 27<sup>th</sup> inst. AAA" - then followed instructions as to dispositions.*

*In a flash, the world around seemed altered. The landscape smiled no longer. It was all a grinning unreality, a mockery, the earth decked in spring finery so that hopes aroused might be more completely dashed.*

*These reflections forced themselves home. There was little time to indulge them. Everything was haste and energy. Moments were of importance. Much had to be done before zero hour, all the hundred and one points of detail attendant upon the complicated game of modern war. The largest item was to reconnoitre dug-out accommodation for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Devons, who would form the garrison of the reserve or battle line – a hot and tiring job involving much climbing of crazy stairs and hurrying, bent double, along long underground corridors.*

*About 6 p.m. arrived a signal officer from French Army Headquarters to inspect communications in the Brigade area. He was informed that the Brigade signal Officer, Prance, the baby of the H.P. Mess – was very busy up the line supervising arrangements for the morrow's attack. This was apparently the first intimation that he had had of the impending offensive, but the news merely caused a smile. What, the enemy attack? Nonsense, they had been GOING to attack for four months on this front, but of course everyone knew they never would. "Ils sont plus sages que ca. On ne passerait jamais ici". It is more than probable that he left Bois des Buttes confirmed in the opinion that the English were very "Windy".*

*His departure coincided with the arrival of the O.C. French "mitrailleuses de position", heavy Etienne machine guns which had been left as an additional garrison to the line. No one knew their locations, but the grey-haired old French Captain in charge arrived to place himself under British command and assure the British General of his unswerving obedience. A pleasant interlude, reminiscent of more chivalrous days, at a time when chivalry was at a discount.*

*Dinner over, the more prudent or more credulous as it then seemed, set to work to pack up everything not absolutely necessary. Meanwhile it was growing dark. The transport arrived, bringing rations and ammunition and taking away the surplus kits.*

*With the coming of night an uncanny silence settled over the countryside, a silence such as can only prevail in crowded places. About nine o'clock "harassing" fire was opened on enemy communications and assembly points. All along the line batteries gave tongue, the sharp bang of eighteen pounders, mingling with the hoarse reports of the field howitzers. Behind the river the few French heavies coughed asthmatically now and again. While the intermittent rattle of machine guns came as a staccato punctuation.*

*Yet the feeling of silence persisted. Not a shell came from the enemy, and his quietness removed any lingering doubts as to his intentions.*

*How that evening dragged! The time crept slowly on towards zero hour, till only a few minutes were left ..... Suddenly, whizz – plop! Whizz – plop! Two German gas shells burst close at hand, punctual heralds of the storm. Within a second a thousand guns roared out their iron hurricane. The night was rent with sheets of flame. The earth shuddered under the avalanche of missiles ..... leapt skywards in dust and tumult. Ever above the din screamed the fierce crescendo of approaching shells, ear splitting crashes as they burst ..... all the time the dull, thud, thud, thud of detonations ..... drumfire .... Inferno raged and whirled round the Bois des Buttes ..... The dug-outs rocked ..... filled with the acrid fumes of cordite, the sickly sweet tang of gas. Timbers started; earth showered from the roof; men rushed for shelter, seizing kits, weapons, gas-masks, message-pads as they dived to safety. It was a descent into hell. Crowded with jostling, sweating humanity, the dug-outs reeked, and to make matters worse, Headquarters had no sooner got below than gas began to filter down. Gas-masks were hurriedly donned and anti-gas precautions taken – the entrances closed by saturated blankets, braziers lighted on the stairs. If gas could not enter, neither could air. As a fact both did in small quantities, and the long night was spent*

*forty foot underground, at the hottest time of the year, in stinking, overcrowded holes, their entrances sealed up and charcoal braziers alight drying up the atmosphere – suffocation rendered more complete by the gas-mask with clip on nostrils and gag in teeth.*

*Downstairs the clamour of the barrage was somewhat deadened, but even so far underground the walls shivered occasionally as a heavy shell burst overhead. Contact was established by 'phone and wire both with the battalions and the flank brigades. The latter were undergoing similar experience to ourselves, but the West Yorkshires reported "We're all right! You're getting the worst of it!" – then the line went, and no more news was heard of the front line battalion. The Middlesex, who were located in dug-outs close to the Bois des Buttes, were being terribly pounded, while the first wave of the barrage had all but overwhelmed the artillery. The emplacements of the 45<sup>th</sup> F.A. Brigade had all been so accurately registered that after the first half-hour of the bombardment, only one gun remained in action. Dawn began to break, but no news came of any infantry attack. The Brigade I.O. reported that the barrage and a very heavy ground mist rendered observation impossible, but shortly afterwards came the amazing message – "Enemy balloons rising from our front lines". Hot upon this came another from the 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade on the right "Enemy advancing up the Miette stream. Close to Brigade headquarters. Cannot hold out without re-inforcements". Such news was startling in the extreme, but worse was yet to come, and at about 5.30 a.m. the left Brigade, 149<sup>th</sup> reported "Enemy has broken our battle-line and are advancing on Ville au Bois". Thus before word had come of the front being assaulted, the enemy had turned both flanks and was closing on the Bois des Buttes.*

*In view of this there was nothing left but to withdraw from Headquarters and fall back across the Aisne. Orders to this effect were given and in some confusion the dug-outs were evacuated, practically everything with the exception of the Brigade confidential dispatch-box being abandoned. Once outside, the scene in the light of day was appalling. Everywhere was ruin – desolation thinly veiled by mist and smoke. The barrage had lifted a little but remained very heavy and the line of the Aisne spouted black with shell-bursts. Some deliberation took place as to the route to be followed to Pontavert. The road was receiving particular attention from the enemy guns but it was eventually chosen as the quickest way and as it would have been impossible in such shelling to pick a way cross-country over the wire-strewn, shell ploughed ground.*

*Accordingly Headquarters moved off led by the General and, although flying splinters of shell rang on steel helmets and clipped great pieces from the road, the little gas – goggled procession wound its way to Pontavert without a single casualty. Very different was the experience of others and shortly after Headquarters left the Bois des Buttes, enemy infantry closed on the hillock. To quote the Brigade I.O. – "I could see vast quantities of the enemy advancing almost unopposed and I therefore retired with my six observers, four of whom were either killed or wounded before we crossed the Aisne ". Again, some artillery officers, making across country in an attempt to reach the Bois de Gernicourt whither Headquarters were supposed to move in the event of the Bois des Buttes having to be evacuated, found themselves with the Aisne before and the enemy close behind. Without hesitation they Chose the former and divesting themselves of their equipment swam valiantly across both the river and the canal, one of them losing his false teeth in the effort!*

*A thin stream of wounded, a few stragglers began to trickle back across the bridge at Pontavert, General Grogan standing there to direct the former and collect the latter with a view to holding the line of the river. How terribly the Brigade had suffered was soon evident. Hardly a soul had escaped. Colonel Lowry of the West Yorkshires, with a bullet wound in the foot; a corporal of the same regiment; a mere handful of the Middlesex; and two or three of the Devons and a few gunners completed the tale of the survivors.*

*It is difficult to get a true picture of the attack. It had been so violent and the trenches so thinly held that all organised resistance on the divisional front was overwhelmed at once. But even then the chief*

*danger lay in the flank movements. The enemy had fiercely assaulted and carried the French lines on the Chemin des Dames, and at the same time under cover of the heavy mist: the sure shield of the German offensives - and helped by the sparse nature of the trench garrison, had worked his way up the Miette stream on the right. The advance on this flank was so rapid that small groups of Germans were across the Aisne near the Bois de Gernicourt before the remnants of the Brigade had been collected at Pontavert, but even before this was known it had become evident that any attempt to hold the line of the river with the few troops available would be out of the question.*

### *III*

*Meanwhile the 25<sup>th</sup> Division had been moved up with orders to take up positions in length along the corps front. One Brigade being assigned to each of the three divisions in line. By this arrangement the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade went to the 21<sup>st</sup> Division, the 75<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 74<sup>th</sup> to the 50<sup>th</sup> Division. The 21<sup>st</sup> Division which had been on the flank of the attack had not yet, relatively speaking, been heavily engaged, but both the 8<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions had ceased to exist as fighting units.*

*As regards the 8<sup>th</sup>, it is doubtful if the total strength of all ranks who succeeded in getting back across the river, reached a thousand, and while the other Brigades had both suffered as heavily as the 23<sup>rd</sup>, their staffs had even worse experiences. The 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade staff had been surrounded and bombed in their Headquarters, and, although more by good luck than good management, most of them had managed to escape. Wimble, the Staff Captain, was a prisoner, and General Haig was sufficiently gassed to prevent his taking any further part in the battle. The 25<sup>th</sup> had suffered still more heavily. The Brigadier, General Husey, was missing together with Pascoe, his young Brigade Major. Both had only been appointed to their respective posts a few short weeks previously, but now all that was known of their fate was that the General had been seen on the bridge at Berry-au-Bac sick unto death in the throes of gas-poisoning, while when last seen Pascoe was rallying the remains of the Brigade in a despairing effort to arrest the enemy onrush.*

*The command of what was left of the 8<sup>th</sup> Divisional infantry accordingly passed to General Grogan, and from this point the story of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division is identified with that of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Brigade.*

*The arrival of welcome reinforcements in the shape of 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade and some 650 men of all units from the Divisional Lewis Gun School enabled some sort of defensive line to be organised in front of Roucy Village. This line was not established before 11 a.m. and a large gap was found to exist on the left flank where the remnants of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division should have touched the French.*

*By this time the barrage had died down, though steady long-range shelling was kept up on the back areas. Viewed from the hills above the village the area of operations presented a vivid spectacle. The day was extremely hot, the sunshine brilliant, and, but for the deep drone of heavy shells winging their way rearwards, all sounds of battle were temporarily stilled. Below, the steep green slopes showed few signs of activity save where the fields and gardens round Roucy little groups of khaki figures moved busily about. The Aisne and its attendant canal glittered like silver ribbons in the sun, but in the vacated trench area beyond hung a pall of haze and dust, which lifting at intervals revealed the roads thick with marching regiments in field grey, with guns, lorries and wagons. Above like great unwinking eyes, rode observation balloons, towed along by motor transport.*

*On no other occasion perhaps did the enemy so rapidly follow up his attack. Battalions advanced in fours across the captured trenches before the last elements of resistance were subdued, while as if to add insult to injury, the war lord himself with his general staff actually arrived to view the battle from the Bois des Buttes at about the same time as its dispossessed occupants were awaiting the German attack in front of Roucy Village!*



*What a target the whole scene presented and what havoc even a few eighteen pounders would have worked on those crowded roads! But not a gun of either the 8<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> Divisional Artillery had been got across the river; while of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division, the 110<sup>th</sup> Artillery Brigade which had taken up positions on the low ground south of the Aisne, was practically wiped out by 9.a.m. and the 112<sup>th</sup> Brigade, though more fortunate, was only able to keep a few guns in action until the afternoon. Moreover the bridges across the river at Pontavert, Concevreux and Maizy were not destroyed in time. Consequently, not only was it impossible to engage the enemy until he had come within rifle range, but he was enabled to move his guns and transport across the river without let or hindrance.*

*By mid-day German infantry had crossed both canal and river in force – at Maizy on the left and at Pontavert in the centre, but not till between 2 and 3 p.m. did any attack develop. Large numbers of the enemy then advanced in open order on a front of about two miles. They were met with very heavy rifle and machine gun fire and, unsupported as they were by artillery, suffered severe casualties without piercing the defence. But it was not long before the gaps in the British line were found out and the enemy working rapidly round the left flank, forced the defenders to make a precipitate retirement to the crest of the Roucy hills.*

*The heavily fortified positions in the woods above the village had all to be abandoned, and a line taken up astride the Roucy - Ventelay road, where although cover, either natural or artificial, was scanty, the field of fire was excellent.*

*By this time enemy aerial activity had considerably developed, and low – flying planes machines – gunned the roads with unpleasant regularity. The observation balloons had come much nearer and against the clear sky looked startlingly close – a heated Cockney even guaranteeing that “e could spit into the barsket from `ere – easy!”*

*In a ditch shelter by the side of the road the Brigade Officers enjoyed their first meal since dinner the previous night. It was not a very sumptuous repast, being a “cold collation” consisting of one tin of sausages divided between eight people and eaten of one penknife. It is also regrettable that the kind contributor of the tin (the Intelligence Officer, who had rescued it from falling into Boche hands) was the only one who got no share of its contents.*

*Little respite was given for digestion, as about 5 p.m. the enemy attempted to storm the position. Lines of infantry in extended order advanced from the cover of the woods, cheering and shouting, but again the frontal attack was halted by the steady volume of rifle and machine-gun fire which it encountered. Was momentary for the gap on the left must by this time have been some miles in width, taking full advantage of which the enemy commenced an encircling movement, at the same time subjecting the front to a bombardment from trench mortars, these tactics were employed throughout his advance. The front would be pinned down by trench mortar fire, while small groups of infantry with light machine guns would dribble round in ones and twos and, taking advantage of depressions in the ground and any natural cover, endeavour to turn the flanks of the position.*

*The situation became critical. It was obvious that the position could not be held against a determined attack, the left flank was already turned and in addition every danger existed that the rapidity of the German advance up the valley from Maizy to Meurival would cut off the line of retreat. At the same time the enemy`s tactics gave the defenders a short but much – needed breather. 8<sup>th</sup> Division Headquarters, which had evacuated Roucy the previous night now moved back to Montigny, while Brig. Gen. Kennedy of the 75<sup>th</sup> Brigade took over the command of the front from General Grogan, who was recalled by Division. The day began to wane and the glow of the sunset was dimmed by the rolling clouds of smoke which arose from blazing villages, farmsteads and huts. Never was the coming of night more welcomed, and in the gathering dusk the line was hastily withdrawn behind Ventelay and new positions*

taken up at about 11.30 p.m. on the ridge above Montigny between Les Grands Savarts and Romain which by 9 p.m. was blazing fiercely.

The way back led through the area of the old transport lines and camps which the night previously had sheltered the stores, canteens, regimental details and general impedimenta of the Division. Now only deserted, shell – swept ruins remained, but the road to Ventelay was strewn with the bodies of man and horse, with charred limbers and splintered wagons, destroyed as they had attempted to escape.

The withdrawal was not accomplished without collisions with enemy patrols, whose advance on the right was so rapid that at Bouvancourt the entire 25<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance was captured. The village was surrounded before the Ambulance knew that any danger existed, Colonel G.J. Ormsby, A.D.M.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Division actually entered the village in a Ford ambulance to warn them to retire when fire was opened on him by an enemy machine gun. He was hit in the arm but, his car being uninjured was able to escape. Later on the same evening Colonel Puddicombe, O.C. 25<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, and Lieut. Kelly, M.O.R.C., U.S.A. also managed to give his captors the slip and regain our lines.

Behind the line the congestion was appalling, the roads for miles being blocked by long lines of retreating transport. The rapidity of the enemy advance; the accurate long – range fire on road junctions and bridges; the convergence of routes; the hilly nature of the country and the heavy casualties to beast and driver; these were factors which made the task of saving the transport one of extraordinary difficulty, and it says much for the discipline and devotion of all ranks concerned that the seemingly impossible was accomplished. All night long the columns crawled slowly back, toiling up steep hillsides and pounding down sudden valleys; the march over and again interrupted by the crash of a shell, squeals of wounded animals, an abrupt halt - then on again. Still daylight found practically all vehicles across the Vesle and on the high ground above Jonchery. Here the brigade transport unlimbered for food and a brief rest. Even in such a predicament the resource of the old soldier was unruffled, and the quartermaster of the West Yorkshires ate for his breakfast a fresh egg, laid during the night by a fowl which was living in an improvised coop on one of the wagons! A pretty domestic touch.

The pleasures of the breakfast – table had been barely tasted or nose bags half emptied, when the infantry on the far side of the river were seen to be falling back. Almost simultaneously an alert enemy gunner “spotted” the halted column and started a sharp burst of shelling. Horses were hastily harnessed; the retreat resumed with all possible speed, but not before two men had been hit.

The shell that did the damage burst right in the middle of the road. Before its smoke had cleared away, a dishevelled private, blood pouring from a deep scratch on his face, dashed up to an officer, seized him by the hand and in the richest Sheffield accent exclaimed “By goom, sir, I’m glad to see thee! I thowt thou was deead when I didn’t see thee leave the doog-outs”.

He was the officer’s servant, a man over 40, who by his own confession “joined up” in a moment of extreme alcoholic exuberance one night after seeing a pal off to the front. When next morning the recruiting sergeant claimed him he had quite forgotten the incident, which did not please his wife who as he put it, “fair played pop wi` me”.

It is impossible to follow the transport further on its journey throughout the long summer day; suffice it to say that under a blazing sun without adequate halts and harassed by enemy planes, tired and frightened animals and cursing sweating men plodded wearily rearwards by way of Vendeuil, Savigny, Faverolles, Lhery and Romigny until towards evening they reached a temporary haven of refuge in the wooded slopes above Jonquery.

During the small hours of the morning a sudden enemy attack from the direction of Bouvancourt had enabled him to break through on the right, forcing the scattered line on the Montigny heights to beat a

*hasty retreat towards the Vesle, where another position was taken up in front of Jonchery. At the same time General Grogan was despatched by General Heneker which had moved rapidly back, with orders to collect what stragglers he could in the neighbourhood of Jonchery and with them to hold the south bank of the river, while General Kennedy of the 75<sup>th</sup> Brigade was ordered to fill the gap to the right and join up with the 21<sup>st</sup> Division. By some marvel of improvisation, this was done and a line established by daylight from where the Prouilly road crosses the Vesle to the farm about 1 1/2 miles northwest of Jonchery.*

*Dawn on the 28<sup>th</sup> therefore saw the position retrieved so far as the remnants of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup> and the greater part of the 25<sup>th</sup> Divisions were concerned, and the morning wore slowly on without any further action manifesting itself. The sun climbed high into a cloudless sky beating fiercely down upon a panorama which was curiously peaceful, although the roads smoked with the passage of troops and transport, and here and there burning farmsteads glowed dully in the brilliant sunshine.*

*The enemy's temporary inactivity afforded a most valuable respite, in which feverish efforts were made to consolidate the position against a fresh assault. Touch was again established on both flanks and although the line was exceedingly "sketchy" it was some satisfaction to know that it was more or less continuous. On the right the 21<sup>st</sup> Division, despite heavy casualties, was still able to maintain an organised front and was in touch with the French on its further flank. On the left the situation was far less reassuring. Here, towards the centre of his main stroke, the enemy advance had been even more rapid and a deep salient had been driven into the allied front; the disintegration of which was complete. It was on this flank that the next blow fell, and shortly after noon a determined attack was launched against the front held by remnants of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division about two miles to the west of Jonchery. So vigorous was this onslaught that the line gave, and the enemy, pushing through the gap with great rapidity, began to work his way towards the high wooded ridges above Vendeuil. The attack was simultaneously extended towards the right, forcing a hasty retreat across the Vesle along the whole front held by the British Corps.*

*All the morning's work of consolidation had been for nothing, and as the tired khaki figures struggled up the steep slopes south of the river, they could see enemy artillery and transport pouring in continuous streams down the two roads converging on Jonchery, while infantry swarmed busily across the open country. It was a sight given to gunners only in dreams, but not a gun was available.*

*On the crest of the hills overlooking the river, along the Jonchery – Branscourt road, was an old French strongpoint, and here a stand was made for about two hours. It was a wonderful position commanding the passage of the river and considerable toll was levied on the advancing masses by machine guns and rifle fire. Once again the frontal attack was halted and for a time remained discreetly out of effective range. The check was not of long duration as little opposition was offered to him on either flank, and German patrols, plentifully provided with light machine guns, occupied the high ground west of Jonchery towards Vendeuil about 4 p.m.*

*The position was soon nearly surrounded, and towards 5 o'clock it was hastily vacated, its defenders falling back under fire towards the crest running almost parallel with and to the east of the main Jonchery – Savigny road. Here some old practice trenches furnished most welcome cover, and by the strenuous personal efforts of General Grogan and Millis, the heterogeneous collection of tired troops, representing almost every unit of three divisions, artillery as well as infantry, was again formed into some coherent line. On the left of the position was a large farmstead occupied by a handful of French infantry, but on the far side of the road the ground sloped upwards towards a great mass of woods. That these were already in enemy hands was obvious from the number of grey clad – figures that from time to time could be seen moving among the trees, but the General wisely decided that at all costs the enemy must be prevented from securing the Jonchery – Savigny road, as the longer use of this was denied him the more effectively would his main advance be delayed. A party of about seventy men under Major Cope of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Devons*

and Thompson was accordingly sent forward to take up a position on the far side of the road and to check any German attempt to debouch from the woods.

As it was not known how many of the enemy were already concealed in the undergrowth and cornfields between the woods and the road, which by the way, were nowhere more than 100 yards apart, the task of this party was not an enviable one but actually their antics provided a little much needed comic relief. The short advance was made in extended order, and was accomplished without casualties, finishing up with a truly ferocious bayonet charge through a large cornfield, out of which several Germans scuttled like bolting rabbits.

The party took up their position in the cornfields between the road and the woods, from the cover of which the enemy made no further attempt to advance, although intermittent rifle fire was kept up until dusk. Then about 100 yards in front of the position, two round heads in coal scuttle helmets popped up inquisitively from some bushes. Their owners, realising at once that they had come too far for the good of their health, bobbed down and began to crawl away. Unfortunately for them their movements had been observed by the watchful Thompson. Pointing the retreating pair out to the man nearest him a sergeant of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sherwood Foresters – he remarked – in much the same tones as one would use to a waiter “Sergeant, shoot me those Boche!”. “Very good, sir” came the perfectly composed answer, two quick shots and those two Germans were no more. Whereupon Thompson promptly marched out and rifled the bodies of the slain, gaining precious identification and also, what was of more immediate importance, matches!

The coming of darkness rendered the isolated position of the party still more precarious, but throughout the night they kept up a perfectly astounding pandemonium and a great deal of rifle – fire. Whether the bluff succeeded, or whether the enemy were equally tired, or both, it is impossible to say, the fact being that no further action developed during the night.

Meanwhile the transport had largely unlimbered in the woods above Jonquery, when Quartermasters ever importunate – were reminding transport officers that rations had to go up the line. This was a bitter pill to swallow! Remember the transport had been forced to retire at least three times the normal distance behind the line; horses and men were almost “all in “. Yet, altho` the usual grouses were forthcoming - , “Why the blinking `ell couldn` t we `ave dumped rations on the way?`; `ow can I arsk these perishin` mules o`mine to go back and shake `ands with jerry again? “, and many more comments of a more sanguinary nature. The ration limbers set out in the cool of the evening to do the whole journey twice again. It was a weary pilgrimage along strange roads in the dark. Several times they lost their way, once turning back when almost into Crugny, which was in enemy hands, but finally dumped their precious loads on the roadside close behind the ridge held by the brigade.

Parsloe, the Brigade Transport Officer, riding on ahead to report, found a very cold, hungry and irate General huddled up in a length of trench struggling to snatch a little sleep, and, such is human nature, was heartily cursed for not having brought rations right up to the line. But in extenuation it must be remembered that both Officers and men had had practically no food and less sleep for forty-eight hours of hard fighting; also that the nights were as cold as the days were hot – ample excuse surely for ragged tempers.

Except for this incident, the night past quietly and, although the uncertainty of the situation rendered sleep impossible, the very fact of remaining stationary and un-attacked throughout the hours of darkness enabled the bulk of the scattered garrison to start the day of the 29<sup>th</sup> May a little more refreshed in spirit.

#### IV

*Unlike the previous day the enemy commenced operations early and, just as the first glow of dawn began to gild the horizon, large bodies of infantry issued from the woods in the apparent belief that the advance party had been withdrawn. A fierce gust of rifle – fire sharply disillusioned them and they scuttled hastily back to cover.*

*This was about 3 a.m. after which hour no further overt action took place for some time, although it was obvious that a more determined move was impending and that the enemy was massing in the woods. In spite of this, the little party vigorously kept up its ridiculous bluff until nearly 11 a.m. when strong parties of Germans were seen working round both flanks. Then, and not till they were in imminent danger of being entirely surrounded, was the order given to fall back and rejoin the main body on the far side of the road. Needless to say this was obeyed with alacrity and the mere handful of troops, which by sheer bluff had held up an overwhelming number of the enemy since the previous afternoon, fled precipitately back to the ridge behind. Immediately their withdrawal was observed the enemy swarmed out after them, opening a furious fusillade from rifles and machine guns which caused serious casualties.*

*Moreover, this time the Boche meant business, and with much shouting and cheering advanced to the assault of the main position. For a time he was held, but the weight of numbers gave such an impetus to the attack that about noon General Grogan saw the fruitlessness of further resistance and accordingly ordered the line to retire by bits – to say “retire by platoons” would sound absurd! – on to the ridge in front of Treslon village about a mile to the rear. Closely followed by the enemy and pursued by his attentions in the shape of an embryonic machine – gun barrage, this retirement was not accomplished without difficulty or casualties but once again the General by his energy and personal example extracted order out of chaos and some sort of line was again formed.*

*By this time the force under his command had become pitifully thin – a ragged army of Falstaffian dimensions. And what a collection! The General himself; his brigade staff – officers; Smythe, the G.S.O. III 8<sup>th</sup> Division, Major Cope of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Devons; Colonel Moore of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sherwood Foresters, the only infantry C.O. of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division not already a casualty; two colonels of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division without a single man of the units they once commanded; a knot of machine gunners from the same division whose gun refused to function from lack of water; a woeful sprinkling of all units of the 8<sup>th</sup> and most of the 25<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions; in all about two hundred – all hungry, sleepless, dirty; many bleeding from wounds of greater or less severity. A number of French colonial troops, part of a division which had just come up as reinforcements, completed the tale of men.*

*This scattered remnant was disposed along a steep ridge, deep in growing corn, which sloped away towards the left into the wooded valley of the Ardre. Here among the trees which bordered the river were more French, blue clad “Poilus” as well as Khaki – clad colonials, chattering and laughing and making great play with their Hotchkiss automatic – rifles against Boche planes. In rear the hillside sloped abruptly down to a miniature valley in which nestled the village of Treslon and at whose further side the ground rose sharply up to another ridge of a more wooded nature, which owing to its close proximity to a village of that name was known as the Bouleuse ridge.*

*For some unaccountable reason the enemy did not follow up his advantage. Instead he sat down and contented himself with subjecting the ridge with a machine gun barrage of some intensity. The air hummed with bullets. Bullets scythed shrilly through the standing corn; kicked vicious spurts of dust from the sun – baked earth. Ricochets droned angrily away overhead. Fortunately the fire was very inaccurate and, although disconcerting actual damage to the scattered forces lying in extended order along the crest of the ridge.*

*Weary and hungry as they were, the spirits of the little band were marvellous. This was largely due to the example set by the General. In a position of extreme personal and tactical danger after three days of incessant fighting, he bumped backwards and forwards along the line on a commandeered mount – his round, red face wreathed in smiles, his eyes twinkling, chuckling to himself as if the whole affair were a boyish joke.*

*His borrowed steed was quickly wounded – no matter, by this time the grooms had arrived with the Brigade chargers. Mounting himself on “Sandy”, his pet pony, the General resumed his ride in full view of the Boche, laughing and talking with the men as he passed – all the time affectionately belabouring “Sandy” with a great crook handled walking stick.*

*Yet at the same time he was perfectly conscious of the seriousness of the situation, and took what immediate steps he could to ameliorate it. A picked handful of his small command were surreptitiously withdrawn to the Bouleuse ridge to act as a covering party when the inevitable retirement from the present position should take place. An Officer was also sent down to the Headquarters of a French regiment believed to be in Treslon Village with a request that they should conform to the dispositions and strengthen the little force on the Bouleuse ridge.*

*The French were eventually located comfortably ensconced in a cellar but General Grogan’s message met with a frankly incredulous reception. An English General in the firing line? Impossible! Only the prompt evidence of an eye witness - a “sous officer” – who exclaimed “But yes, my Colonel, there is – a mad English General on horse – back! I have seen him!” - convinced the regimental commander who even then politely but firmly declined to contribute the desired support.*

*Millis kept galloping across to the left in a series of attempts to stop the French - who were without officers and continually announced their intention of retiring “en soutien” – to stay their ground; Ledward, the Staff Captain, and the grooms made journeys from a S.A.A. limber in the valley to the line with bandoliers of ammunition; Prance was ostensibly busied with his signal communications.*

*The Whole scene – its sunny fields of ripening corn, its galloping horsemen – was for a time more reminiscent of some old time battle picture than an episode from the Great War, and in spite of the pressing attention of machine – gun bullets, one was strongly reminded of field days on Laffan’s Plain or the long valley. But such pre-war memories were destined to be rudely shattered. The reason for the enemy’s infantry inactivity was soon explained, and he was shortly observed to be man – handling into position several heavy trench – mortars. Owing to the weight of these pieces and their ammunition it was some little time before they were ready to open fire, but about 3 p.m. an aimed bombardment started which in an entrenched position would have been serious enough but which no troops, however fresh or however good their morale, could have long withstood in the open. The effect of the big Minenwerfer shells – huge two hundred pound canisters of high explosive on the hard soil was terrible, the tearing crash of the burst being as demoralising as the execution wrought by the flying splinters. The little red – tiled houses in Treslon Village crumbled in columns of black dust; men were torn to bleeding shreds; the line quickly thinned out. Nerves on edge before became still more jagged.*

*Worse was yet to come. On the left the French again grew restive, seeing which Millis started once more across to rally them. Prance, snatching a hasty meal of dry bread and wine in the saddle, shouted “Hang it all wait a moment for a fellow! I’m coming too” – and catching Millis up, galloped with him across the ridge. The two had not gone more than 50 yards when a shell burst right between their horses, killing both animals and Prance outright. Millis being hit through both ankles. From an individual standpoint the moral effect of this was out of all proportion to its actual significance. Looking back on that afternoon after so long an interval. It is difficult to tell why. Yet at the moment these two casualties seemed to mark a turning point. Probably the reason was that up to that time the little family of Brigade Headquarters had*

come unscathed through the holocaust. Then in a second an irreparable gap had been made. The sun seemed to have gone in. In no one was the effect more noticeable than in the General. His cheerfulness vanished and again his attitude was contagious.

The breaking point both individually and tactically was being reached. The pitiless bombardment continued. Colonel Moore was killed. To complete the hopelessness of the situation, allied guns, whether British or French, began shelling the ridge. The first salvo, all too accurately aimed, burst well in the middle of the tired line, doing fearful havoc. Frantic messages were sent back to stop this havoc. At the same time Bourdillon, the D.A.M.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Division arrived in the little valley behind the line with three ambulances to pick up the wounded.

A vivid picture stands out of the thin stream of mutilated humanity, English and French, being carried down on hurdles and ground sheets – such medical amenities such as stretchers had long since disappeared – when suddenly the Bombardment increased to rapid fire ..... stopped suddenly ..... then followed a fierce rattle of musketry, shouts and cheers, a rush of Khaki clad figures down the hillside, the General and Ledward galloping past, the ambulances clattering off down the valley in a cloud of dust – the ridge was in German hands.

If at other times he had been slow at following up his advantage, the enemy on this occasion lost no time in attempting to exploit his success. The assault lost none of its momentum. Scores of light machine guns were brought into play upon the survivors of the mixed force as they scrambled breathlessly up the steep slopes of the Bouleuse Ridge. At the same time, urged on by the loud shouts from their non-commissioned officers, the German line swept forward in pursuit, and before the British line could even be rallied, German signal lights were rising from the clumps of woods all along its forward slope. Worse still, in one place a party of the enemy actually established a footing on the crest of the ridge itself.

Action of a very decided character was necessary. Hastily gathering together about a dozen men under a young officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> East Lancashire's, the General led them at the charge straight into the wood into which the enemy were established. The stroke succeeded and the German post, surprised at the unexpectedness of the little counter attack, was driven headlong down the slope.

An amusing incident in connection with this sortie was again provided by General Grogan. A German infantryman drew a bead on him from about 20 yards range, but his shot went so wide that Sandy, the General's pony, was hit through the nose. With a total disregard of the niceties of military etiquette, the General signalled his miss by "cocking a snook" at the offending marksman, then leaving him to be dealt with by the troops following him, the General calmly got down and bandaged up Sandy's nose with his own handkerchief. As a matter of fact, the wound was simply a clean hole through the fleshy part of the nose and did not appear to inconvenience the beast in the least.

Elsewhere along the ridge. The enemy thrusting forward had met with an unexpectedly stubborn resistance and sat down with the apparent intention of repeating the same tactics he had employed with such success in the capture of the ridge in front. In the respite thus given, efforts were made once again to organise a continuous defensive line, although by this time its length had so contracted that it did not appear to be in touch with either flank.

Shortly news arrived that the 19<sup>th</sup> Division were expected to reinforce the front at any moment, while most welcome reinforcements of two composite units about the strength of half a battalion each made up from the rag – tag and bobtail, chiefly of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division, arrived into the line. The word "reinforcements" is somewhat of a misnomer since actually the new arrivals outnumbered the force that General Grogan had left. By this time dusk was beginning to fall and the position was one of extreme anxiety. The enemy patrols were definitely established in the clumps of woods on the forward slopes of the

ridge about 300 yards from the crest. The line could not be expected to stand any further prolonged pressure.

Once again the General was a miracle of endurance, although other officers had reached such a point of exhaustion that not even the realisation of imminent personal danger could keep them awake or stir their tired limbs. Thompson for example, in the rush that took place in the retreat from the Treslon to the Bouleuse ridge, managed to reach the summit of the latter; then out of breath sat down for a minute and, even while the enemy were attempting to carry the position, fell asleep and resisted all efforts to awake him. He was eventually removed by one of the grooms who lifted him on a charger and bore him out of the immediate scene of battle without awakening him from his slumbers.

Signal communication was once more established with Division and night fell without any further enemy action. During the night word arrived that the 56<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Division would take over command of the front from General Grogan.

Here properly the story of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Brigade's part in the Battle ends, tho' actually only the General, in a state bordering on collapse, the relief brigade major and Thompson were relieved. Neither change of command nor the arrival of fresh troops brought any respite to the gallant survivors on the Bouleuse ridge.

Although that morning the 8<sup>th</sup> Division handed over the whole of the front to the 19<sup>th</sup> Division and retired comfortably across the Marne to Villiers – au – Bois, the pitiful remnants of the division, with their fellows of the 25<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions remained in line and often in action until about the 12<sup>th</sup> June – and this in spite of the fact that sorely tried 21<sup>st</sup> Division was taken out of the line the following night.

The 56<sup>th</sup> Brigade opened their headquarters in the village of Sarcy on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> May, and it was amusing to see them settling down to breakfast and cursing the non-arrival of Kidneys and bacon. They were new to the open warfare game of hare and hounds with the Boche playing the latter and more enviable part and we scarred veterans could afford to smile, hungry as we were, and say "you wait " nor had they to wait long.

The new Division had been rushed into action so rapidly that its transport had not been able to keep up with the fighting troops and as a result Viscount Fielding – the A.A. and Q.M.G 8<sup>th</sup> Division – ordered the effective portion of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division first line transport to remain for the moment at the disposal of the 56<sup>th</sup> Brigade. As a further long withdrawal was imminent, instructions were given that the limbers should make their way rearwards, laying dumps of S.A.A. and rations as they went.

A large part of the transport was in SARCY village, but about 9 a.m. news came from the 56<sup>th</sup> Brigade Headquarters that the enemy had taken Lhery on the left and was also making progress on the right. This double stroke threatened both the avenues of retreat and the transport was at once galloped out of the village taking the less dangerous of the two routes, that to Chaumuzy. Even so the column came under fire outside the village, Mathews the transport officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Middlesex, being hit in the hand.

A little way down the road the traffic congestion became appalling. English wagons mingled with French wagons and mules met an advancing wave of transport, Guns and men of both nationalities pushing up towards the line. After a seemingly interminable march, Chaumuzy was reached only to find Divisional Headquarters had left the town which was in a state of wild confusion, full of demoralised French troops, who had apparently looted a canteen. At a time when chaos was at its height an enemy gun began shelling the town with dreadful effect.

By making a wide detour across the country the 8<sup>th</sup> Divisional limbers eventually got ahead of the traffic block and regained the main road between Marfaux and Pourcy, but it was not till Nanteuil – la Fosse was reached late in the afternoon that any responsible staff – officers could be found who could give information as to where they could make for, or orders as to what they were to do.



*In this village the 19<sup>th</sup> Division had established their advanced Headquarters, while in a potato cellar were located a few officers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division who had been left in the forward zone to superintend the evacuation of remnants of the Division other than fighting troops. The brick walls of that cellar could have witnessed few more comic spectacles than the supper which was served there that night. Everyone was hungry but food was difficult to beg, buy or steal. For all that Reddington, Colonel Fielding's big Coldstream servant, procured a loaf or the of bread, a tin of sardines some jam, and a bottle or two of white wine. These were laid out imposingly upon a trestle and Reddington announced to the Colonel in the most imperturbable way "Supper is ready m`lord!" The small group of red – tabbed but very unshaven officers fell to with a will, and afterwards sank down in a sleep of sheer exhaustion on the uncomfortable couch provided by the big heap of potatoes. Wallace, the Brigadier – Major of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and another officer started by rolling up together with an old piece of sacking over them, but morning found Wallace, minus the sacking, on the potatoes, the other plus the sacking had rolled off without waking on to the flags.*

*The next day everyone but the wretched infantry personnel were moved across the Marne and the whole divisional transport parked in the Bois de Boursault to the West of Epernay. A last comb – cut and reorganisation was effected with the result that a small composite battalion (about 500 strong) together with a machine – gun company was sent up on June 2/3<sup>rd</sup> to join the 800 odd troops of the division which had been collected in the firing line. These two so – called battalions held positions in the Bois de Courton and were under the command of Lt. Col. E. M. Beall, D.S.O. ( M.G.C.) and LT. Col. D. Mitchell (22 D.,L.I. Pioneers).*

*In order the more effectually to ration these units and also to avoid the threat to the Bois de Boursault of the enemy crossing the river at Chateau Theirry further west, the transport was moved further to the rear, the first line being collected at La Loge Turbanne, a farm at a main road junction to the south east of Epernay. To this forward station rations and S.A.A. were delivered direct by the Divisional Motor Transport Company which had incidentally suffered severely in the enemy shelling of Fismes on the night of the 26/27 May - and taken on by the limbers to the Quartermaster of the composite force in the woods near Romery, and to Mortimer, the A.P.M., who was encamped with his "slops" close to Hautvillers.*

*It was a new experience for "infanteers" to do supply work and many secrets of the A.S.C. were revealed, such as why army mutton or beef never has kidneys – at least when it arrives at those for whom it is destined! Rations were plentiful, except for a shortage of cigarettes. This was so acute that it was eventually necessary to send a staff car into Paris to purchase smokes for the troops in the line.*

*La Loge Turbanne was a very peaceful spot – a Dutch barn to sleep in, a stream to bathe in and in addition to rations, quantities of eggs, milk, and yes! champagne. Champagne was plentiful simply because German gunners were devoting particular attention to the delectable city of Epernay with the result that wine – merchants at least those that stayed were selling off at panic prices. The rich fare together with just enough work transformed haggard scare – crows into fleshy men in an incredibly short time and there were many none too willing to leave the farm when the division finally moved out of the area.*

*Although it had ceased to exist as a fighting formation, although its staff was at Villiers – au Bois with nothing to do since all the surviving troops were in the line under the 19<sup>th</sup> Division, the division remained in the area till the second week in June. For ten days the wretched composite battalions hung on to their positions though it is only fair to say that the German advance had spent itself. Except for two strong attacks against the Montagne de Bligny on June 6<sup>th</sup>, the enemy made no further attempts to advance on this particular piece of front. The line settled down. Trenches began to be dug and for a time there was peace, while on both sides efforts were being renewed for the resumption of the struggle which*

was to result first in the desperate German effort to advance and then in the great allied counter stroke which drove the enemy back almost to the lines he had left to attack IX Corps on May 27<sup>th</sup>.

Of all battles in which the 8<sup>th</sup> Division was engaged this was at once the most disastrous and the most remarkable. The first break through was so overwhelming, so complete that nothing the Boche did before or after it could be compared to it. It may be that with more experience of the sector a more coherent defence might have been organised, but as it was tired battalions much under strength were holding each about a thousand yards of front when the enemy loosed on them an artillery preparation of a violence and an accuracy that far outdid, in the opinion of the most seasoned soldiers, any other barrage they were ever under. There was no artillery support, while the Germans speedily drove the few allied planes out of the sky. Troops did not know their whereabouts or where the trenches led. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Devon Regiment, which had been rushed up the night before the attack to support the 23<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, won a "citation "in French Army Orders and the award of a Croix de Guerre for a "forlorn hope" stand which would compare with the highest annals in their history. But only a portion of the Battalion was engaged in this epic, the others lost their way in the vast tunnels and were killed or taken by the enemy as they emerged.

The amazing speed of the enemy advance has already been remarked but a good instance of it is provided by the following experience. Miller, a subaltern of the Devons, who was captured, recounts that he was in a shell – hole with a few men firing hard at enemy skirmishers advancing across the open in front. The battle was still hot. Suddenly a big camouflage screen on his left was blown down by a shell to reveal an enemy battalion marching in column down the road!

The complete disintegration of formations and the impossibility (owing to road congestion, rapidity of the retreat) of the higher staff keeping in close touch with the situation resulted in a "soldier's battle". Time after time the situation was only saved by the gallantry and resource of some officer or man whose action went unheard of and unrecognised. History will never know the number of deadly isolated struggles which were fought out in the mists and marshes of the Aisne, in the valleys of the Vesle and the Ardre, amid the standing corn on the successive ridges, or in the vast woods of the Montaigne de Rheims.

Still there was no lack of awards and decorations, among which it is sufficient to record that General Grogan was awarded the Victoria Cross which he had so well earned and that, in addition to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Devon Regiment, the 5<sup>th</sup> Battery R.F.A. under Captain Massey, which perished to a man fighting to the last with rifle, bayonet and Lewis gun, were cited by the French Army Commander and awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Nor must the part played by the Medical Officers go unrecorded. All the Infantry M.O's except one had become casualties by the third day of the battle while one field ambulance had, as has been recorded, captured lock, stock, and barrel. Leaving one or two of the M.O's from the remaining ambulance to attend to the troops in the line, Bourdillon (Col. Ormsby having been wounded), took all the others off to the big French clearing–station at Epernay, whither a stream of British wounded was flowing, and where they could be of greater use in saving life. Indeed how many English lives this devoted little band saved will never be known, but, at a time when the British were none too popular with their allies and when even had they been, the French had neither the staff nor the resources to deal adequately with the numbers of casualties, they sweated as stretcher bearers, acted as dressers, physicians, surgeons, nurses for days until practically all our own wounded had been evacuated either by ambulance or by the crude hospital trains on which the French grudged any Englishman a passage.

The Division was wiped out in the strict sense of the word. While it is always unsafe to generalise, it is extremely doubtful whether any other British Division on the Western Front, certainly after early 1915, suffered such obliteration. Not an infantry C.O. or adjutant survived. Two out of the three Brigade Commanders were casualties, the third won the V.C. The field ambulances, the motor and horse transport

*of the divisional supply train all suffered in proportion to the fighting services. Among the infantry rank and file, the casualties mounted in almost every battalion to over 600. The total ration strength of the division during the time that the transport was at La Loge Turbanne was about 1,500 out of 12,000!*

*In other words the battle of the Aisne and Marne following the battles of the Somme and Villers Bretonneux brought the grand total of casualties suffered by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division in under two months to over 17,000. Of a truth there is some justification for the division claiming with a certain mournful pride to be the unluckiest in France. Throughout the war from November 1914 onwards all the engagements "went wrong" in which it took part. Neuve Chapelle, Festubert, Fromelles in 1915; the Somme on July 1<sup>st</sup> and again in October 1916; Ypres on the 31<sup>st</sup> July, in August and November 1917; All these were but preliminaries to the Spring of 1918 when the last week of three successive months saw the division practically wiped out – March 23 – 30<sup>th</sup> on the Somme, April 23 – 26<sup>th</sup> at Villers Bretonneux, and May 27 – June 1<sup>st</sup> between the Aisne and the Marne.*

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