WILLIAM HENRY WATSON

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Содержание

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"The words of an eye-witness, flowing naturally from first impressions, are frequently more expressive, and convey ideas more just than studied descriptions; though the language may often be such as it would scarcely be allowable in other persons to write."

Captain James Burney, 1806.

CHAPTER I.
ON THE XIth CORPS FRONT.
(*October to December 1916.*)

The village of Locon lies five miles out from Bethune, on the Estaires road. Now it is broken by the war: in October 1916 it was as comfortable and quiet a village as any four miles behind the line. If you had entered it at dusk, when the flashes of the guns begin to show, and passed by the square and the church and that trap for despatch-riders where the *chemin-de-fer vicinal* crosses to the left of the road from the right, you would have come to a scrap of orchard on your left where the British cavalrymen are buried who fell in 1914. Perhaps you would not have noticed the graves, because they were overgrown and the wood of the crosses was coloured green with lichen. Beyond the orchard was a farm with a garden in front, full of common flowers, and a flagged path to the door.

Inside there is a cheerful little low room. A photograph of the Prince of Wales, a sacred picture, and an out-of-date calendar, presented by the 'Petit Parisien,' decorate the walls. Maman, a dear gnarled old woman—old from the fields—stands with folded arms by the glittering stove which projects into the centre of the room. She never would sit down except to eat and sew, but would always stand by her stove. Papa sits comfortably, with

legs straight out, smoking a pipe of *caporal* and reading the 'Telegramme.' Julienne, pretty like a sparrow, with quick brown eyes, jerky movements, and fuzzy hair, the flapper from the big grocer's at La Gorgue, for once is quiet and mends Hamond's socks. In a moment she will flirt like a kitten or quarrel with Louie, a spoilt and altogether unpleasant boy, who at last is going to school. The stalwart girl of seventeen, Adrienne, is sewing laundry marks on Louie's linen. It is warm and cosy.

The coffee is ready. The little bowls are set out on the table. The moment has come. From behind a curtain Hamond produces, with the solemnity of ritual, a battered water-bottle. He looks at Papa, who gravely nods, and a few drops from the water-bottle are poured into each steaming bowl of coffee. The fragrance is ineffable, for it is genuine old Jamaica....

We talk of the son, a cuirassier, and when he will come on leave; of the Iron Corps who are down on the Somme; of how the men of the Nord cannot be matched by those of the Midi, who, it is rumoured, nearly lost the day at Verdun; of Mme. X. at Gonnehem, who pretends to be truly a *Parisienne*, but is only a carpenter's daughter out of Richebourg St Vaast; of the oddities and benevolence of M. le Maire. Adrienne discusses learnedly the merits of the Divisions who have been billeted in the village. She knows their names and numbers from the time the Lahore Division came in 1914.[1] We wonder what are

[1] Every intelligent person in every French village or town knew the numbers of all the divisions in the neighbourhood.

these heavy armoured motor-cars of a new type that have been a little successful on the Somme. And we have our family jokes. "Peronne est prise," we inform Maman, and make an April fool of her—while, if the line is disturbed and there is an outbreak of machine-gun fire or the guns are noisy, we mutter, "Les Boches attaquent!" and look for refuge under the table.

In April of last year, when the Boche attacked in very truth, Maman may have remembered our joke. Then they piled their mattresses, their saucepans, their linen, and some furniture on the big waggon, and set out for Hinges—Bethune was shelled and full of gas. I wonder if they took with them the photograph of the Prince of Wales? There was bitter fighting in Locon, and we must afterwards have shelled it, because it came to be in the German lines....

Hamond knew the Front from the marshes of Fleurbaix to the craters of Givenchy better than any man in France. He had been in one sector of it or another since the first November of the war. So, when one of the companies of the XIth Corps Cyclist Battalion, which I commanded, was ordered to reinforce a battalion of the 5th Division in the line at Givenchy and another of my companies to repair the old British line by Festubert, and to work on the "islands,"[2] I determined to move from my dismal headquarters in a damp farm near Gonnehem and billet myself at Locon. It was the more convenient, as Hamond, who

[2] Detached posts, which could not be approached by day, in front of the main trench system.

commanded the Motor Machine-Gun Battery of the Corps, was carrying out indirect fire from positions near Givenchy.

We lived in comfort, thanks to Maman and Starman, Hamond's servant. I would come in at night, saying I was *fatigué de vivre*. Old Maman, understanding that I was too tired to live, would drag out with great trouble grandfather's arm-chair, place a pillow in it, and set it by the stove. And Julienne, a little subdued at my imminent decease, would forget to flirt.

We would start, after an early breakfast, in Hamond's motor-cycle and side-car, and drive through the straggling cottages of Hamel, where the Cuirassiers, in October 1914, protected the left flank of the advancing 5th Division, through Gorre, with its enormous ramshackle chateau, and along the low and sordid banks of the La Bassée Canal. We would leave the motor-cycle just short of the houses near Pont Fixe, that battered but indomitable bridge, draped defiantly with screens of tattered sackcloth.

I would strike along the Festubert road, with the low ridge of Givenchy on my left, until I came to the cross-roads at Windy Corner.

A few yards away were the ruins of a house which Brigadier-General Count Gleichen,[3] then commanding the 15th Infantry Brigade, had made his headquarters when first we came to Givenchy, and were certain to take La Bassée. That was in October 1914, and the line ran from the houses near Pont

[3] Now Major-General Lord Edward Gleichen, K.C.V.O., C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O.

Fixe through the farm-buildings of Canteleux to the cottages of Violaines, whence you looked across open fields to the sugar factory, which so greatly troubled us, and the clustered red walls of La Bassée. The Cheshires held Violaines. They were driven out by a sudden attack in November. The line broke badly, and Divisional Headquarters at Beuvry Brewery packed up, but a Cyclist officer with a few men helped to rally the Cheshires until a battalion from the 3rd Division on the left arrived to fill the gap. We did not again hold Violaines and Canteleux until the Germans retired of their own free-will.

Now once again, exactly two years later, the 5th Division was in the line.

I would take to the trench at Windy Corner, and tramp along to call on the cheery young colonel of the battalion to which my men were attached. There is a little story about his headquarters. A smell developed, and they dug hard, thinking it came from a corpse. The sergeant-major discovered the cause. A fond relative had sent the mess-waiter a medicated belt to catch the little aliens in the course of their traditional daily migration....

We would go round the line, which then was quiet, exploring the intricacies of Red Dragon Crater. Afterwards I would walk through the complicated defences of Givenchy to join Hamond at "Dirty Dick's,"[4] by the shrine, for the ride back....

The 5th Division was afraid of an attack on Givenchy at this time. It was a key position. If Givenchy went, the line south of the

[4] A famous dug-out.

canal must crumble and the left flank of the Loos salient would be in the air. But the attack did not come until April 1918, and the story of how Givenchy held then, when the line to the north was flowing westwards, is history.

On the left of Givenchy the line ran in front of Festubert through stagnant fields, where the water in the summer is just below the surface. It is dreary country, full of ghosts and the memories of fighting at night. It is all a sodden cemetery.

There my men were rebuilding the breastworks of the old British line, for in these marshes it was impossible to dig trenches, and working on the "islands."

Breastworks continued to the north. Our lines were overlooked from the Aubers Ridge. In winter they were flooded and men were drowned. Behind were dead level meadows, often covered with water, and dismal ruined villages. The country was filthy, monotonous, and stunted. In the summer it stank. In the winter it was mud. Luckily, for many months the line was quiet.

In November of this year the Corps, to vary the picture, took over the Cuinchy sector on the right of Givenchy and immediately south of the La Bassée Canal. It was a unique and damnable sector, in which a company of my men were set to dig tunnels from the reserve to the support and front trenches.

It was unique by reason of the brick-stacks, and damnable by reason of the Minenwerfer and the Railway Triangle. Our line ran in and out of a dozen or so brick-stacks, enormous maroon cubes of solid brick that withstood both shell and mine.

Some we held and some the enemy held. Inside them tiny staircases were made, and camouflaged snipers, impossible to detect, made life miserable. Occasionally we tried to take each other's brick-stacks, but these attempts were unsuccessful, and we settled down, each as uncomfortable as he well could be. And in this sector the enemy employed minenwerfer with the utmost enterprise. Our trenches were literally blown to pieces. In the daytime we ran about like disturbed ants, ever listening for the little thud of the "minnie's" discharge and then looking upwards for the black speck by day or the glow of it by night. For "minnies" can be avoided by the alert and skilful. Finally, a triangle of railway embankments, fortified until they had become an impregnable field-work, held for the German the southern bank of the canal.

To the occasional tall visitor the main communication trench added irritation and certain injury to fear. Some ingenious fellow had laid an overhead rail some six feet above the trench boards. On this rail material was slung and conveyed forwards. It was an excellent substitute for a light railway, but it compelled a tall man to walk along the trench with his head on one side. This strained attitude did not conduce to stability on slippery trench boards. Again, the height of the rail above the floor of the trench varied. A moment's absent-mindedness and the damage was done.

My officers and men worked well. We were lucky, and our casualties were few, but it was a trying time. An occasional day in Bethune just made life bearable.

The one redeeming feature of the XIth Corps front was the excellent town of Bethune.

Of all the towns immediately behind the line, none could rival Bethune in the providing of such comforts, relaxations, and amenities as the heart of the soldier desired. The billets were notoriously comfortable. The restaurants were varied and good. The *pâtisserie* was famous before the war. The oyster-bar approached that of Lillers. I know of but one *coiffeur* better than "Eugene's." The shops provided for every reasonable want. The theatre was palatial. The canteen was surpassed only by Meaulte, of ill-fated memory. The inhabitants were civil, friendly, and, in comparison with their neighbours, not extortionate.

On the morning in October 1914, when the 5th Division—the first British troops Bethune had seen—passed through the town to take up the line Vermelles-Violaines, I breakfasted at the "Lion d'Or," round the corner from the square. I was received with grateful hospitality by madame. An extremely pretty girl of fourteen, with dark admiring eyes, waited on me. She was charmingly hindered by Annette, a child of three or four, who with due gravity managed to push some bread on to my table and thus break a plate. When I returned in the summer of 1916, I expected that I would at least be recognised. I found the tavern crowded. Agnes, who had just recovered from an illness, served the mob of officers with unsmiling disdain. She was not even flurried by the entreaties of multitudinous padres who were doubtless celebrating some feast-day. And Annette, decorated

with appalling ribbons, was actually carrying plates.

The alternative was the "Hôtel de France"—a solemn and pretentious hostelry, at which the staff and French officials congregated. When the enemy began to shell Bethune, the "Hôtel de France" was closed.

The "Lion d'Or" carried on until the house opposite was hit, and afterwards reopened spasmodically; but in 1916 and 1917 it was wiser to try the "Paon d'Or" in the outskirts of the town, near the canal. At that stuffy restaurant it was possible to lunch peacefully while shells dropped at intervals in the square and centre of the town.

"Eugene: Coiffeur," was an institution. Eugene must have been dead or "serving," for madame presided. She was a thin and friendly lady, with tiny feet, and a belief that all her customers required verbal entertainment. It was touching to see madame seat herself briskly beside a morose colonel who knew no respectable word of French, and endeavour, by the loud reiteration of simple phrases, to assure him that he was welcome and the weather appalling.

I would linger over Bethune, because no town has been a greater friend to the soldier for a brief period out of the line. Now it is shattered, and the inhabitants are fled.

My headquarters at this time were in a farm near Gonnehem, six miles or so from Bethune. The farm was good of its kind, and in summer the casual visitor might even have called it smart, after Wiggans, my adjutant, had cleared away the midden-heap,

drained the courtyard, and had whitewashed everything that would take the colour—all in the face of violent and reiterated protests from madame. The centre of the courtyard, encircled by a whitewashed rope, was particularly effective.

In winter no polite epithet could describe the place. The hamlet consisted of a few farms, each surrounded by innumerable little ditches, hidden by rank undergrowth and sheltered by large trees. At the best of times the ditches were full of soaking flax, which gave out a most pungent odour. After rain the ditches overflowed and flooded the roads and paths. The hedges and bushes sagged with water. The trees dripped monotonously. Some of us caught influenza colds: some endured forgotten rheumatism and lumbago.

We had but one pastime. Certain of our transport horses were not in use. These we were continually exchanging for riding horses more up to our weight with a friendly "Remounts" who lived in solitude near by. In due course Wiggans became the proud owner of a dashing little black pony and I of a staff officer's discarded charger. In spite of the dreariness of our surroundings, we felt almost alive at the end of an afternoon's splash over water-logged fields. Nobody could damp Wiggans' cheerfulness when he returned with a yet more fiery steed from his weekly deal, and the teaching of the elements of horsemanship to officers, who had never ridden, produced an occasional laugh. We may ourselves have given pleasure in turn to our friends, the yeomanry, who were billeted in Gonnehem

itself.

To us in our damp and melancholy retreat came rumours of tanks. It was said that they were manned by "bantams." The supply officer related that on the first occasion on which tanks went into action the ear-drums of the crews were split. Effective remedies had been provided. We learned from an officer, who had met the quartermaster of a battalion that had been on the Somme, the approximate shape and appearance of tanks. We pictured them and wondered what a cyclist battalion could do against them. Apparently the tanks had not been a great success on the Somme, but we imagined potentialities. They were coloured with the romance that had long ago departed from the war. An application was made for volunteers. We read it through with care.

I returned from leave. It was pouring with rain and there was nothing to do. The whole of my battalion was scattered in small parties over the Corps area. Most of my officers and men were under somebody else's command. I sent in an application for transfer to the heavy branch of the Machine-Gun Corps, the title of the Tank Corps in those days. I was passed as suitable by the Chief Engineer of the Corps, and waited.

It was on the 28th December 1916 that I was ordered by wire to proceed immediately to the headquarters of the tanks. Christmas festivities had cheered a depressed battalion, but there was at the time no likelihood of the mildest excitement. Hamond had disappeared suddenly—it was rumoured to England and

tanks. I was left with a bare handful of men to command. It was still raining, and we were flooded. I was not sorry to go....

We set out on a bright morning, in a smart gig that Wiggans had bought, with his latest acquisition in the shafts, bedecked with some second-hand harness we had found in Bethune, and clattered through Lillers to the Hôtel de la Gare.

Lillers was a pleasant town, famous principally for the lady in the swimming-bath and its oyster-bar. Every morning, in the large open-air swimming-bath of the town, a lady of considerable beauty was said to disport herself. The swimming-bath was consequently crowded. The oyster-bar provided a slight feminine interest as well as particularly fine *marennes verts*. Lillers was an army headquarters. Like all towns so fated it bristled with neat notices, clean soldiers with wonderful salutes, and many motor-cars. It possessed an under-world of staff officers who hurried ceaselessly from office to office and found but little time to swim in the morning or consume oysters in the afternoon.

The Hôtel de la Gare was distinguished from lesser hotels by an infant prodigy and champagne cocktails. The infant prodigy was a dumpy child of uncertain age, who, with or without encouragement, would climb on to the piano-stool and pick out simple tunes with one finger. The champagne cocktails infected a doctor of my acquaintance with an unreasoning desire to change horses and gallop back to billets.

At last the train came in. My servant, my baggage, and myself were thrown on board, and alighted at the next station in

accordance with the instructions of the R.T.O....

A few months later the Cyclist Battalion went to Italy, under Major Percy Davies. It returned to France in time for the German offensive of April 1918, and gained everlasting honour by holding back the enemy, when the Portuguese withdrew, until our infantry arrived. For its skilful and dogged defence this battalion was mentioned by name in the despatches of the Commander-in-Chief.

CHAPTER II.
FRED KARNO'S ARMY.
(*January to April 1917.*)

My servant, Spencer, and I arrived at St Pol, where officers going on leave used to grow impatient with the official method of travel, desert the slow uncomfortable train, and haunt the Rest House in the hope of obtaining a seat in a motor-car to Boulogne. I had expected that the R.T.O. would call me into his office, and in hushed tones direct me to the secret lair of the tanks. Everything possible, it was rumoured, had been done to preserve the tanks from prying eyes. I was undeceived at once. An official strode up and down the platform, shouting that all men for the tanks were to alight immediately. I found on inquiry that the train for the tank area would not depart for several hours, so, leaving my servant and my kit at the station, I walked into the town full of hope.

I lunched moderately at the hotel, but, though there was much talk of tanks there, I found no one with a car. I adjourned in due course to the military hairdresser, and at dusk was speeding out of St Pol in a luxurious Vauxhall. I was deposited at Wavrans with the Supply Officer, a melancholy and overworked young man, who advised me to use the telephone. Tank headquarters informed me that I was posted provisionally to D Battalion, and

D Battalion promised to send a box-body. I collected my servant and baggage from the station at Wavrans, accepted the Supply Officer's hospitality, and questioned him about my new Corps.

Tanks, he told me, were organised as a branch of the Machine-Gun Corps for purposes of camouflage, pay, and records. Six companies had been formed, of which four had come to France and two had remained in England. The four overseas companies had carried out the recent operations on the Somme (September-October 1916). The authorities had been so much impressed that it was decided to expand each of these companies into a battalion, by the embodiment of certain Motor Machine-Gun Batteries and of volunteers expected from other corps in response to the appeal that had been sent round all formations. Thus A, B, C, and D Battalions were forming in France, E, F, and sundry other battalions, in England. Each battalion, he believed, consisted of three companies. Each company possessed twelve or more tanks, and the Company Commander owned a car.

Primed with this information and some hot tea, I welcomed the arrival of the box-body. We drove at breakneck speed through the darkness and the rain to Blangy-sur-Ternoise. I entered a cheerful, brightly-lit mess. Seeing a venerable and imposing officer standing by the fire, I saluted him. He assured me that he was only the Equipment Officer. We sat down to a well-served dinner, I discovered an old 'Varsity friend in the doctor, and retired content to a comfortable bed after winning slightly at bridge.

In the morning I was sent in a car to Bermicourt, where I was interviewed by Colonel Elles.[5] As the result of the interview I was posted to D Battalion, and on the following evening took over the command of No. 11 Company from Haskett-Smith....

The usual difficulties and delays had occurred in the assembling of the battalions. Rations were short. There was no equipment. The billets were bad. Necessaries such as camp kettles could not be obtained. That was now old if recent history. The battalions had first seen the light in October. By the beginning of January officers and men were equipped, fed, and under cover.

The men were of three classes. First came the "Old Tankers," those who had been trained with the original companies. They had been drawn for the most part from the A.S.C.: M.T. Some had been once or twice in action; some had not. They were excellent tank mechanists. Then came the motor machine-gunners—smart fellows, without much experience of active operations. The vast majority of officers and men were volunteers from the infantry—disciplined fighting men.

On parade the company looked a motley crew, as indeed it was. Men from different battalions knew different drill. Some from the less combatant corps knew no drill at all. They resembled a "leave draft," and nobody can realise how undisciplined disciplined men can appear, who has not seen a draft of men from various units marching from the boat to a rest

[5] Now Major-General H. J. Elles, C.B., D.S.O.

camp. The men are individuals. They trail along like a football crowd. They have no pride in their appearance, because they cannot feel they are on parade. They are only a crowd, not a company or a regiment. Corporate pride and feeling are absent. The company was composed of drafts. Before it could fight it must be made a company. The men described themselves with admirable humour in this song, to the tune "The Church's one foundation"—

> "We are Fred Karno's army, the Ragtime A.S.C.,
> We do not work, we cannot fight, what ruddy use are we?
> And when we get to Berlin, the Kaiser he will say—
> 'Hoch, hoch, mein Gott!
> What a ruddy rotten lot
> Are the Ragtime A.S.C.!'"

The company lived in a rambling hospice, built round a large courtyard. The original inhabitants consisted of nuns and thirty or forty aged and infirm men, who, from their habits and appearance, we judged to be consumptives.

The nuns were friendly but fussy. They allowed the officers to use a large kitchen, but resented the intrusion of any but officers' mess cooks, and in putting forward claims for alleged damages and thefts the good nuns did not lag behind their less pious sisters in the village. We were grateful to them for their courtesy and kindliness; yet it cannot be said that any senior officer in the company ever went out of his way to meet the Mother Superior.

She possessed a tactless memory.

The consumptives had a large room to themselves. It stank abominably. Where they slept at night was a mystery. They died in the room next to my bed-chamber.

The door of my room was inscribed "Notre Dame des Douleurs," and the room justified its title. All operations planned in it were cancelled. The day after I had first slept in it I fell ill. Colonel Elles, with Lieut.-Colonel Burnett, came to see me in my bed. I had not shaved, and my temperature made me slightly familiar. I could never keep the room warm of nights. Once, when I was suffering from a bad cold, I put out my hand sleepily for my handkerchief, and, without thinking, tried to blow my nose. It was a freezing night, and I still have the scar.

The majority of the men had wire beds, made by stretching wire-mesh over a wooden frame; but the rooms were draughty. We made a sort of dining-hall in a vast barn, but it was cold and dark.

In these chilly rooms and enormous barns the official supply of fuel did not go far. The coal trains from the "Mines des Marles" often rested for a period in Blangy sidings. I am afraid that this source was tapped unofficially, but the French naturally complained, strict orders were issued, and our fires again were low. It was necessary to act, and to act with decision. I obtained a lorry from the battalion, handed it over to a promising subaltern, and gave him stern instructions to return with much coal. Late in the afternoon he returned, on foot. The lorry had broken down

six miles away. Three tons of coal made too heavy a load in frosty weather. The lorry was towed in, and once again we were warm.

I did not ask for details, but a story reached my ears that a subaltern with a lorry had arrived that same morning at a certain Army coal dump. He asked urgently for two tons of coal. The Tanks were carrying out important experiments: coal they must have or the experiments could not be continued. Permission was given at once—he would return with the written order, which the Tanks had stupidly forgotten to give him. A little gift at the dump produced the third ton. To a Heavy Gunner the story needs no comment.

The mess was a dining-hall, medieval in size, with an immense open fireplace that consumed much coal and gave out little heat. We placed a stove in the middle of the hall. The piping was led to the upper part of the fireplace, but in spite of Jumbo's ingenuity it was never secure, and would collapse without warning. The fire smoked badly.

As the hall would seat at least fifty, we specialised in weekly guest-nights, and the reputation of the company for hospitality was unequalled. In those days canteens met all reasonable needs: the allotment system had not been devised; a worried mess-president, commissioned with threats to obtain whisky, was not offered fifty bars of soap in lieu. And we bought a piano that afterwards became famous. Luckily, we had an officer, nicknamed Grantoffski, who could play any known tune from memory.

Our mess was so large that we were asked to entertain temporarily several officers from other units of the Tank Corps in process of formation. Several of these guests came from the central workshops of the Tank Corps at Erin, and later returned our hospitality by doing us small services.

One engineer, who remained with the Tank Corps for a few weeks only, told us a remarkable story. We were talking of revolvers and quick shooting and fighting in America. Suddenly to our amazement he became fierce.

"Do you see my hand? You wouldn't think it, but it's nearly useless—all through a Prussian officer. It was in Louisiana, and he went for me although I was unarmed. I caught his knife with my bare hand—it cut to the bone—I jerked back his wrist and threw him. My pal had a Winchester. He pushed it into the brute's face, smashed it all up, and was just going to pull the trigger when I knocked it away. But the sinews of my hand were cut and there was no doctor there.... I've been after that Prussian ever since. I'm going to get him—oh yes, don't you fear. I'm going to get him. How do I know he is still alive? I heard the other day. He is on the other side. I've pursued him for five years, and now I'm going to get him!"

He was a Scots engineer, a sturdy red-faced fellow with twinkling eyes and a cockney curl to his hair.

The mess was a pleasant place, and training proceeded smoothly, because no company commander ever had better officers. My second-in-command was Haigh, a young and

experienced regular from the infantry. He left me after the second battle of Bullecourt, to instruct the Americans. My officers were Swears, an "old Tanker," who was instructing at Bermicourt, Wyatt, and "Happy Fanny," Morris, Puttock, Davies, Clarkson, Macilwaine, Birkett, Grant, King, Richards, Telfer, Skinner, Sherwood, Head, Pritchard, Bernstein, Money, Talbot, Coghlan—too few remained long with the company. Of the twenty I have mentioned, three had been killed, six wounded, three transferred, and two invalided before the year was out.

Training began in the middle of December and continued until the middle of March. Prospective tank-drivers tramped up early every morning to the Tank Park or "Tankodrome"—a couple of large fields in which workshops had been erected, some trenches dug, and a few shell-craters blown. The Tankodrome was naturally a sea of mud. Perhaps the mud was of a curious kind—perhaps the mixture of petrol and oil with the mud was poisonous. Most officers and men working in the Tankodrome suffered periodically from painful and ugly sores, which often spread over the body from the face. We were never free from them while we were at Blangy.

The men were taught the elements of tank driving and tank maintenance by devoted instructors, who laboured day after day in the mud, the rain, and the snow. Officers' courses were held at Bermicourt. Far too few tanks were available for instruction, and very little driving was possible.

"Happy Fanny" toiled in a cold and draughty out-house with a

couple of 6-pdrs. and a shivering class. Davies, our enthusiastic Welsh footballer, supervised instruction in the Lewis gun among the draughts of a lofty barn in the Hospice.

The foundation of all training was drill. As a very temporary soldier I had regarded drill as unnecessary ritual, as an opportunity for colonels and adjutants to use their voices and prance about on horses. "Spit and polish" seemed to me as antiquated in a modern war as pipeclay and red coats. I was wrong. Let me give the old drill-sergeant his due. There is nothing in the world like smart drill under a competent instructor to make a company out of a mob. Train a man to respond instantly to a brisk command, and he will become a clean, alert, self-respecting soldier.

We used every means to quicken the process. We obtained a bugle. Our bugler was not good. He became careless towards the middle of his calls, and sometimes he erred towards the finish. He did not begin them always on quite the right note. We started with twenty odd calls a day. Everything the officers and the men did was done by bugle-call. It was very military and quite effective. All movements became brisk. But the bugler became worse and worse. Out of self-preservation we reduced the number of his calls. Finally he was stopped altogether by the colonel, whose headquarters were at the time close to our camp.

Our football team helped to bring the company together. It happened to excel any other team in the neighbourhood. We piled up enormous scores against all the companies we played.

Each successive victory made the men prouder of the company, and more deeply contemptuous of the other companies who produced such feeble and ineffective elevens. Even the money that flowed into the pockets of our more ardent supporters after each match strengthened the belief in the superiority of No. 11 Company. The spectators were more than enthusiastic. Our C.S.M. would run up and down the touch-line, using the most amazing and lurid language.

Towards the middle of February our training became more ingenious and advanced. As painfully few real tanks were available for instruction, it was obviously impossible to use them for tactical schemes. Our friendly Allies would have inundated the Claims Officer if tanks had carelessly manœuvred over their precious fields. In consequence the authorities provided dummy tanks.

Imagine a large box of canvas stretched on a wooden frame, without top or bottom, about six feet high, eight feet long, and five feet wide. Little slits were made in the canvas to represent the loopholes of a tank. Six men carried and moved each dummy, lifting it by the cross-pieces of the framework. For our sins we were issued with eight of these abortions.

We started with a crew of officers to encourage the men, and the first dummy tank waddled out of the gate. It was immediately surrounded by a mob of cheering children, who thought it was an imitation dragon or something out of a circus. It was led away from the road to avoid hurting the feelings of the crew and to

safeguard the ears and morals of the young. After colliding with the corner of a house, it endeavoured to walk down the side of the railway cutting. Nobody was hurt, but a fresh crew was necessary. It regained the road when a small man in the middle, who had been able to see nothing, stumbled and fell. The dummy tank was sent back to the carpenter for repairs.

We persevered with those dummy tanks. The men hated them. They were heavy, awkward, and produced much childish laughter. In another company a crew walked over a steep place and a man broke his leg. The dummies became less and less mobile. The signallers practised from them, and they were used by the visual training experts. One company commander mounted them on waggons drawn by mules. The crews were tucked in with their Lewis guns, and each contraption, a cross between a fire-engine and a triumphal car in a Lord Mayor's Show, would gallop past targets which the gunners would recklessly endeavour to hit.

Finally, these dummies reposed derelict in our courtyard until one by one they disappeared, as the canvas and the wood were required for ignobler purposes.

We were allowed occasionally to play with real tanks. A sham attack was carried out before hill-tops of generals and staff officers, who were much edified by the sight of tanks moving. The total effect was marred by an enthusiastic tank commander, who, in endeavouring to show off the paces of his tank, became badly ditched, and the tank was for a moment on fire. The

spectators appeared interested.

On another day we carried out experiments with smoke-bombs. Two gallant tanks moved slowly up a hill against trenches. When the tanks drew near, the defenders of the trenches rushed out, armed with several kinds of smoke-producing missiles. These they hurled at the tanks, and, growing bolder, inserted them into every loophole and crevice of the tanks. At length the half-suffocated crews tumbled out, and maintained with considerable strength of language that all those who had approached the tanks had been killed, adding that if they had only known what kind of smoke was going to be used they would have loaded their guns to avoid partial asphyxiation.

In addition to these open-air sports, the senior officers of the battalion carried out indoor schemes under the colonel. We planned numerous attacks on the map. I remember that my company was detailed once to attack Serre. A few months later I passed through this "village," but I could only assure myself of its position by the fact that there was some brick-dust in the material of the road.

By the beginning of March the company had begun to find itself. Drill, training, and sport had each done their work. Officers and men were proud of their company, and were convinced that no better company had ever existed. The mob of men had been welded into a fighting instrument. My sergeant-major and I were watching another company march up the street. He turned to me with an expression of slightly amused contempt.

"They can't march like us, sir!"

CHAPTER III.
BEFORE THE FIRST BATTLE.
(*March and April 1917.*)

In the first months of 1917 we were confident that the last year of the war had come. The Battle of the Somme had shown that the strongest German lines were not impregnable. We had learned much: the enemy had received a tremendous hammering; and the success of General Gough's operations in the Ancre valley promised well for the future. The French, it was rumoured, were undertaking a grand attack in the early spring. We were first to support them by an offensive near Arras, and then we would attack ourselves on a large scale somewhere in the north. We hoped, too, that the Russians and Italians would come to our help. We were told that the discipline of the German Army was loosening, that our blockade was proving increasingly effective, and we were encouraged by stories of many novel inventions. We possessed unbounded confidence in our Tanks.

Late in February the colonel held a battalion conference. He explained the situation to his company commanders and the plan of forthcoming operations.

As the result of our successes in the Ancre valley, the German position between the Ancre and Arras formed a pronounced salient. It was determined to attack simultaneously at Arras and

from the Ancre valley, with the object of breaking through at both points and cutting off the German inside the salient.

Colonel Elles had offered two battalions of tanks. He was taking a risk. Officers and crews were only half-trained. Right through the period of training real tanks had been too scarce. Improved tanks were expected from England, but none had arrived, and he decided to employ again the old Mark I. tank which had been used in the operations on the Somme in the previous year. The two battalions selected were "C" and "D."

When we examined the orders for the attack in detail, I found that my company was destined to go through with the troops allotted to the second objective and take Mercatel and Neuville Vitasse. It should have been a simple enough operation, as two conspicuous main roads penetrated the German lines parallel with the direction of my proposed attack.

On March 9th I drove to Arras in my car with Haigh, my second-in-command, and Jumbo, my reconnaissance officer. We went by St Pol and the great Arras road. The Arras road is a friend of mine. First it was almost empty except for the lorry park near Savy, and, short of Arras, it was screened because the Germans still held the Vimy Ridge. Then before the Arras battle it became more and more crowded—numberless lorries, convoys of huge guns and howitzers, smiling men in buses and tired men marching, staff-cars and motor ambulances, rarely, a waggon with slow horses, an old Frenchman in charge, quite bewildered by the traffic. When the battle had begun, whole

Divisions, stretching for ten miles or more, came marching along it, and the ambulances streamed back to the big hospital at St Pol. I saw it for the last time after the Armistice had been signed, deserted and unimportant, with just a solitary soldier here and there standing at the door of a cottage. It is an exposed and windy road. The surface of it was never good, but I have always felt that the Arras road was proud to help us. It seemed ever to be saying: "Deliver Arras from shell and bomb; then leave me, and I shall be content to dream again."…

We drove into Arras a little nervously, but it was not being shelled, and, hungry after a freezing ride, we lunched at the Hôtel de Commerce.

This gallant hotel was less than 2500 yards from the German trenches. Across the street was a field battery in action. The glass of the restaurant had been broken, the upper stories had been badly damaged, the ceiling of the dining-room showed marks of shrapnel. Arras was being shelled and bombed every night, and often by day; German aeroplanes flew low over the town and fired down the streets. The hotel had still carried on ever since the British had been in Arras and before. The proprietress, a little pinched and drawn, with the inevitable scrap of fur flung over her shoulders, presided at the desk. Women dressed in the usual black waited on us. The lunch was cheap, excellently cooked, and well served—within easy range of the enemy field-guns. After the battle the hotel was put out of bounds, for serving drinks in forbidden hours. Indeed, A.P.M.'s have no souls. It reopened

later, and continued to flourish until the German attack of April 1918, when the enemy shelling became too insistent. The hotel has not been badly hit, and, if it be rebuilt, I beseech all those who visit the battlefields of Arras to lunch at the Hôtel de Commerce —in gratitude. It is in the main street just by the station.

We motored out of Arras along a road that was lined with newly-made gun-pits, and, arriving at a dilapidated village, introduced ourselves to the Divisional staff. We discussed operations, and found that much was expected of the tanks. After a cheery tea we drove home in the bitter cold.

On the 13th March we again visited the Division. I picked up the G.S.O. III. of the Division, called on a brigadier, with whom I expected to work, and then drove to the neighbourhood of the disreputable village of Agny. We peeped at the very little there was to be seen of the enemy front line through observation posts in cottages and returned to Arras, where we lunched excellently with the colonel of an infantry battalion. I left Jumbo with him, to make a detailed reconnaissance of the Front....

The Arras battle would have been fought according to plan, we should have won a famous victory, and hundreds of thousands of Germans might well have been entrapped in the Arras salient, if the enemy in his wisdom had not retired. Unfortunately, at the beginning of March he commenced his withdrawal from the unpleasant heights to the north of the Ancre valley, and, once the movement was under way, it was predicted that the whole of the Arras salient would be evacuated. This actually occurred in

the following weeks; the very sector I was detailed to attack was occupied by our troops without fighting. Whether the German had wind of the great attack that we had planned, I do not know. He certainly made it impossible for us to carry it out.

As soon as the extent of the German withdrawal became clear, my company was placed in reserve. I was instructed to make arrangements to support any attack at any point on the Arras front.

The Arras sector was still suitable for offensive operations. The Germans had fallen back on the Hindenburg Line, and this complicated system of defences rejoined the old German line opposite Arras. Obviously the most practical way of attacking the Hindenburg Line was to turn it—to fight down it, and not against it. Our preparations for an attack in the Arras sector and on the Vimy Ridge to the north of it were far advanced. It was decided in consequence to carry out with modifications the attack on the German trench system opposite Arras and on the Vimy Ridge. Operations from the Ancre valley, the southern re-entrant of the old Arras salient, were out of the question. The Fifth Army was fully occupied in keeping touch with the enemy.

On the 27th March my company was suddenly transferred from the Third Army to the Fifth Army. I was informed that my company would be attached to the Vth Corps for any operations that might occur. Jumbo was recalled from Arras, fuming at his wasted work, and an advance party was immediately sent to my proposed detraining station at Achiet-le-Grand.

On the 29th March I left Blangy. My car was a little unsightly. The body was loaded with Haigh's kit and my kit and a collapsible table. On top, like a mahout, sat Spencer, my servant. It was sleeting, and there was a cold wind. We drove through St Pol and along the Arras road, cut south through Habarcq to Beaumetz, and plunged over appalling roads towards Bucquoy. The roads became worse and worse. Spencer was just able to cling on, groaning at every bump. Soon we arrived at our old rear defences, from which we had gone forward only ten days before. It was joyous to read the notices, so newly obsolete—"This road is subject to shell-fire"—and when we passed over our old support and front trenches, and drove across No Man's Land, and saw the green crosses of the Germans, the litter of their trenches, their signboards and their derelict equipment, then we were triumphant indeed. Since March 1917 we have advanced many a mile, but never with more joy. Remember that from October 1914 to March 1917 we had never really advanced. At Neuve Chapelle we took a village and four fields, Loos was a fiasco, and the Somme was too horrible for a smile.

On the farther side of the old German trenches was desolation. We came to a village and found the houses lying like slaughtered animals. Mostly they had been pulled down, like card houses, but some had been blown in. It was so pitiful that I wanted to stop and comfort them. The trees along the roads had been cut down. The little fruit-trees had been felled, or lay half-fallen with gashes in their sides. The ploughs rusted in the fields. The rain was falling

monotonously. It was getting dark, and there was nobody to be seen except a few forlorn soldiers.

We crept with caution round the vast funnel-shaped craters that had been blown at each cross-road, and, running through Logeast Wood, which had mocked us for so many weeks on the Somme, we came to Achiet-le-Grand.

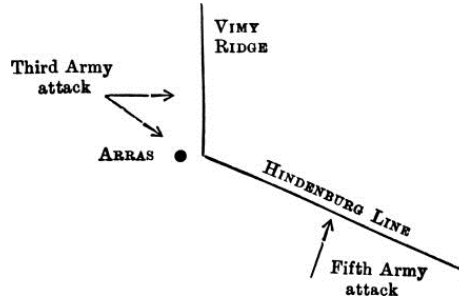
Ridger, the town commandant, had secured the only standing house, and he was afraid that it had been left intact for some devilish purpose. Haigh and Grant of my advance party were established in a dug-out. So little was it possible in those days to realise the meaning of an advance, that we discovered we had only two mugs, two plates, and one knife between us.

In the morning we got to work. A supply of water was arranged for the men; there was only one well in the village that had not been polluted. We inspected the ramp by which the tanks would detrain, selected a tankodrome near the station, wired in a potential dump, found good cellars for the men, and began the construction of a mess in the remains of a small brick stable. Then Haigh and I motored past the derelict factory of Bihucourt and through the outskirts of Bapaume to the ruins of Behagnies, on the Bapaume-Arras road. After choosing sites for an advanced camp and tankodrome, we walked back to Achiet-le-Grand across country, in order to reconnoitre the route for tanks from the station to Behagnies. After lunch, Haigh, Jumbo, and I motored to Ervillers, which is beyond Behagnies, and, leaving the car there, tramped to Mory. Jumbo had discovered in

the morning an old quarry, hidden by trees, that he recommended as a half-way house for the tanks, if we were ordered to move forward; but the enemy was a little lively, and we determined to investigate further on a less noisy occasion.

That night we dined in our new mess. We had stretched one tarpaulin over what had been the roof, and another tarpaulin took the place of an absent wall. The main beam was cracked, and we feared rain, but a huge blazing fire comforted us—until one or two slates fell off with a clatter. We rushed out, fearing the whole building was about to collapse. It was cold and drizzling. We stood it for five minutes, and then, as nothing further happened, we returned to our fire....

In some general instructions I had received from the colonel, it was suggested that my company would be used by the Vth Corps for an attack on Bullecourt and the Hindenburg Line to the east and west of the village. It will be remembered that the attack at Arras was designed to roll up the Hindenburg Line, starting from the point at which the Hindenburg Line joined the old German trench system. General Gough's Fifth Army, consisting of General Fanshawe's Vth Corps and General Birdwood's Corps of Australians, lay south-east of Arras and on the right of the Third Army. The Fifth Army faced the Hindenburg Line, and, if it attacked, it would be compelled to attack frontally.



The disadvantages of a frontal attack on an immensely strong series of entrenchments were balanced by the fact that a successful penetration would bring the Fifth Army on the left rear of that German Army, which would be fully occupied at the time in repelling the onset of our Third Army.

The key to that sector of the Hindenburg Line which lay opposite the Fifth Army front was the village of Bullecourt.

In the last week of March the Germans had not taken refuge in their main line of defence, and were still holding out in the villages of Croisilles, Ecoust, and Noreuil.

We were attacking them vigorously, but with no success and heavy casualties. On the morning of the 31st March Jumbo and I drove again to Ervillers and walked to Mory, pushing forward down the slope towards Ecoust. There was a quaint feeling of insecurity, quite unjustified, in strolling about "on top." We had an excellent view of our shells bursting on the wire in front of Ecoust, but we saw nothing of the country we wanted to

reconnoitre—the approaches to Bullecourt. Ecoust was finally captured at the sixth or seventh attempt by the 9th Division on April 1st.

In the afternoon I paid my first visit to the Vth Corps, then at Acheux, twenty miles back. I motored by Bapaume and Albert over the Somme battlefield. The nakedness of it is now hidden by coarse grass and rough weeds, but in March of 1917 it was bare. There was dark-brown mud for mile after mile as far as the eye could see—mud churned and tortured until the whole surface of the earth was pitted with craters. Mud overwhelmed the landscape. Trees showed only against the sky; dead men, old equipment, derelict tanks blended with the mud. At Le Sars bits of walls and smashed beams lay embedded in the mud. At Pozières the mud held a few mud-coloured bricks. I was glad when I came to Albert.

We took the Doullens road and found the Corps well housed in the chateau at Acheux. I announced the imminent arrival of my tanks, but the news did not kindle the enthusiasm I had expected. The Vth Corps had already used tanks and knew their little ways. After tea I consulted with the lesser lights of the staff. Satisfactory arrangements were made for supplies, rations, and accommodation, and I demanded and obtained the use of a troop of Glasgow Yeomanry, on the plea that they were required to cover the tracks of my tanks. I wanted a horse to ride.

I decided to return by Puisieux-le-Mont. It was apparent that the Albert-Bapaume road would soon become uncomfortably

crowded. I wanted to reconnoitre the only alternative route, and at the same time to inspect the village of Serre, which, on paper, I had so often and so violently attacked.

Never have I endured a more ghastly ride. In comparison with the country on either side of the Puisieux road, the Somme battlefield from the highway between Albert and Bapaume was serenely monotonous. After Mailly-Mailly the road became a rough track, narrow and full of unfilled shell-holes. Crazy bridges had been thrown across the trenches. The sun was setting in a fiery sky, and a reddish light tinged the pitiful tumbled earth, and glittered for a moment on the desolate water of the shell-holes. The crumbling trenches were manned with restless dead. In the doubtful light I thought a dead German moved. He lay on his back, half-sunken in the slimy mud, with knees drawn up, and blackened hand gripping a rusty rifle. Mercifully I could not see his face, but I thought his arms twitched.

It grew darker, and so narrow was the track that I might have been driving over the black mud of the battlefield. A derelict limber half-blocked the road, and, swerving to avoid it, we barely missed the carcass of a horse, dead a few days. Our progress was slow. Soon we lit the lamps. The track was full of horrible shadows, and big dark things seemed to come down the road to meet us—shattered transport or old heaps of shells. On either side of the car was the desert of mud and water-logged holes and corpses, face downward under the water, and broken guns and mortars, and little graves, and mile-long strands of rusty wire.

Everywhere maimed ghosts were rustling, and the plump rats were pattering along the trenches.

It is unwise to go through a battlefield at night. If they make the Somme battlefield a forest, no man will be brave enough to cross it in the dark.

We came to lights in the ruins of a village, and I stopped for a pipe and a word with my driver....

My tanks arrived at Achiet-le-Grand just after dawn on April 1st. We had taken them over from the central workshops at Erin, and had drawn there a vast variety of equipment. The tanks had been driven on to the train by an Engineer officer. The railway journey had been delayed as usual, and the usual expert —this time a doctor—had walked along the train, when shunted at Doullens, and had pointed out to his companion the "new monster tanks."

In the morning we hauled off the sponson-trolleys—their use will be explained later—but we thought it wiser to wait until dusk before we detrained the tanks.

Tanks travel on flat trucks, such as are employed to carry rails. They are driven on and off the train under their own power, but this performance requires care, skill, and experience. A Mk. I. or a Mk. IV. tank is not too easy to steer, while the space between the track and the edge of the truck is alarmingly small. With two exceptions, my officers had neither experience nor skill.

It was an anxious time—not only for the company commander. The office of the R.T.O., at the edge of the ramp,

was narrowly missed on two occasions. Very slowly and with infinite care the tanks were persuaded to leave the train and move down the road to the tankodrome we had selected. Then it began first to sleet and then to snow, while an icy wind rose, until a blizzard was lashing our faces.

In the old Mark I. tank it was necessary to detach the sponsons, or armoured "bow-windows," on either side before the tank could be moved by rail. This was no easy matter. The tank was driven into two shallow trenches. A stout four-wheeled trolley was run alongside, and a sort of crane was fitted, to which slings were secured. The sponson was girt about with these slings, the bolts which secured the sponson to the body of the tank were taken out, and the sponson was lowered on to the trolley.

My men, of whom the majority were inexperienced, carried out the reverse process on a dark night in a blizzard. Their fingers were so blue with cold that they could scarcely handle their tools. The climax was reached when we discovered that we should be compelled to drill new holes in several of the sponsons, because in certain cases the holes in the sponsons did not correspond with the holes in the tanks.

If the men never had a harder night's work, they certainly never worked better. Half the tanks fitted their sponsons and reached Behagnies by dawn. The remainder, less one lame duck, were hidden in Achiet-le-Grand until darkness once more allowed them to move.

Every precaution was taken to conceal the tanks from the

enemy. My troop of Glasgow Yeomanry, under the direction of Talbot, who had been a sergeant-major in the Dragoons, rode twice over the tracks which the tanks had made in order to obliterate them by hoof-marks. At Behagnies the tanks were drawn up against convenient hedges and enveloped in tarpaulins and camouflage nets. In spite of our efforts they appeared terribly obvious as we surveyed them anxiously from one point after another. Our subtle devices were soon tested. An enterprising German airman flew down out of the clouds and darted upon two luckless observation balloons to right and left of us. He set them both on fire with tracer bullets, came low over our camp, fired down the streets of Bapaume, and disappeared into the east. The sporting instinct of my men responded to the audacity of the exploit, and they cheered him; but for the next twenty-four hours I was wondering if the camouflage of my tanks had been successful, or if the attention of the airman had been concentrated solely on the balloons. Presumably we were not spotted, for while at Behagnies we were neither shelled nor bombed.

The preparations for my first essay in tank-fighting were beginning to bear fruit. Eleven tanks lay within two short marches of any point from which they were likely to attack, and my crews were busy overhauling them. One crippled tank was hidden at Achiet-le-Grand, but the mechanical defect which had developed in her must have escaped the notice of central

workshops. Cooper[6] was engaged night and day in taking up supplies and making forward dumps. The Corps had provided us with a convoy of limbered waggons drawn by mules—the forward roads were not passable for lorries—and the wretched animals had little rest. We were ordered to be ready by the 6th, and the order meant a fight against time. Tanks consume an incredible quantity of petrol, oil, grease, and water, and it was necessary to form dumps of these supplies and of ammunition at Mory Copse, our half-way house, and at Noreuil and Ecoust. Night and day the convoy trekked backwards and forwards under Cooper or Talbot. Mules cast their shoes, the drivers were dog-tired, the dumps at Noreuil and Ecoust were shelled, both roads to Mory were blocked by the explosion of delayed mines,—in spite of all difficulties the dumps were made, and on the morning of the battle the convoy stood by loaded, ready to follow the tanks in the expected break through.

Haigh had ridden forward to Ecoust with a handful of Glasgow yeomen in order to keep an eye on the dump and reconnoitre the country between Ecoust and the Hindenburg Line. He started in the afternoon, joining an ammunition column on the way. They approached the village at dusk. The enemy was shelling the road and suspected battery positions short of the first houses. The column made a dash for it at full gallop, but a couple of shells found the column, killing a team and the drivers.

Haigh and his men wandered into a smithy and lit a small fire,

[6] Major R. Cooper, M.C., Royal Fusiliers, had replaced Captain R. Haigh, M.C.

for it was bitterly cold. The shelling continued, but the smithy was not hit. They passed a wretched night, and at dawn discovered a cellar, where they made themselves comfortable after they had removed the bodies of two Germans.

The reconnaissances were carried out with Haigh's usual thoroughness. Tank routes and observation posts were selected —"lying-up" places for the tanks were chosen. Everything was ready if the tanks should be ordered to attack Bullecourt from the direction of Ecoust.

On April 4th I was introduced to the Higher Command. The Vth Corps had moved forward from Acheux to the ruined chateau at Bihucourt. There I lunched with the General, and drove with him in the afternoon to an army conference at Fifth Army Headquarters in Albert. The block of traffic on the road made us an hour late, and it was interesting to see how an Army commander dealt with such pronounced, if excusable, unpunctuality in a Corps commander.

The conference consisted of an awe-inspiring collection of generals seated round a table in a stuffy room decorated with maps. The details of the attack had apparently been settled before we arrived, but I understood from the Army commander's vigorous summary of the situation that the Third Army would not attack until the 7th. The greatest results were expected, and the Fifth Army would join in the fray immediately the attack of the Third Army was well launched. As far as I was concerned, my tanks were to be distributed along the fronts of the Australian and

Vth Corps. The conference broke up, and the colonel and I were asked to tea at the chateau. It was a most nervous proceeding, to drink tea in the company of a bevy of generals; but the major-general on my right was hospitality itself, and the colonel improved the occasion by obtaining the promise of some more huts from the major-general, who was engineer-in-chief of the Army. Eventually we escaped, and the colonel[7] drove me back to Behagnies, where battalion headquarters lay close by my camp.

On the night of the 5th, as soon as it was dusk, my tanks moved forward. One by one they slid smoothly past me in the darkness, each like a patient animal, led by his officer, who flashed directions with an electric lamp. The stench of petrol in the air, a gentle crackling as they found their way through the wire, the sweet purr of the engine changing to a roar when they climbed easily on to the road—and then, as they followed the white tape into the night, the noise of their engines died away, and I could hear only the sinister flap-flap of the tracks, and see only points of light on the hillside.

Tanks in the daytime climbing in and out of trenches like performing elephants may appeal to the humour of a journalist. Stand with me at night and listen. There is a little mist, and the dawn will soon break. Listen carefully, and you will hear a queer rhythmical noise and the distant song of an engine. The measured flap of the tracks grows louder, and, if you did not know, you would think an aeroplane was droning overhead. Then in the

[7] Now Brigadier-General J. Hardress Lloyd, D.S.O.

half-light comes a tired officer, reading a map, and behind him another, signalling at intervals to a grey mass gliding smoothly like a snake. And so they pass, one by one, with the rattle of tracks and the roar of their exhaust, each mass crammed with weary men, hot and filthy and choking with the fumes. Nothing is more inexorable than the slow glide of a tank and the rhythm of her tracks. Remember that nothing on earth has ever caused more deadly fear at the terrible hour of dawn than these grey sliding masses crammed with weary men....

My tanks were safely camouflaged in the old quarry at Mory Copse before dawn on April 6th. I joined them in the morning, riding up from the camp at Behagnies on a troop-horse I had commandeered from my troop of Glasgow Yeomanry. The quarry was not an ideal hiding-place, as it lay open to direct though distant observation from the German lines; but the tanks were skilfully concealed by the adroit use of trees, undergrowth, and nets, the hill surmounted by the copse provided an excellent background, and we were compelled to make a virtue of necessity as the open downs in the neighbourhood of Mory gave not the slightest cover.[8] The village itself was out of the question: the enemy were shelling it with hearty goodwill.

We lay there comfortably enough, though unnecessary movement by day and the use of lights at night were forbidden. No enemy aeroplane came over, but a few shells, dropping just beyond the copse on a suspected battery position, disturbed our

[8] Paget, the Corps Camouflage Officer, was of the greatest assistance.

sleep. The tanks were quietly tuned, the guns were cleaned, and officers were detailed to reconnoitre the tank routes to Ecoust and Noreuil.

The offensive was postponed from day to day, and we were growing a little impatient, when at dawn on April 9th the Third Army attacked.

It had been arranged at the last Army Conference that the Fifth Army would move when the offensive of the Third Army was well launched. My tanks were to be distributed in pairs along the whole front of the army, and to each pair a definite objective was allotted. I had always been averse to this scattering of my command. The Hindenburg Line, which faced us, was notoriously strong. Bullecourt, the key to the whole position, looked on the map almost impregnable. The artillery of the Fifth Army was to the best of my knowledge far from overwhelming, and gunners had told me that good forward positions for the guns were difficult to find. I realised, of course, that an officer in my subordinate position knew little, but I was convinced that a surprise concentration might prove a success where a formal attack, lightly supported by a few tanks scattered over a wide front, might reasonably fail. I planned for my own content an attack in which my tanks, concentrated on a narrow front of a thousand yards and supported as strongly as possible by all the infantry and guns available, should steal up to the Hindenburg Line without a barrage. As they entered the German trenches down would come the barrage, and under cover of the barrage

and the tanks the infantry would sweep through, while every gun not used in making the barrage should pound away at the German batteries.

I was so fascinated by my conception that on the morning of the 9th I rode down to Behagnies and gave it to the colonel for what it was worth. He approved of it thoroughly. After a hasty lunch we motored down to the headquarters of the Fifth Army.

We found General Gough receiving in triumph the reports of our successes on the Third Army front opposite Arras.

"We want to break the Hindenburg Line with tanks, General," said the colonel, and very briefly explained the scheme.

General Gough received it with favour, and decided to attack at dawn on the following morning. He asked me when my tanks would require to start. The idea of an attack within twenty-four hours was a little startling—there were so many preparations to be made; but I replied my tanks should move at once, and I suggested air protection. General Gough immediately rang up the R.F.C., but their General was out, and, after some discussion, it was decided that my tanks would have sufficient time to reach the necessary position if they moved off after dusk. We drove at breakneck speed to the chateau near, which was occupied by the Australian Corps, and were left by General Gough to work out the details with the Brigadier-General of the General Staff.

The colonel allowed me to explain the scheme myself. All my suggestions were accepted; but the concentration of men and guns that I had imagined in my dreams was made impossible

by the fact that General Gough had ordered the attack for the morrow.

I took the colonel's car and tore back to Behagnies. I wrote out my orders while Jumbo, helped by two reconnaissance officers who were attached to us for instruction, rapidly marked and coloured maps for the tank commanders. My orders reached Swears, who was in charge at Mory Copse, by 6.30 P.M., and by 8 P.M. the tanks were clear of the quarry.

After dark I walked down the Bapaume road and presented myself at the headquarters of the Australian Division, with which my tanks were operating. It was a pitch-black night. The rain was turning to sleet.

Divisional Headquarters were in "Armstrong" or small canvas huts, draughty and cold. I discussed the coming battle with the staff of the Division and Osborne, the G.S.O. II. of the Corps. We turned in for a snatch of sleep, and I woke with a start—dreaming that my tanks had fallen over a cliff into the sea. At midnight I went to the door of the hut and looked out. A gale was blowing, and sleet was mingled with snow. After midnight I waited anxiously for news of my tanks. It was a long trek for one night, and, as we had drawn them so recently, I could not guarantee, from experience, their mechanical condition. There was no margin of time for any except running repairs.

At one o'clock still no news had come. The tanks had orders to telephone to me immediately they came to Noreuil, and from Noreuil to the starting-point was at least a ninety-minutes' run.

By two o'clock everybody was asking me for information. Brigade Headquarters at Noreuil had neither seen tanks nor heard them, but they sent out orderlies to look for them in case they had lost their way. At Noreuil it was snowing hard, and blowing a full gale.

My position was not pleasant. The attack was set for dawn. The infantry had already gone forward to the railway embankment, from which they would "jump off." In daylight they could neither remain at the embankment nor retire over exposed ground without heavy shelling. It was half-past two. I was penned in a hut with a couple of staff officers, who, naturally enough, were irritated and gloomy. I could do nothing.

The attack was postponed for an hour. Still no news of the tanks. The faintest glimmerings of dawn appeared when the telephone-bell rang. The Australian handed me the receiver with a smile of relief.

"It's one of your men," he said.

I heard Wyatt's tired voice.

"We are two miles short of Noreuil in the valley. We have been wandering on the downs in a heavy snowstorm. We never quite lost our way, but it was almost impossible to keep the tanks together. I will send in a report. The men are dead-tired."

"How long will it take to get to the starting-point?" I asked.

"An hour and a half at least," he replied wearily.

"Stand by for orders."

It was 1¼ hours before zero. The men were dead-tired. The

tanks had been running all night. But the Australians were out on the railway embankment and dawn was breaking.

I went to see the General, and explained the situation briefly.

"What will happen to your tanks if I put back zero another hour and we attack in daylight?" he asked.

"My tanks will be useless," I replied. "They will be hit before they reach the German trenches—particularly against a background of snow."

He looked at his watch and glanced through the window at the growing light.

"It can't be helped. We must postpone the show. I think there is just time to get the boys back. Send B. to me."

I called up Wyatt and told him that the men were to be given a little sleep. The officers, after a short rest, were to reconnoitre forward. I heard orders given for the Australians to come back from the railway embankment—later I learned that this was done with practically no casualties—then I stumbled down the road to tell the colonel.

I found him shaving.

"The tanks lost their way in a snowstorm and arrived late at Noreuil. The attack was postponed."

He looked grave for a moment, but continued his shaving.

"Go and have some breakfast," he said cheerily. "You must be hungry. We'll talk it over later."

So I went and had some breakfast....

CHAPTER IV.
THE FIRST BATTLE OF BULLECOURT.
(*April 11, 1917.*)

Later in the morning we heard from Jumbo, who had returned from Noreuil, the full history of the weary trek in the blizzard.

The tanks had left Mory Copse at 8 P.M. under the guidance of Wyatt. In the original plan of operations it had been arranged that Wyatt's section should attack from Noreuil and the remaining sections from Ecoust. So Wyatt was the only section commander who had reconnoitred the Noreuil route.

No tape had been laid. We had not wished to decorate the downs with broad white tape before the afternoon of the day on which the tanks would move forward. On the other hand, we had not calculated on such a brief interval between the receipt of orders and the start of the tanks. An attempt to lay tape in front of the tanks was soon abandoned: the drivers could not distinguish it, and Wyatt was guiding them as well as he could.

Soon after they had set out the blizzard came sweeping over the downs, blocking out landmarks and obscuring lamps. The drivers could not always see the officers who were leading their tanks on foot. Each tank commander, blinded and breathless,

found it barely possible to follow the tank in front. The pace was reduced to a mere crawl in order to keep the convoy together.

Though Wyatt never lost his way, he wisely proceeded with the utmost caution, checking his route again and again. Our line at the time consisted of scattered posts—there were no trenches—and on such a night it would have been easy enough to lead the whole company of tanks straight into the German wire.

The tanks came down into the valley that runs from Vaulx-Vraucourt to Noreuil two miles above Noreuil. The crews were dead-tired, but they would have gone forward willingly if they could have arrived in time. The rest of the story I have told.

The blizzard confounded many that night. The colonel told me later he had heard that a whole cavalry brigade had spent most of the night wandering over the downs, hopelessly lost. I cannot vouch for the story myself.

In the afternoon (April 10) I was called to a conference at the headquarters of the Australian Division. General Birdwood was there, Major-General Holmes, who commanded the Division with which we were to operate, Brigadier-General Rosenthal, commanding the artillery of the Corps, sundry staff officers, the colonel, and myself.

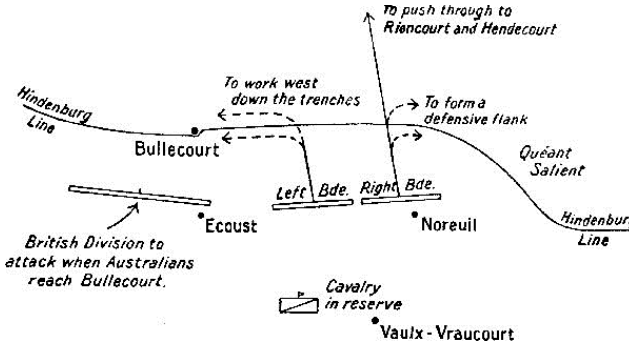
The conference first discussed the situation on the front of the Third Army. The initial advance had been completely successful, but the German forces were far from defeat, and were continuing to offer a most determined and skilful resistance. We certainly had not broken through yet. The battle, however, was still in

its earliest stages; the situation had not crystallised; there was still hope that the enormous pressure of our offensive might cause the enemy line to crumble and disappear. It had been decided, in consequence, to proceed with the postponed attack on Bullecourt, but to overhaul the arrangements which had been improvised to meet an emergency. The original idea of a stealthy and silent attack, led by tanks and supported by a bombardment rather than a barrage, was abandoned after some discussion, and the conference agreed to return to more classical methods.

Two infantry brigades would attack and pierce the Hindenburg Line on the front immediately to the east of Bullecourt. The attack was to be led by tanks under cover of a barrage and a heavy bombardment. Emphasis was laid on the necessity for strong counter-battery work. The right attacking brigade would form a defensive flank in the direction of Quéant, and at the same time endeavour to press through to Riencourt and Hendecourt. The left brigade would work its way down the German trenches into Bullecourt itself. Immediately the village was reached, the British division on the left would extend the front of the attack westwards.

My tanks were detailed to co-operate very closely with the infantry. The right section (Wyatt's) were given three duties: first, to parade up and down the German wire immediately to the right of the front of the attack; second, to remain with the infantry in the Hindenburg Line until the trenches had been successfully "blocked" and the defensive flank secured; third, to accompany

the infantry in their advance on Riencourt and Hendecourt.



The centre section (Field's) were required to advance between the two brigades and plunge into the Hindenburg Line. This movement was made necessary by the decision to attack not on a continuous front but up two slight spurs or shoulders. The Hindenburg Line itself lay just beyond the crest of a slope, and these almost imperceptible shoulders ran out from the main slope at right angles to the line. It was thought that the depression between them would be swept by machine-gun fire, and it was decided in consequence to leave the attack up the depression to the tanks alone.

My left section (Swears') were to precede the infantry of the left Australian brigade. They were to obtain a footing in the Hindenburg Line and then work along it into Bullecourt. Whether, later, they would be able to assist the British infantry

in their attack on the trenches to the west of Bullecourt was a matter for their discretion.

The atmosphere of the conference was cheerless. It is a little melancholy to revive and rebuild the plan of an attack which has been postponed very literally at the last moment. The conference was an anticlimax. For days and nights we had been completing our preparations. The supreme moment had come, and after hours of acute tension had passed without result. Then again, tired and without spirit, we drew up fresh plans. War is never romantic because emergencies, which might be adventures, come only when the soldier is stale and tired.

We hurried back to the camp at Behagnies and composed fresh orders, while Jumbo re-marked his maps and reshuffled his aeroplane photographs. At dusk Jumbo and I started out in the car for Noreuil, but at Vaulx-Vraucourt we decided to leave the car as the road was impossible. It was heavy with mud and slush and we were far from fresh. We passed Australians coming up and much transport—in places the road was almost blocked. After an hour or more we came to the valley above Noreuil, full of new gun-pits. Our tanks lay hidden against the bank at the side of the road, shrouded in their tarpaulins. My men were busily engaged in making them ready. One engine was turning over very quietly. It was bitterly cold, and the snow still lay on the downs.

We struggled on to a ruined house at the entrance to the village. One room or shed—it may have been a shrine—constructed strongly of bricks, still stood in the middle of the

wreckage. This my officers had made their headquarters. I gave instructions for all the officers to be collected, and in the meantime walked through the street to one of the two brigade headquarters in the village.

This brigade was fortunate in its choice, for it lay safe and snug in the bowels of the earth. An old brewery or factory possessed whole storeys of cellars, and the brigade office was three storeys down.

Haigh and Swears were discussing operations with the brigadier. They were all under the illusion that the postponed attack would take place as originally planned, and bitter was the disappointment when I told them that the orders had been changed. I gave the general and his brigade-major a rough outline of the new scheme, and took Swears and Haigh back with me to the ruins.

All my officers were assembled in the darkness. I could not see their faces. They might have been ghosts: I heard only rustles and murmurs. I explained briefly what had happened. One or two of them naturally complained of changes made at such a late hour. They did not see how they could study their orders, their maps, and their photographs in the hour and a half that remained to them before it was time for the tanks to start. So, again, I set out carefully and in detail the exact task of each tank. When I had finished, we discussed one or two points, and then my officers went to their tanks, and I returned to brigade headquarters, so that I might be in touch with the colonel and the Division should

anything untoward happen before zero.

The night passed with slow feet, while my tanks were crawling forward over the snow. The brigade-major re-wrote his orders. Officers and orderlies came in and out of the cellar. We had some tea, and the general lay down for some sleep. There was a rumour that one of the tanks had become ditched in climbing out of the road. I went out to investigate, and learned that Morris's tank had been slightly delayed. It was, unfortunately, a clear cold night.

When I returned to the cellar the brigade staff were making ready for the battle. Pads of army signal forms were placed conveniently to hand. The war diary was lying open with a pencil beside it and the carbons adjusted. The wires forward to battalion headquarters were tested. Fresh orderlies were awakened.

Apparently there had been little shelling during the early part of the night. Noreuil itself had been sprinkled continuously with shrapnel, and one or two 5.9's had come sailing over. Forward, the railway embankment and the approaches to it had been shelled intermittently, and towards dawn the Germans began a mild bombardment, but nothing was reported to show that the enemy had heard our tanks or realised our intentions.

I received messages from Haigh that all my tanks were in position, or just coming into position, beyond the railway embankment. Zero hour was immediately before sunrise, and as the minutes filed by I wondered idly whether, deep down in the earth, we should hear the barrage. I was desperately anxious that the tanks should prove an overwhelming success. It was

impossible not to imagine what might happen to the infantry if the tanks were knocked out early in the battle. Yet I could not help feeling that this day we should make our name.

We looked at our watches—two minutes to go. We stared at the minute-hands. Suddenly there was a whistling and rustling in the distance, and a succession of little thumps, like a dog that hits the floor when it scratches itself. The barrage had opened. Constraint vanished, and we lit pipes and cigarettes. You would have thought that the battle was over. We had not blown out our matches when there was a reverberating crash overhead. Two could play at this game of noises.

Few reports arrive during the first forty minutes of a battle. Everybody is too busy fighting. Usually the earliest news comes from wounded men, and naturally their experiences are limited. Brigade headquarters are, as a rule, at least an hour behind the battle. You cannot often stand on a hill and watch the ebb and flow of the fight in the old magnificent way.

At last the reports began to dribble in and the staff settled down to their work. There were heavy casualties before the German wire was reached. The enemy barrage came down, hot and strong, a few minutes after zero.... Fighting hard in the Hindenburg trenches, but few tanks to be seen.... The enemy are still holding on to certain portions of the line.... The fighting is very severe.... Heavy counter-attacks from the sunken road at L. 6 b. 5.2. The news is a medley of scraps.

Soon the brigadier is called upon to act. One company want a

protective barrage put down in front of them, but from another message it seems probable that there are Australians out in front. The brigadier must decide.

One battalion asks to be reinforced from the reserve battalion. Is it time for the reserve to be thrown into the battle? The brigadier must decide.

They have run short of bombs. An urgent message for fresh supplies comes through, and the staff captain hurries out to make additional arrangements.

There is little news of the tanks. One report states that no tanks have been seen, another that a tank helped to clear up a machine-gun post, a third that a tank is burning.

At last R., one of my tank commanders, bursts in. He is grimy, red-eyed, and shaken.

"Practically all the tanks have been knocked out, sir!" he reported in a hard excited voice.

Before answering I glanced rapidly round the cellar. These Australians had been told to rely on tanks. Without tanks many casualties were certain and victory was improbable. Their hopes were shattered as well as mine, if this report were true. Not an Australian turned a hair. Each man went on with his job.

I asked R. a few questions. The brigade-major was listening sympathetically. I made a written note, sent off a wire to the colonel, and climbed into the open air.

It was a bright and sunny morning, with a clear sky and a cool invigorating breeze. A bunch of Australians were joking over

their breakfasts. The streets of the village were empty, with the exception of a "runner," who was hurrying down the road.

The guns were hard at it. From the valley behind the village came the quick cracks of the 18-pdrs., the little thuds of the light howitzers, the ear-splitting crashes of the 60-pdrs., and, very occasionally, the shuddering thumps of the heavies. The air rustled and whined with shells. Then, as we hesitated, came the loud murmur, the roar, the overwhelming rush of a 5.9, like the tearing of a giant newspaper, and the building shook and rattled as a huge cloud of black smoke came suddenly into being one hundred yards away, and bricks and bits of metal came pattering down or swishing past.

The enemy was kind. He was only throwing an occasional shell into the village, and we walked down the street in comparative calm.

When we came to the brick shelter at the farther end of the village we realised that our rendezvous had been most damnably ill-chosen. Fifty yards to the west the Germans, before their retirement, had blown a large crater where the road from Ecoust joins the road from Vaulx-Vraucourt, and now they were shelling it persistently. A stretcher party had just been caught. They lay in a confused heap half-way down the side of the crater. And a few yards away a field-howitzer battery in action was being shelled with care and accuracy.

We sat for a time in this noisy and unpleasant spot. One by one officers came in to report. Then we walked up the sunken

road towards the dressing station. When I had the outline of the story I made my way back to the brigade headquarters in the cellar, and sent off a long wire. My return to the brick shelter was, for reasons that at the time seemed almost too obvious, both hasty and undignified. Further reports came in, and when we decided to move outside the village and collect the men by the bank where the tanks had sheltered a few hours before, the story was tolerably complete.

All the tanks, except Morris's, had arrived without incident at the railway embankment. Morris ditched at the bank and was a little late. Haigh and Jumbo had gone on ahead of the tanks. They crawled out beyond the embankment into No Man's Land and marked out the starting-line. It was not too pleasant a job. The enemy machine-guns were active right through the night, and the neighbourhood of the embankment was shelled intermittently. Towards dawn this intermittent shelling became almost a bombardment, and it was feared that the tanks had been heard.[9]

Skinner's tank failed on the embankment. The remainder crossed it successfully and lined up for the attack just before zero. By this time the shelling had become severe. The crews waited inside their tanks, wondering dully if they would be hit before they started. Already they were dead-tired, for they had had little sleep since their long painful trek of the night before.

Suddenly our bombardment began—it was more of a

[9] We learned later that they had been heard.

bombardment than a barrage—and the tanks crawled away into the darkness, followed closely by little bunches of Australians.

On the extreme right Morris and Puttock of Wyatt's section were met by tremendous machine-gun fire at the wire of the Hindenburg Line. They swung to the right, as they had been ordered, and glided along in front of the wire, sweeping the parapet with their fire. They received as good as they gave. Serious clutch trouble developed in Puttock's tank. It was impossible to stop since now the German guns were following them. A brave runner carried the news to Wyatt at the embankment. The tanks continued their course, though Puttock's tank was barely moving, and by luck and good driving they returned to the railway, having kept the enemy most fully occupied in a quarter where he might have been uncommonly troublesome.

Morris passed a line to Skinner and towed him over the embankment. They both started for Bullecourt. Puttock pushed on back towards Noreuil. His clutch was slipping so badly that the tank would not move, and the shells were falling ominously near. He withdrew his crew from the tank into a trench, and a moment later the tank was hit and hit again.

Of the remaining two tanks in this section we could hear nothing. Davies and Clarkson had disappeared. Perhaps they had gone through to Hendecourt. Yet the infantry of the right brigade, according to the reports we had received, were fighting most desperately to retain a precarious hold on the trenches they had

entered.

In the centre Field's section of three tanks were stopped by the determined and accurate fire of forward field-guns before they entered the German trenches. The tanks were silhouetted against the snow, and the enemy gunners did not miss.

The first tank was hit in the track before it was well under way. The tank was evacuated, and in the dawning light it was hit again before the track could be repaired.

Money's tank reached the German wire. His men must have "missed their gears." For less than a minute the tank was motionless, then she burst into flames. A shell had exploded the petrol tanks, which in the old Mark I. were placed forward on either side of the officer's and driver's seats. A sergeant and two men escaped. Money, best of good fellows, must have been killed instantaneously by the shell.

Bernstein's tank was within reach of the German trenches when a shell hit the cab, decapitated the driver, and exploded in the body of the tank. The corporal was wounded in the arm, and Bernstein was stunned and temporarily blinded. The tank was filled with fumes. As the crew were crawling out, a second shell hit the tank on the roof. The men under the wounded corporal began stolidly to salve the tank's equipment, while Bernstein, scarcely knowing where he was, staggered back to the embankment. He was packed off to a dressing station, and an orderly was sent to recall the crew and found them still working stubbornly under direct fire.

Swears' section of four tanks on the left were slightly more fortunate.

Birkett went forward at top speed, and, escaping the shells, entered the German trenches, where his guns did great execution. The tank worked down the trenches towards Bullecourt, followed by the Australians. She was hit twice, and all the crew were wounded, but Birkett went on fighting grimly until his ammunition was exhausted and he himself was badly wounded in the leg. Then at last he turned back, followed industriously by the German gunners. Near the embankment he stopped the tank to take his bearings. As he was climbing out, a shell burst against the side of the tank and wounded him again in the leg. The tank was evacuated. The crew salved what they could, and, helping each other, for they were all wounded, they made their way back painfully to the embankment. Birkett was brought back on a stretcher, and wounded a third time as he lay in the sunken road outside the dressing station. His tank was hit again and again. Finally it took fire, and was burnt out.

Skinner, after his tank had been towed over the railway embankment by Morris, made straight for Bullecourt, thinking that as the battle had now been in progress for more than two hours the Australians must have fought their way down the trenches into the village. Immediately he entered the village machine-guns played upon his tank, and several of his crew were slightly wounded by the little flakes of metal that fly about inside a Mk. I. tank when it is subjected to really concentrated machine-

gun fire. No Australians could be seen. Suddenly he came right to the edge of an enormous crater, and as suddenly stopped. He tried to reverse, but he could not change gear. The tank was absolutely motionless. He held out for some time, and then the Germans brought up a gun and began to shell the tank. Against field-guns in houses he was defenceless so long as his tank could not move. His ammunition was nearly exhausted. There were no signs of the Australians or of British troops. He decided quite properly to withdraw. With great skill he evacuated his crew, taking his guns with him and the little ammunition that remained. Slowly and carefully they worked their way back, and reached the railway embankment without further casualty.

The fourth tank of this section was hit on the roof just as it was coming into action. The engine stopped in sympathy, and the tank commander withdrew his crew from the tank.

Swears, the section commander, left the railway embankment, and with the utmost gallantry went forward into Bullecourt to look for Skinner. He never came back.

Such were the cheerful reports that I received in my little brick shelter by the cross-roads. Of my eleven tanks nine had received direct hits, and two were missing. The infantry were in no better plight. From all accounts the Australians were holding with the greatest difficulty the trenches they had entered. Between the two brigades the Germans were clinging fiercely to their old line. Counter-attack after counter-attack came smashing against the Australians from Bullecourt and its sunken roads, from

Lagnicourt and along the trenches from the Quéant salient. The Australians were indeed hard put to it.

While we were sorrowfully debating what would happen, we heard the noise of a tank's engines. We ran out, and saw to our wonder a tank coming down the sunken road. It was the fourth tank of Swears' section, which had been evacuated after a shell had blown a large hole in its roof.

When the crew had left the tank and were well on their way to Noreuil, the tank corporal remembered that he had left his "Primus" stove behind. It was a valuable stove, and he did not wish to lose it. So he started back with a comrade, and later they were joined by a third man. Their officer had left to look for me and ask for orders. They reached the tank—the German gunners were doing their very best to hit it again—and desperately eager not to abandon it outright, they tried to start the engine. To their immense surprise it fired, and, despite the German gunners, the three of them brought the tank and the "Primus" stove safe into Noreuil. The corporal's name was Hayward. He was one of Hamond's men.

We had left the brick shelter and were collecting the men on the road outside Noreuil, when the colonel rode up and gave us news of Davies and Clarkson. Our aeroplanes had seen two tanks crawling over the open country beyond the Hindenburg trenches to Riencourt, followed by four or five hundred cheering Australians. Through Riencourt they swept, and on to the large village of Hendecourt five miles beyond the trenches. They

entered the village, still followed by the Australians....[10]

What happened to them afterwards cannot be known until the battlefield is searched and all the prisoners who return have been questioned. The tanks and the Australians never came back. The tanks may have been knocked out by field-guns. They may have run short of petrol. They may have become "ditched." Knowing Davies and Clarkson, I am certain they fought to the last—and the tanks which later were paraded through Berlin were not my tanks....

We rallied fifty-two officers and men out of the one hundred and three who had left Mory or Behagnies for the battle. Two men were detailed to guard our dump outside Noreuil, the rescued tank started for Mory, and the remaining officers and men marched wearily to Vaulx-Vraucourt, where lorries and a car were awaiting them.

I walked up to the railway embankment, but seeing no signs of any of my men or of Davies' or Clarkson's tanks, returned to Noreuil and paid a farewell visit to the two brigadiers, of whom one told me with natural emphasis that tanks were "no damned use." Then with Skinner and Jumbo I tramped up the valley towards Vraucourt through the midst of numerous field-guns. We had passed the guns when the enemy began to shell the crowded valley with heavy stuff, directed by an aeroplane that kept steady and unwinking watch on our doings.

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[10] An airman who flew over the battlefield is inclined to doubt this story. We must wait for the official history.

Just outside Vaulx-Vraucourt we rested on a sunny slope and looked across the valley at our one surviving tank trekking back to Mory. Suddenly a "5.9" burst near it. The enemy were searching for guns. Then to our dismay a second shell burst at the tail of the tank. The tank stopped, and in a moment the crew were scattering for safety. A third shell burst within a few yards of the tank. The shooting seemed too accurate to be unintentional, and we cursed the aeroplane that was circling overhead.

There was nothing we could do. The disabled tank was two miles away. We knew that when the shelling stopped the crew would return and inspect the damage. So, sick at heart, we tramped on to Vaulx-Vraucourt, passing a reserve brigade coming up hastily, and a dressing station to which a ghastly stream of stretchers was flowing.

We met the car a mile beyond the village, and drove back sadly to Behagnies. When we came to the camp, it was only ten o'clock in the morning. In London civil servants were just beginning their day's work.

The enemy held the Australians stoutly. We never reached Bullecourt, and soon it became only too clear that it would be difficult enough to retain the trenches we had entered. The position was nearly desperate. The right brigade had won some trenches, and the left brigade had won some trenches. Between the two brigades the enemy had never been dislodged. And he continued to counter-attack with skill and fury down the trenches on the flanks—from the sunken roads by Bullecourt and up

the communication trenches from the north. In the intervals his artillery pounded away with solid determination. Bombs and ammunition were running very short, and to get further supplies forward was terribly expensive work, for all the approaches to the trenches which the Australians had won were enfiladed by machine-gun fire. Battalions of the reserve brigade were thrown in too late, for we had bitten off more than we could chew; the Germans realised this hard fact, and redoubled their efforts. The Australians suddenly retired. The attack had failed.

A few days later the Germans replied by a surprise attack on the Australian line from Noreuil to Lagnicourt. At first they succeeded and broke through to the guns; but the Australians soon rallied, and by a succession of fierce little counter-attacks drove the enemy with great skill back on to the deep wire in front of the Hindenburg Line. There was no escape. Behind the Germans were belts of wire quite impenetrable, and in front of them were the Australians. It was a cool revengeful massacre. The Germans, screaming for mercy, were deliberately and scientifically killed.

Two of my men, who had been left to guard our dump of supplies at Noreuil, took part in this battle of Lagnicourt. Close by the dump was a battery of field howitzers. The Germans had broken through to Noreuil, and the howitzers were firing over the sights; but first one howitzer and then another became silent as the gunners fell. My two men had been using rifles. When they saw what was happening they dashed forward to the howitzers,

and turning their knowledge of the tank 6-pdr. gun to account, they helped to serve the howitzers until some infantry came up and drove back the enemy. Then my men went back to their dump, which had escaped, and remained there on guard until they were relieved on the following day.

The first battle of Bullecourt was a minor disaster. Our attack was a failure, in which the three brigades of infantry engaged lost very heavily indeed; and the officers and men lost, seasoned Australian troops who had fought at Gallipoli, could never be replaced. The company of tanks had been, apparently, nothing but a broken reed. For many months after the Australians distrusted tanks, and it was not until the battle of Amiens, sixteen months later, that the Division engaged at Bullecourt were fully converted. It was a disaster that the Australians attributed to the tanks. The tanks had failed them—the tanks "had let them down."

The Australians, in the bitterness of their losses, looked for scapegoats and found them in my tanks, but my tanks were not to blame. I have heard a lecturer say that to attack the Hindenburg Line on a front of fifteen hundred yards without support on either flank was rash. And it must not be forgotten that the attack ought to have been, and in actual fact was, expected. The artillery support was very far from overwhelming, and the barrage, coming down at zero, gave away the attack before my tanks could cross the wide No Man's Land and reach the German trenches.

What chances of success the attack possessed were destroyed by the snow on the ground, the decision to leave the centre of the attack to the tanks alone, the late arrival of the reserve brigade, and the shortage of bombs and ammunition in the firing line. These unhappy circumstances fitted into each other. If the snow had not made clear targets of the tanks, the tanks by themselves might have driven the enemy out of their trenches in the centre of the attack. If the first stages of the attack had been completely successful, the reserve brigade might not have been required. If the Australians had broken through the trench system on the left and in the centre, as they broke through on the left of the right brigade, bombs would not have been necessary.

It is difficult to estimate the value of tanks in a battle. The Australians naturally contended that without tanks they might have entered the Hindenburg Line. I am fully prepared to admit that the Australians are capable of performing any feat, for as storm troops they are surpassed by none. It is, however, undeniable that my tanks disturbed and disconcerted the enemy. We know from a report captured later that the enemy fire was concentrated on the tanks, and the German Higher Command instanced this battle as an operation in which the tanks compelled the enemy to neglect the advancing infantry. The action of the tanks was not entirely negative. On the right flank of the right brigade, a weak and dangerous spot, the tanks enabled the Australians to form successfully a defensive flank.

The most interesting result of the employment of tanks was

the break-through to Riencourt and Hendecourt by Davies' and Clarkson's tanks, and the Australians who followed them. With their flanks in the air, and in the face of the sturdiest opposition, half a section of tanks and about half a battalion of infantry broke through the strongest field-works in France and captured two villages, the second of which was nearly five miles behind the German line. This break-through was the direct forefather of the break-through at Cambrai.

My men, tired and half-trained, had done their best. When General Elles was told the story of the battle, he said in my presence, "This is the best thing that tanks have done yet."

The company received two messages of congratulation. The first was from General Gough—

"The Army Commander is very pleased with the gallantry and skill displayed by your company in the attack to-day, and the fact that the objectives were subsequently lost does not detract from the success of the tanks."

The second was from General Elles—

"The General Officer Commanding Heavy Branch M.G.C. wishes to convey to all ranks of the company under your command his heartiest thanks and appreciation of the manner in which they carried out their tasks during the recent operations, and furthermore for the gallantry shown by all tank commanders and tank crews in action."

The company gained two Military Crosses, one D.C.M., and three Military Medals in the first Battle of Bullecourt.

CHAPTER V.
THE SECOND BATTLE OF BULLECOURT.
(*May 3, 1917.*)

When the First Battle of Bullecourt had been fought in the office as well as in the field, when all the returns and reports had been forwarded to the next higher authority, and all the wise questions from the highest authority had been answered yet more wisely, we obtained lorries and made holiday in Amiens.

It was my first visit, and I decided whenever possible to return. It rained, but nobody minded. We lunched well at the Restaurant des Huîtres in the Street of the Headless Bodies. It was a most pleasant tavern—two dainty yellow-papered rooms over a mean shop. The girls who waited on us were decorative and amusing, the cooking was magnificent, and the Chambertin was satisfying. Coming from the desolate country we could not want more. We tarried as long as decorum allowed, and then went out reluctantly into the rain to shop. We bought immense quantities of fresh vegetables—cauliflowers, Brussels sprouts, new potatoes, and a huge box of apples, also a large "paté de canard," as recommended by Madame de Sévigné. A shampoo enabled us to consume chocolate and cakes. We put our last

packages in the car and drove back in the evening.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.