

'HUMPHREY'S WAR'

FIRST WORLD WAR MEMOIRS

Written circa 1976

by

Humphrey S. Swinnerton

(1893-1977)



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EDITORS NOTES

1. Minor spelling and grammatical corrections applied.
2. Items in square brackets [. . .] are notes added to amplify, correct or query the original.
3. The final paragraph of the original handwritten document has been moved to its correct location in the text.

J. Worthy, January 1999

Humphrey's Memoirs were kindly shared by his grandchildren James Worthy and Julie Wilson.

Book & cover design by Jo & Tony Doe 2018.



Some of the places Humphrey mentioned in his Memoirs are indicated in red.

4th August 1914.

The outbreak of the first World War. I was twenty one on the 21st January and therefore had just completed my four years apprenticeship as an engineer.

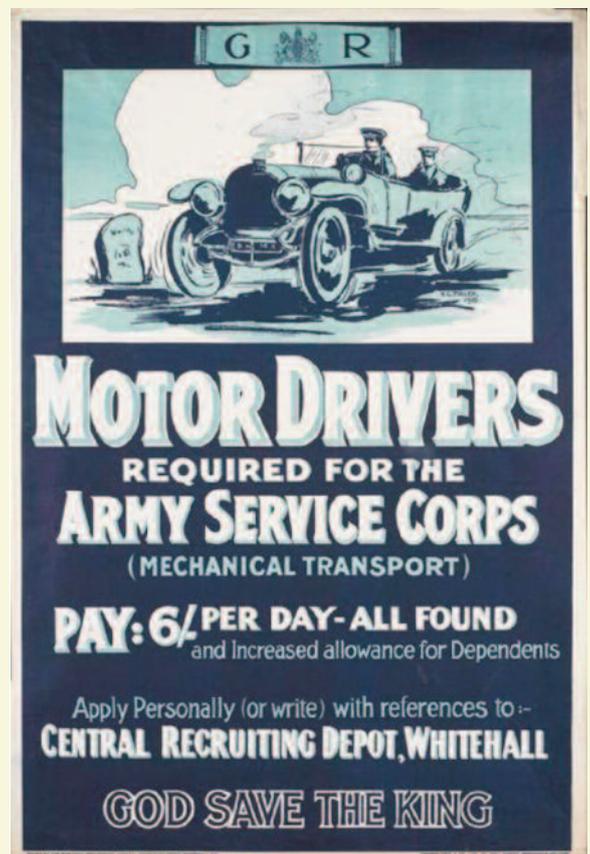
There was some doubt as to whether Britain would go to war until Germany invaded Belgium to whom Britain was bound by treaty.



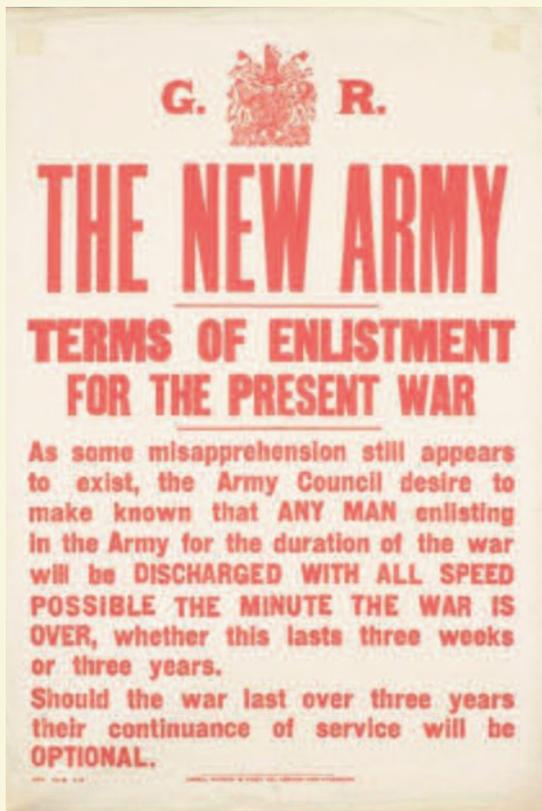
Lord Kitchener became Minister for War and called for one hundred thousand volunteers. These were quickly forthcoming and were known as **Kitchener's Army**. I remained working for **C.D. Phillips** [a Newport engineering company] as an engineer but most of the peace time personnel joined up including the head of the firm **Mr Godfrey Phillips** and two of his brothers. The works was taken over by the Government and proceeded to make machine tools, lathes in particular.

A notice appeared in the local press that motor drivers were urgently required for the **Army Service Corps** (ASC) at 6/- [six shillings — 30p] per day subject to passing a driving test, applications to be made to an address in *Cardiff*. I journeyed to *Cardiff* and joined a queue outside a derelict shop. At last, gaining entry, I was confronted by an *ASC Officer* in uniform and was asked about my occupation and experience. I had done a little driving and a lot of servicing of the firm's vehicles whilst serving my apprenticeship. On the strength of

this I was told to report to the recruiting office in *Newport*, opposite the *Westgate Hotel*, *W.A. Bakers Ironmongers* shop - then empty. Here I found a **Captain Rich** and one other recruit awaiting attention. This individual, looking very scruffy and in need of a shave, sprang smartly to attention and saluted when called forward by Captain Rich. "*What Regiment do you want to join ?*" asked the Captain, "*sure and its the Enniskillen Dragoons sir*" was the response. "*Why do you want to join the Enniskillen Dragoons*", "*Begorra I'm real Irish*". By this time it was obvious that he had consumed a fair amount of alcohol so the Captain said, "*You had better dismiss and come back and see me again*", then, *sotto voce* to me, "*I'll bet that man was a deserter*". I am called in and explain that I have been sent by the *ASC Officer* in *Cardiff*. This is accepted and I am handed a copy of the *New Testament* and told to say after the Captain, "*I swear by Almighty God allegiance to His Majesty King George V and*



to protect his person, crown and dignity so help me God". A free travel warrant is placed in my hand and one shilling [5p] - the King's shilling — and instructions for travel to the *Grove Park, London Depot* of the ASC.



Now, being in the army I am ordered to strip completely to be examined by a doctor in an adjoining room. This was apparently satisfactory though I was told nothing at the time, but learned afterwards that the main object was to see if I was clear of VD.

On 8th November 1915 I presented myself at *Newport GWR Station* in good time to catch the train to *Paddington*, 10:16am considered the best of the day at that time. I was surprised to find only one passenger waiting at *Newport*. Luckily he too was destined for the *ASC Depot* at *Grove Park*. He had recently been employed as a driver by *Messrs Peglers*, well known grocers in *Maindee (Newport)*. The train arrived packed to suffocation with recruits from *Llanelli*,

Swansea, Neath and *Cardiff* consisting in the main of colliers all bound for *London* and various regiments. The two and a half hour journey was uneventful. Immediately on arrival a typical Welshman mounted a luggage trolley and called out in a broad Welsh accent, "Come on boys, give the cockneys a song". So, conducting with a walking stick he burst into "*Land of My Fathers*" supported by the whole train-load of supporters. This curtain-raiser having been accomplished, a voice queried, "Where are we going now?", and the answer from over a hundred voices, "*The Load of Hay*" (this famous pub remained until one of Hitler's bombs scored a direct hit). It was approached by a ramp from *Paddington Station* and soon was filled by *South Wales recruits*. After some quick drinks they emerged into *Praed Street*. A bus came along bearing the legend "*Praed Street*", not much help as it was already in that thoroughfare. However, the Welshmen jumped on board, that is as many as could, and that was the last I was to see of them.

My *Newport* friend suggested we should get some lunch but I thought it best to find *Charing Cross Station*. This we did easily and then proceeded to a three-course luncheon in a nearby restaurant. This proved a very wise precaution as will appear later. We duly arrived at a station labelled *Grove Park W*. We walked out of the station and came immediately face to face with a soldier wearing a red cap. My first introduction to a *Military Policeman*. "Any men here for the *ASC depot* fall in two deep", he commanded, "by the left, quick march". In about 10 minutes we arrived at a large empty house — no furniture of any description. After some time each man received two blankets and was told that if anyone desired to write home announcing safe arrival the *Corporal* would post same for us. Luckily I was armed with a stamped addressed envelope and soon managed to scribble a few lines on my knee

whilst sitting on two blankets. As 6pm approached and no sign of tea a shout went up, “*What about some grub?*”. This brought the news, “*you chaps do not go on the Nation’s strength until tomorrow morning, therefore your first army meal will be breakfast*”. Another hour passed when suddenly the *Corporal*, accompanied by a *Lance-Corporal* arrived carrying a large clothes basket containing as many rock cakes as could hold. The *Corporal* announced that they had to carry the cakes from *Lee Green* therefore the charge would be 2d. (usual price 1d.) [1d. is 1 old penny, 1 new penny = 1p. =2s.4d.]. This profit was a perk for the *Corporal* and his assistant, and, of course, there was a complete clear-out and no further

We were split up into various parties under the charge of a *Corporal* who wore a coloured ribbon in his cap so that we could recognise him.

With lack of orders I wandered about the workhouse all day and contacted my *Corporal* (*blue ribbon*) and was told where and when to present myself on the following morning to take a test on a lorry. Next morning we woke to find 3 inches of snow on the ground. Nevertheless about a dozen filed into a *Dennis* lorry and, driven by the examiner, proceeded in the direction of *Bow, Bromley* and *Chislehurst*. We had not gone far when we came to a violent and sudden stop. Getting quickly down we discovered that the *Dennis*

had skidded off the road and come to rest inches from a lamp standard. No damage and soon the first victim took the wheel. Up a steep hill, down a steep hill, reverse round a blind corner without touching the curb, a few questions on lorry maintenance and the next victim took the wheel. This procedure was repeated until dinner time but my turn had not come. Next morning the same routine but with a *Pierce-Arrow* lorry, this time my turn at the wheel quickly came and all went well until we came to a very steep hill

which had to be climbed. Engaging first gear successfully, silently, with a double de-clutch I was ordered to stop and, without running back at all, to start again in first gear, get into second gear and back to first. To my horror I found that the front brake was almost useless so that it was almost impossible to start off without running back. This, we were told, would always involve failure of the test, a fate



Pierce Arrow lorry

supplies available. The next problem was sleep and how to obtain it. I finally decided to roll one blanket for a pillow and lie on the other several times folded. I was surprised to find how much sleep could be obtained in this way. Morning came and we were marched down to *ASC Headquarters*, a commandeered workhouse, and given breakfast. Finding ablution rooms and toilets, we managed, under crowded conditions, a wash and shave.

which befell most of us. Home to dinner and an order from the *Corporal (blue ribbon)* to see him next morning. This appointment was duly kept and I was escorted to the *OC's* office. "What have you to say regarding the driving test which you failed yesterday?" I replied by telling him of the inefficient foot brake. Turning to the *Corporal* he said, "Long test tomorrow. Dismiss". The *Corporal* told me to report to him in the morning. This time we, the failures, were loaded into a new *Dennis* lorry and started off on a new route. First down a very steep hill, a reverse round a right hand junction on the near side, line up parallel to the curb and stop. Start up again with starting handle (no self-starters at this time) and then drive back to *Grove Park* for dinner. Next morning after breakfast I had difficulty finding *Corporal blue-ribbon* but eventually spotted him in the crowded barrack square. He told me that I had passed the long test and asked for my paybook. This was returned to me in due course stamped inside the cover "PASSED ON LORRY" and signed by the *OC*.

14th November 1915

Next I was directed to a large room on the first floor, told to undress and put on uniform. This consisted of shirt, pants, trousers, tunic and cap, all thrown at me. I was also handed a rifle — *Boer War veteran* but nice and clean with a new looking stock. A figure in khaki uniform accosted me and offered his assistance in dressing me with particular reference to puttees. This help was very acceptable and I soon learned that the assistance came from an old soldier who expected a tip for his services. I now proceeded to pack up my civilian clothes into a large parcel addressed for home. Leaving the bundle I went to the nearby canteen to get some tie-on labels. On my return the large parcel, already addressed on the brown paper, had disappeared and also my rifle. The latter was replaced by the thief



with a more antique version and very dirty. The civilian clothes were never seen again. Now fully equipped we made our way to nearby *Pennington Camp* — bell tents on a large open space which might at one time have been a grass covered common but was now a morass of white London clay, semi-liquid and over the top of army boots. The tents were fitted with wooden floors but the sticky mud coated them entirely. Nearly everyone had colds, several pneumonia and it was rumoured that one man had committed suicide. Eventually someone got in touch with **Horatio Bottomley** MP who came and made a personal inspection. This resulted in all the camp being sent home on fourteen days leave as no other place could be found to accommodate the large number of recruits flowing in.

1st December 1915

We returned to *Pennington Camp*. Severe frost had set in, hardening the mud and the tent floors had been cleaned but we were soon on the move. Marching to *Grove Park station* we were packed into a troop train. Eight men to a carriage, a seven-pound of bully beef and one loaf of bread we set off about 7am for an

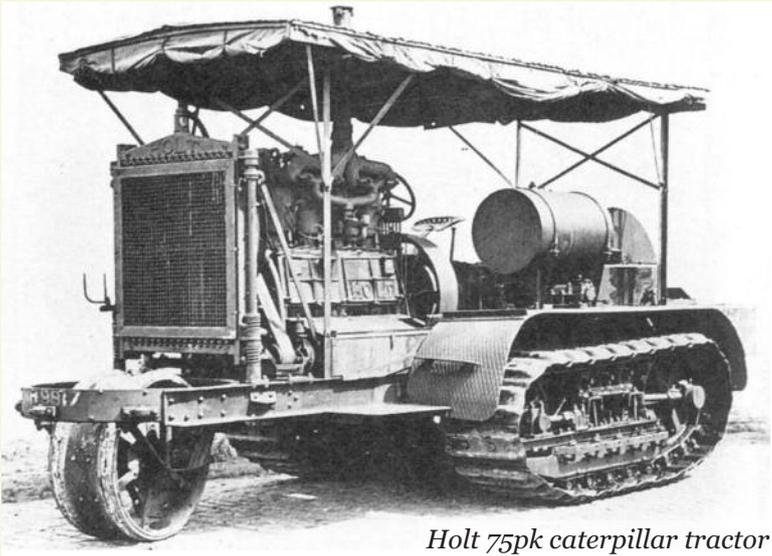


Daimler 3 ton flatbed lorry

unknown destination. It soon became obvious that we were moving in a semi-circle to avoid main lines through *London*. As it became dark, 6pm, we came to a halt and were told to get out. Two military policemen met us and informed us we were in *Bulford, Salisbury Plain*. The camp was two miles away by road but much nearer over the Plain. Which would we take? A unanimous vote favoured the short cut over the hard frozen plain. We entered a large empty building with a floor deeply coated with peat. This proved to be the riding school. Tins of herrings in tomato sauce appeared with a good supply of sliced bread — one tin to two men, the bread as required, also warm tea. This meal which combined tea and supper had to be taken standing up — no furniture in a riding school. Next we were marched to a row of brick built houses — peace-time married quarters. Given two

blankets we slept with kitbags for pillows. With the dawn of day we looked out to take stock of our surroundings. Our first glimpse of *Salisbury Plain*, but our immediate vista was one of devastation, a large area obviously having been destroyed by fire. We soon learned that this was done by some **Australians** as a protest against red tape and spit-and-polish. None of which they would tolerate. Breakfast (very good) was served in a large hut. Never did fried bacon and sausage taste so good. After a wash and shave we were introduced to our lorries (3 ton, solid tyre *Daimlers*) two men per vehicle, and told to clean and polish them — they were well spattered with road mud. My companions in the billet (married quarters) were four *Scotsmen*, three of whom were brothers, the other a piper who had his pipes always at hand. Thank goodness the others were not musical.

Christmas Day, 1915 rapidly approached and a church parade was planned for the morning. Great preparations were made (spit-and-polish) and a band appeared from nowhere unannounced. As the time for the parade and service approached so the rain descended activity (vintage Salisbury Plain) and rendered any outside activity impossible. The band took up station in the riding school and provided much needed recreation until dinner time. The usual Christmas fare was provided — turkey and plum pudding, after which the OC, **Colonel Holbrook**, accompanied by a naval officer, addressed the company, wishing everyone a happy Christmas and stating that there would be no parades until next morning. He concluded by casually remarking, “Lt Holbrook VC is with



Holt 75pk caterpillar tractor

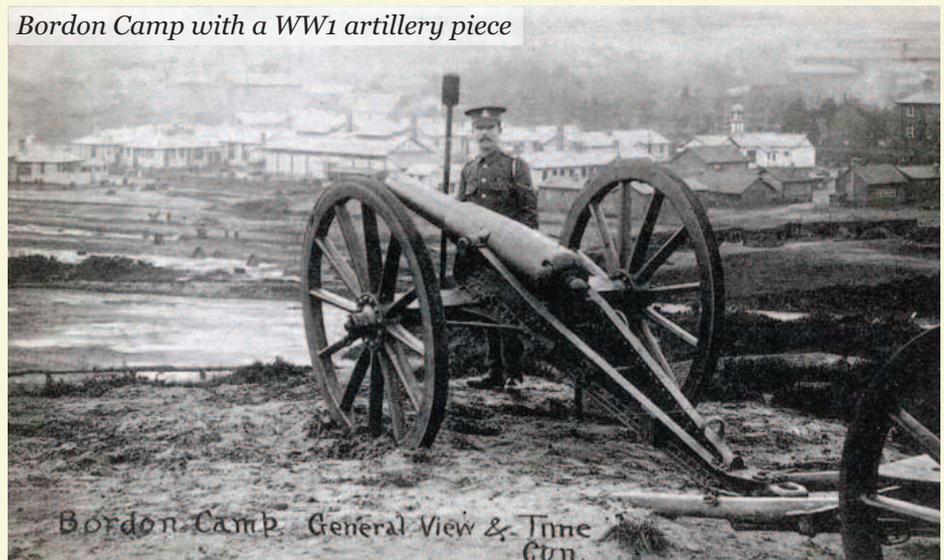
us today”. **Lt Holbrook**, the *OC*’s son, had just safely returned after taking his submarine through the *Dardanelles*, hence the VC. The rain ceased and many spent the afternoon exploring *Salisbury Plain* on foot. I remained in the billet reading while others played cards for money. After a few days and a few short runs with the lorry to *Salisbury*, *Amesbury* and, once, to *Southampton* we were warned late one night to be ready to move next morning in convoy with all our equipment.

Late January 1916

We set off shortly after dawn in convoy with an officer guiding the leading lorry. After travelling all day passing *Alton* and *Basingstoke* we arrived at a place (camp) called *Bordon*, near *Farnham*, *Hampshire*. Our quarters were wooden huts looking out onto a large, sandy parade ground and backed by a piece of rough ground covered thickly and deeply with heather. We parked our lorries on the sandy parade ground and soon discovered that the heather-covered ground was the

parking place of four, naval-type six inch guns with a “*Holt*” caterpillar tractor for each. Whilst in this camp we did very little driving but plenty of square-bashing, rifle drill, guards, etc. becoming fairly proficient. We were told that we were now **616 Company, ASC**, and our job would be to keep the four guns mentioned above supplied with ammunition. We also were allotted three commissioned officers, a *Captain OC*, a *Lieutenant* and a *2nd Lieutenant*. A staff sergeant (acting sergeant major), a sergeant, about six corporals and several lance corporals, but, perhaps the most important of the non-commissioned ranks, a staff sergeant who acted as *Quartermaster Sergeant (the Quarter Bloke)*. When we had been at *Bordon* about a week, there appeared in the ranks an *Irishman*, **Patrick Burke**. He did not believe in spending army time in shaving or observing elementary hygiene. Consequently he always looked scruffy and moreover he was always drunk or nearly so, even at an early hour. It was my misfortune to get put on guard with Patrick. As usual he turned up half drunk.

Bordon Camp with a WW1 artillery piece



Bordon Camp. General View & Time Gun

How he got through the guards inspection I will never know. As I patrolled my beat in the early evening I was surprised to see Pat

Bordon Military Camp in Hampshire



suddenly leave his and charge across the parade ground with bayonet fixed and at the ready. After a few minutes Pat came back and walked up to me. Out of breath he gasped, “*Did you see that b - - - - - ?*”. I assured him I had not and that everything was normal, quiet and still. Luckily he accepted this and went back to his post.

The three officers of **616 Company, ASC** travelled from *Bulford* in two nice new *Wolseleys* and arrived at *Bordon* admired by everyone, but not for long. An order came through, “*Return Wolseleys to Bulford for exchange*”. Two drivers had to be found to carry this out and, of course, **Private Patrick Burke** was the first choice. So Pat departed and we never saw him again. The *Wolseleys* were replaced by two *Ford “Tin Lizzies”* (the real, original models) with two new drivers. Rain made the sandy soil very soft and lorries frequently got bogged down. The chassis of these Daimlers was of peculiar structure — steel plates bolted together with wood in between. This allowed for bending without fracture but also some twist. When a lorry became bogged down by only two wheels, the chassis twisted, throwing the starter-handle dogs out of line with the crankshaft. It was therefore impossible to start

the engine except by towing — a frequent occurrence.

Early March 1916

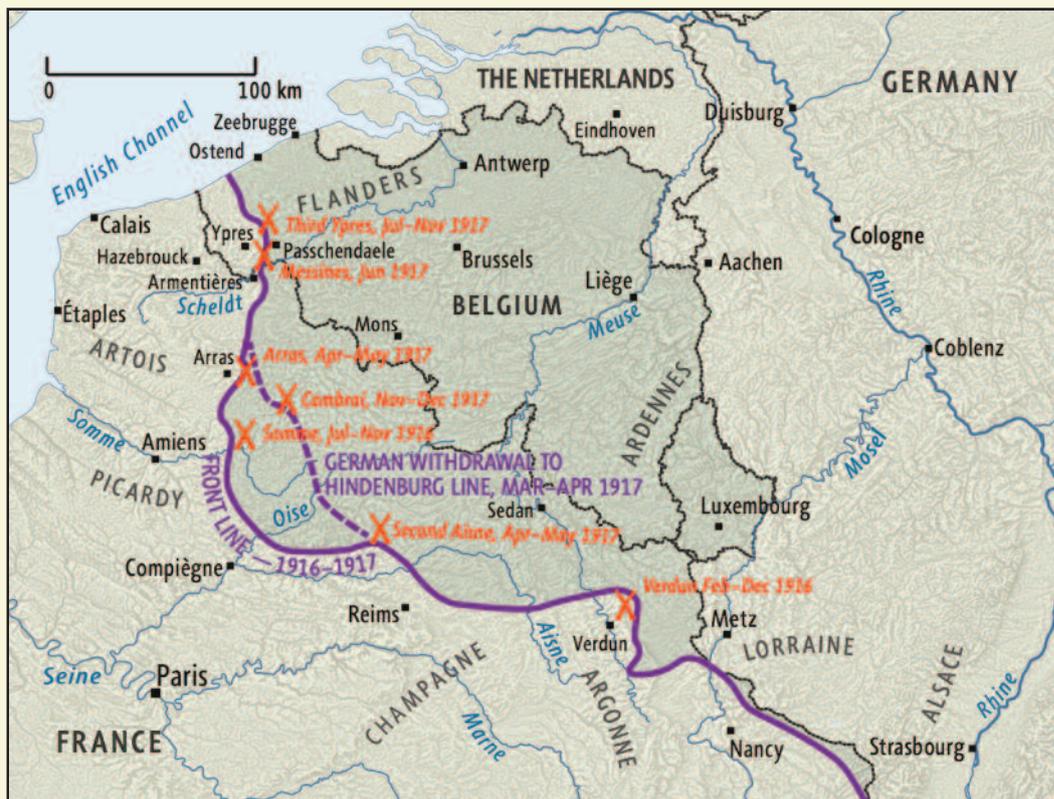
Whilst at *Bordon* everyone was sent home on embarkation leave (ten days), and on return was ordered to parade in late afternoon ready to move off. In due course we reached *Newbury* and parked for the night, sleeping in our vehicles having searched in vain for a *YMCA, Church*

Army or *Salvation Army* hut. Next morning we proceeded via *Hungerford, Calne, Bath* and *Bristol*, over *Clifton Down* to *Avonmouth Docks*. Here we left the lorries which we were told we should catch up with in *Egypt*. In the mean time we were put into civvy billets in *Hotwells Road, Bristol*, almost under the suspension bridge. After a week we entrained and after a long, circuitous journey arrived at *Portsmouth* and were placed on board *SS*



Minnetonka. This was a large ship standing high out of the water. A voice in the ranks was heard to comment, “*A fine target for a torpedo*”, a fate which befell her later in the war in the eastern Mediterranean. Tied up

next astern was HMS *Royal Oak* in her final stages of construction, she was torpedoed in *Scapa Flow* during World War II with the loss of over eight hundred lives. *Minnetonka* sailed the same evening, but only out into Plymouth sound where she anchored. We were quartered below on the second deck, the first being occupied by five hundred mules. They strongly objected to the confinement, stamping



Map of the Western Front main battles 1916-1917

and fighting most of the time, rendering sleep impossible for **616 Company**, ASC lying in hammocks underneath. The aroma was not at all Spring-like although it was mid-March. We were put on short rations as the ship was provisioned for the run to *Alexandria* and every days delay upset the catering. After a week we found ourselves returning to *Portsmouth* where **616 Company** were told to disembark and board a waiting train on the quayside. By evening we found ourselves in *Southampton* and were billeted in a camp (bell tents) on the outskirts of the town. The same night a great storm arose, high wind and torrential rain. Very few tents survived until morning and everyone was soaked, kit and all. I escaped better than most and soon discovered a *YMCA* hut where I was able to buy a good breakfast (bacon and eggs with hot tea). The state of the tents was so bad that it was decided to transfer us to huts for the remainder of our stay.

Mid-March 1916

After several days I began to feel far from well but would not consider reporting sick on the eve of going overseas. Then one evening we were ordered to parade and marched to the docks. A large number of boys marched with us, profuse with offers of “*Carry your rifle, carry your kit bag soldiers*”, no doubt in anticipation of a tip. Not feeling well I was very pleased, in defiance of army rules, to be rid, if only temporarily of my useless encumbrance. Arriving at the quayside we boarded a rather small, waiting ship, the *Duchess of Argyle*, issued with a life belt, told to go below (first deck) and stay put. Still feeling unwell I made myself as comfortable as possible (the life belt made an excellent pillow) and was soon asleep. When I awoke it was 5am and knew by the throb of the engines that we were still moving. The air on the first deck was so foul that I determined to reach the top deck and get some fresh air. As I looked

The Duchess of Argyle



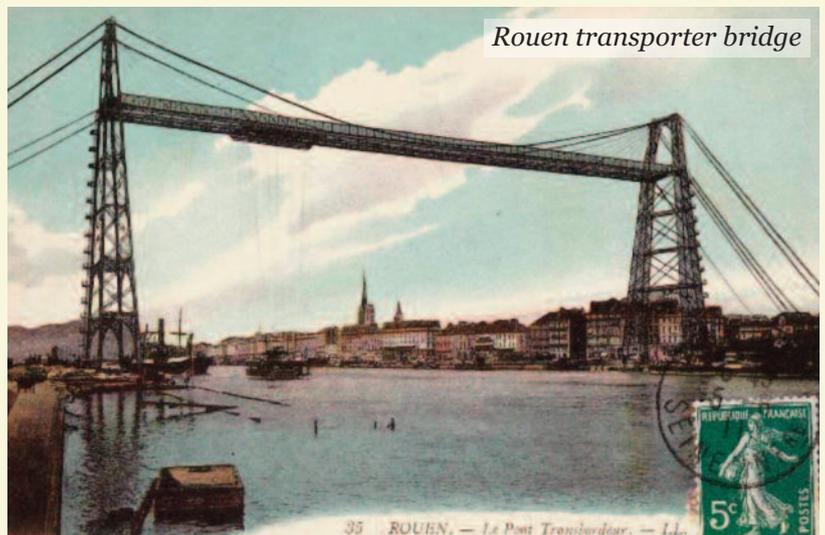
Late March 1916

We sailed at 9am the following morning which dawned with bright sunshine and luckily very mild, and soon found ourselves proceeding up the *Seine*. A lovely run with magnificent scenery on all sides, but I was feeling too ill to appreciate it at the time. As darkness approached. I noticed a transporter bridge ahead but smaller than the one at *Newport*. This denoted the town of *Rouen* and the prospect of another march. I judged this impossible

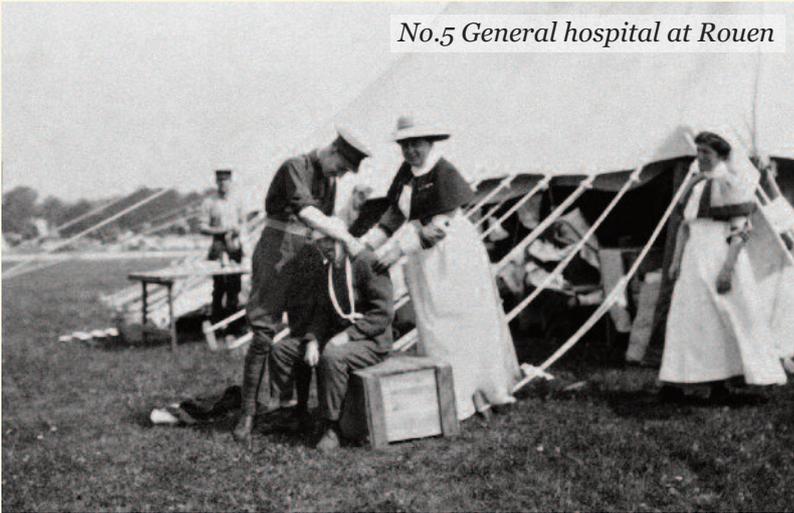
and informed the orderly corporal of my condition. He in turn informed the OC, **Captain Dickenson**, who very kindly and unexpectedly came to see me. He vanished quickly but soon returned, ordering me to follow him. He led me on to the quay and into a small wooden hut where there was another officer, a doctor as his badges denoted. He opened the front of my tunic to look at my chest and immediately proclaimed, “*This man has measles!*”. I do not remember very clearly what happened next but in due course I found myself in a hospital — mattress beds in tents, or rather marquees, open all round the sides although it was the last week in March. This was an isolation hospital. The adjoining ward,

round I perceived that we were just sailing into a harbour between breakwaters. There was a sunken ship just inside with only masts and a bit of funnel showing. The *Duchess of Argyle* tied up at the quayside and a fatigue party began to unload cargo which contained a quantity of army mail, throwing the bags on to the quay. Several fell short and landed in the water, never to be seen again. My attention was centred on a French soldier, obviously on sentry duty, equipped with a long, awkward looking rifle, probably a museum piece, with the longest and largest bayonet I have ever seen. His uniform of blue tunic and red trousers gave him a Napoleonic appearance which was probably intentional. Feeling very unwell I stepped ashore and was pleased to find we had only a very short march to a so-called rest camp — bell tents on some waste ground. We were given a sort of picnic breakfast then told to parade for a route march. I discovered that we were now in *Le Havre*. After the route march we returned to the rest camp to await dinner and eventually tea. I managed to get a little sleep, then, as it grew dark we were marched along the quayside and put aboard another ship to spend the night on the top open deck.

Rouen transporter bridge



No.5 General hospital at Rouen



separated by a barbed-wire fence, was the scarlet fever section. when convalescent we were allowed to mix in the open air and spent a lot of time walking in the woods which seemed to surround the hospital. After about three weeks I was discharged and sent by ambulance to the *ASC Base Depot, Rouen*, to await a further posting. Our time was occupied with fatigues — moving heavy packing cases from one store room to another. Next day another party would be detailed to move the same back again, orders having gone round that all men were to be kept occupied. After a few days of this convalescence I began to feel ill again, the chief symptoms being high temperature, sore throat and nausea. Reporting sick I was given “*excused duty*” and a box of tablets which a doctor, who scarcely looked at me, presented me with. I went back into the billet and lay on the floor. I dozed a bit but after a short time a voice said, “*Drink this lad, it will do you good*”. Looking up I beheld a huge Australian holding a cup of steaming liquid, *Bovril* or *Oxo*, but I was too sick to take it. Next morning I joined the sick parade and was sent by the same doctor, again without the slightest examination to *No.8 General Hospital*. I was told to undress and get into a vacant bed that I was shown. Before I could carry out

these instructions the ward sister came along to get my name and number. She took one look at my chest and then proclaimed, “*This man has scarlet fever! He must go at once to the isolation hospital and this ward must be thoroughly disinfected. Who sent you here?*”. “*The doctor at the ASC depot, Rouen*” I replied. I cannot remember what happened next but I eventually woke up in a very comfortable bed, the sole occupant of a square tent, and already feeling better after a long sleep. I was assisted to dress and then taken to the isolation

hospital, next door to the measles ward. It was three weeks before I was allowed to get up. One of the nurses was a **Miss Davies** of *Newport*, her father belonging to the firm of *DeeBees Ltd*.

It was now **April 1916** and I was able to spend a lot of time out in the woods. We were able to purchase the *Paris Daily Mail* each day and so learned of the death of **Kitchener**. After six weeks I was discharged and sent again to the *ASC depot*. This depot was a



HMS HAMPSHIRE - the Death of Lord Kitchener

On 5 June 1916, *HMS 'Hampshire'* left the Royal Navy's anchorage at *Scapa Flow, Orkney*, bound for Russia. The Secretary of State for War, **Lord Kitchener**, was on board as part of a diplomatic and military mission aimed at boosting Russia's efforts on the Eastern Front.

At about a quarter to nine in the evening, in stormy conditions and within two miles of Orkney's northwest shore, she struck a mine laid by the *German submarine U-75*. Only twelve of those onboard survived.

cotton mill in pre-war times and quite unfit to accommodate troops. As I entered now for the second time the guard was just parading and I noticed that one of them was **George Gibson**, an apprentice from *C.D.Phillips, Newport*. When he saw me he made one remark, *“This is a hell of a place”* which I knew to be only too true. In due course a party of *Australian ASC* arrived and as soon as they could dump their kit they proceeded to walk out again. They were immediately halted at the gate by a British sentry. *“Where are you going ?”* said he. *“We are going to look around the town”* was the reply. *“You must have a pass to go out”*. *“No we don’t”* said an Aussie sergeant, *“Fall in two deep, by the left, quick march”*. This was accomplished and the sergeant remarked as a parting shot, *“Parties on parade do not require passes”*. After the morning parade I was escorted into a room where six officers were seated around a table. *“Who the hell passed you fit for the army? . “A doctor at Newport, Monmouthshire”* I replied. Without further comment he handed me some papers, the top one having a large blue pencil **“TB”** inscribed on it. The corporal then marched me out and I asked him what this was all about. *“The six officers were six doctors constituting a medical board and they had to decide what to do with you. The “TB” on your medical history papers means “Temporary Base”, not tuberculosis.”*

I felt greatly relieved and thanked him for the information. He had done me more good than all the doctors.

July 1916

About a week later I was picked out on the morning parade and, together with the man next to me, taken to the lorry park and placed in charge of a three ton new *Holford* lorry, one of many. Tool kits were checked and signed for after which we set off in convoy. About 5pm we reached the village of *Neuf Chatell [Neufchatel-en-Bray, ENE of Rouen ?]* and parked for the night. Some food was provided, tea and breakfast, and the village pub (estaminet) did a record trade until a late hour (no specified opening or closing hours in France). Next morning we set off [NE?], passing the small town of *Cassell [Cassel]* and the villages of *Flete* and *Caistre [Caestre & Fletre SE of Cassel]* finally arriving at the village of *Meteren [outside Bailleul]*, parking at the roadside. I was informed that I would be *“on guard”* for the night, 6pm to 6am, two hours on and 4 hours off. As soon as darkness came the distant sky lit up like lightning and the rat-a-tat of machine guns could be distinctly heard. I had no idea how far we were from the front line or where it was. I found out later that it was about three miles and behind, but a little to the left of *Ypres [3 miles NW of Ieper, Belgium]* – at this time, **July 1916**, a quiet front. Next morning we were taken by an officer for a run to test our driving capabilities, gear changing and in particular, double de-clutching. After a while he told us to stop and he pointed out the ruins of the town of *Ypres* – the only view I was ever to get of this historical place! In due course we discovered that we were to be an ammunition column attached to the **Thirty Sixth Ulster Division**



who had just come on to this front from the *Somme* where they had suffered severely. We left *Meteren* and parked on the road side near the village of *St Jans Cappel* [4km N of *Meteren*] where there was a large ammunition

convoy with a workshop unit. We reached an area of slag heaps and coal mines, parking and setting up workshops on a piece of waste ground belonging to one of them. We were billeted in an old French barn and woke up next morning covered with snow which had drifted in through the tiled roof. Our sergeant lodged a protest and we moved into a hut for the next and subsequent nights.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge - taken by Canadian troops 1918



dump from which we drew supplies and conveyed them as near as possible to the front line. This was mostly small arms ammunition and was conveyed on the last stage of its journey by mule transport.

Early in 1917 I was transferred to the **Thirty Sixth Division Supply column** and assigned to a thirty hundredweight lorry [30cwt = about 1.5 tonne]. Duties were the same as before, but instead of food for guns we were now transporting food for men. Soon an order was made that 30cwt lorries had to be returned to the advanced base lorry park, *St Omer* [30km W]. Very soon I found myself despatched to *Calais docks* with a *Pierce-Arrow* lorry for work in the docks moving stores from quayside to warehouses. This lasted some weeks and then I found myself back in *St Omer*. A few more weeks lapsed and I found myself driving an *Albion* store-wagon in

The continuous stream of ambulances coming down the road told us that something big was on the move, so we were not surprised when orders came for us to move. We arrived at the village of *Estre-Gauche* [*Estree Cauchy* SE of *Bruay la Buisserie* ?] and took up position in a farm yard. We soon discovered that we were near the *Souchez* end of the *Vimy Ridge* which was under attack by the **Canadians** with great success on **Easter Monday 9th April 1917**. I was sent with others to join the **3rd Canadian Siege Battery ammunition column** at *Mont St Eloi* just outside [NW] of



Albion A10, 3 ton truck

Tractor towing an 8 inch Howitzer in 1916



We remained in the *Arras* area for some time and then moved north to support the **Portuguese** in the *Armentieres, Laventie, Neuve-Chapelle* area [L & N-C are SW of A]. The lorries parked on the roadside at a place called *Mont Bernachon* [W of N-C] whilst the FWD tractors were parked further forward over the *La Basse canal* [Canal d'Aire ?] in order to be nearer the guns, now increased to six. An observation balloon was moored nearby and a busy crossroads was not far away.

At 4am, 9th April 1918,

I awoke to the sound of a heavy bombardment. Shells bursting on the crossroads not far away. We took cover behind the balloon people's hut which was sand-bagged to a height of 3 foot 6 inches [1m] all round. *99th Siege Headquarters* was in a farmhouse about 3/4 mile [1.2km] away and a party of two had to walk across the fields each morning to draw the day's rations. On this morning, covered by thick mist fog I was one of the two selected for this duty. We found the *Quartermaster* and told him what we wanted. He said that no rations had arrived

Arras. This unit had four 6 inch howitzers and was equipped with *Peerless* lorries. My first trip took me from *Berthonville farm* at the foot of the ridge (headquarters of the Canadian Division during the attack) to what had been the village of *Thelus* [7km N of *Arras*] near the summit of the Ridge but now identified only by a board bearing the one word "THELUS". The Ridge having been captured and held by the **Canadians** we spent our time tidying up — clearing rubble from the roads to permit guns and transport to go forward. Soon the *3rd Canadians* were moved to the *Ypres Salient* but I was detailed to a four wheel drive (FWD) tractor used to tow the 6 inch howitzers. The guns and tractors which did not go to *Ypres* became *Vimy Ridge* positions because the responsibility of the *99th Siege Battery* who came from *Ypres* leaving their guns and tractors behind. This change-over saved a lot of work and wear and tear of equipment (a 6 inch howitzer weighed 5 tons [5090kg] and had an effective range of 12 miles).

A 6 inch, 26 cwt Howitzer



The canal drawbridge at La Basse being repaired in 1918



from the base and he did not expect any as something big was on. He then ordered us back to our FWD's as he said we might have to move at any moment. Of course we all had emergency rations — bully beef and biscuits. Later in the morning our OC, *Lt Stevens*, a 1914 volunteer of great experience, came up the road on his new *Triumph* motorcycle. "Load my machine into the first FWD" he ordered, and then, getting up beside the driver, *Corporal House*, he set off and commanded the other 5 FWD's to follow. It was soon evident that we were bound for the gun positions. The *Portuguese Infantry* had given way, the Germans were advancing, and so it was necessary to get the six howitzers away to avoid capture. We proceeded unmolested until we reached a T junction where we halted. The OC told us to turn right at the T junction, park and wait. He would go left with the leading FWD driven by *Corporal House* and endeavour to get one

howitzer away. This was found to be impossible as a number of large trees had been felled either by shell fire or intentionally by the German engineers. German small calibre shells were dropping all around us in a haphazard manner. Whilst I was directing the other drivers to turn around on the T junction one of these missiles dropped in a muddy ditch by my side. I did not hear it coming but it announced its arrival by lifting me off my feet and setting me down again. I felt several bits of something hit me but it turned out to be mud from the ditch. *Lt. Stevens* gave the order to withdraw which we did with

alacrity. As we retreated a shell landed on a large, corrugated iron horse shelter which went up and came down in a shower of corrugated sheets and timber. Luckily there were no horses inside at the time and no one was hurt. We arrived back at our headquarters farm after crossing the *La Basse Canal* by draw-bridge. A direct hit had taken the top off, destroying the platform lifting gear, but luckily the platform was in the down position

The Somme offensive



giving right of way to road traffic. We parked at the roadside and were ordered to remain on alert and on call at a minutes notice night and day. On inspection I found that the nearside body of my FWD tractor was like a pepperbox from shell splinters and the aluminium sump had also received several hits without penetration. A motor cycle despatch rider summoned us at 10pm to start up and proceed to the *Royal Ordnance Group* workshops further to the rear and collect a 6 inch howitzer gun barrel, limber and carriage and convey same to another workshop for assembly. Our six FWD tractors carried out these orders, proceeding in convoy. And so, within twenty four hours the six guns captured by the Germans were replaced. Next night we had to collect the completely assembled howitzers and convey them to their new positions on the edge of the *Nieppe Forest* several miles to the rear of the old position. Here they were able to give much needed support to the few remaining **Portuguese, King Edward's Horse, the Seaford Highlanders** and the **Australians** who were rushed up from the *Somme* front in old London buses. The German advance was halted when it reached the *Nieppe Forest* because they did not know what might be concealed under the thick forest growth. However, *Armentieres, Loker [W of Kemmel, Belgium], Kemmel Hill* and *Monts des Cats* had been taken in an advance of about eleven miles, and, of course, the great *Somme* offensive swept on.

We, the **99th Siege Battery RGA**, stayed put all through the **summer of 1918** and things remained quiet on what became known as the *Lys Front*. *Messines Ridge [Mesen,*

Belgium] was taken, or rather, blown up with land mines laid underground largely by *South Wales* miners commanded by **General Plummer (2nd Army)**. This made possible an attack on the *Aubers Ridge [WSW of Lille]* — a strong position covering *Lille* and held by the enemy since 1914. This Ridge was taken during the summer, the attack being supported by the **99th Siege Battery** and several others (*the 346th and 166th*). **99th Siege Battery** reached the village of *Fromelles* on top of the ridge [*2km NE of Aubers*] and were called to action because the infantry and field artillery could not dislodge the Germans from behind a railway embankment just outside *Lille*. Resuming the advance, we had to negotiate a railway crossing over a ramp made of loose ashes. The tractors ground to a halt, but soon a large throng of French men, women and children appeared from nowhere and pushed, shoved and heaved at the 5 ton guns and the advance



continued. The place was called *Sequedin* and turned out to be a suburb of *Lille [W outskirts]*. These were the first liberated French civilians we had met and, of course, they were very excited. We were the first heavy battery they had seen as we were the first to enter *Lille*. When they saw us preparing to spend the night in our lorries they insisted on giving us lodgings. I slept in a bedroom which, shortly before, had housed some German. Next day we bypassed *Lille* and crossed the frontier into **Belgium** at a place called *Baisieux [E of Lille]*, skirted *Tournai* and *Ath*, and arrived at a village called *Fiennes [?]*.

My overdue leave came up so I joined a leave party entraining at *La Madelaine Station, Lille* on the **2nd November, 1918**.

We travelled all night to *Boulogne*, crossing to *Folkestone* on an old Belgian paddle steamer. We arrived at *Waterloo Station* but reached *Paddington* too late to catch a train westwards that evening. We were lucky to find a bed in a nearby *YMCA*. After a good breakfast at *Lockharts* (a famous cheap London restaurant) I boarded a train for *Newport* and arrived to find no-one home. Mother and father were staying with friends in North Wales. **Mrs. Davies, Ernie's** mother put me up for the night (my friend Ernie was later to become Best Man at my wedding). Next morning I sent a telegram to North Wales seeking instructions. These soon arrived saying, "come to *Oswestry*", which I did. After one night there we all returned to *Llandeuvaud*. **On the 11th November** I drove mother to *Newport* in the pony and trap. As we approached *Limekiln Cottage*, where the *Coldra* roundabout is now, all the works' hooters and the ships' hooters in the docks sounded.

It was 11am.

We knew the armistice had been signed and the war was over.

In *Newport* the streets were crowded. Everyone had stopped work. Complete strangers invited each other to, "come and have a drink!". Boys and girls danced in the streets until the early hours of next morning.

Through the *Press* all personnel on leave were told to return as normal upon the expiry of their statutory fourteen days. I returned to *Lille* and reported to *Corps Headquarters*. Here I was informed that the **99th Siege Battery** had moved to the village of *Le Touret*. I walked about all day but failed to find any trace of the **99th** so I sought a civilian billet for the night which, as before, had housed a German. Next morning I reported back to *Corps Headquarters* and found a lorry going to the **99th Siege Battery** and others in the neighbourhood.

Armistice celebrations at Monmouth



I was dumped in a village near *Tournai, Belgium*. I discovered that the man who had taken my place had sustained a minor wound, and that the mongrel who had attached himself to the battery and was regarded as a mascot had been wounded in the jaw on the last occasion that the **99th** were to see action. After a few days rest at *Tournai* the advance towards *Brussels* continued.

Setting out in complete darkness and pouring rain at 5am we hoped to get clear of the horse transport which more or less monopolised the roads. We soon caught up with a long line of field artillery but a mounted officer refused to let us overtake by turning his horse across our path. This went on all day as we passed through several small towns and villages until with all radiators boiling we turned off the *Route National (main road)* and entered the village of *Lembeeg [Lembek — 1.5km S of Halle]*. Here there was a square large enough to park the six howitzers. I was detailed to brew tea (the cook had gone to hospital with tonsillitis). The others set off to explore the village with special attention to the numerous estaminets (pubs) although torrential rain persisted.

Next morning, leaving the guns in *Lembeeg*, we continued on the main road reaching *Le Foret* — a suburb of *Brussels* where nurse [*Edith*] **Cavell** was imprisoned and shot by the Germans for helping British prisoners to escape. We had no guard duty

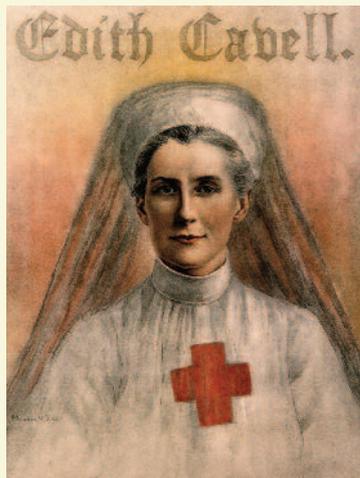


The King's Palace, Brussels

to do or parades to attend except pay parade on Fridays so we spent our time and money exploring *Brussels*. Shops, pubs and restaurants never seemed to close night or day. I went to the famous opera house and saw *Faust* performed in French (being the principal language spoken in Brussels).



Christmas Day 1918 — with a *Canadian* colleague Harry we set out on foot immediately after breakfast to see the sights of *Brussels*: Law Courts, King's Palace, Houses of Parliament, art galleries and museum. After a substantial midday meal in a restaurant we rambled about until evening and then sought entertainment in a variety theatre where we saw a sort of pantomime (patriotic version). Walking back to our lorry



park we found a fish and chip shop full of troops in Christmas spirit. We joined in with fish, chips and ice cream eventually getting to bed about 2am.

On Boxing Day we left *Brussels* and returned to *Lembreeq*. The reason for this move was soon apparent. The Germans, under the terms of the Armistice, were ordered to surrender a large number of field guns. They left them in the most awkward and inaccessible places that they could find. In muddy, watery roadside ditches, on lawns, on flower beds, always immobilised by removal of lynch pins and often on their side. It became our duty to collect these museum or scrap iron pieces from all over *Belgium* and form them into “dumps”. Whilst on this duty we were taken by lorry to see the battlefield of *Waterloo*, the CO acting as guide. With my enthusiasm for history I decided to pay a second visit unaccompanied and walked all over the site armed with an official guide book. I climbed the 200 steps to the top of the *British Memorial (Le Leon de Waterloo)* — a bigger than life-size brass lion cast from the brass guns captured from the French in the battle.

My curiosity still not satisfied I made a third visit with a party conducted by a pre-war peace-time guide. This chap spoke in broken English describing the scene and battle as though he had been present on the 18th June 1815. There were several Americans in the party and we soon found out that the guide really knew very little about the actual battle. An American officer began to question the poor chap, “You say *Napoleon* on a white charger was seen over there, whilst *Wellington* standing among his infantry squares here on top of the hill awaited his (*Napoleon's*) arrival? Do you mean to tell us that, in the midst of one of the greatest battles in history, they actually stood looking at each other?”. Collapse of guide, his English failing

him completely. Then a voice from the rear, “Please tell us where *Wellington* had his wet canteen?” (it was a very hot day).

The gun-collecting occupied us **until Easter 1919**, which found us in *Brussels*. It occurred to me that there must be an English church somewhere. After making enquiries I found it in the outskirts of the city with a congregation consisting largely of British troops. It transpired that this was **Nurse Cavell's** church which she attended regularly. The Chaplain, **Rev. Gahan**, ministered to her in prison after her arrest by the Germans. I found amongst the congregation a man from



my own unit, **Charlie**, and had the pleasure of his company at my Easter communion. As we left church the Chaplain introduced us to the organist who turned out to be his wife. She looked very ill and emaciated — anaemic no doubt due to four years under German occupation. I remarked to **Charlie** on her appearance and his comment was “*Just like her music*”.

Charlie was promoted to *Corporal* and was posted to the army of occupation, Germany whilst I was sent back to take my old FWD to a huge lorry park at a place called *Enghein [Enghien N suburb of Paris?]* ready to be shipped somewhere. Shortly afterwards I was posted to **43rd Motor Ambulance Company** at *Lille*. I spent several weeks



exploring the city, developed a bad boil on my elbow and was to take a store wagon to *Dieppe*.

We left *Lille* in convoy — two mobile workshops, one store wagon and an ambulance under the charge of a *2nd Lieutenant*. This proved a very interesting trip as we had to cross the former battlefield at *Vimy Ridge* from the German side. The road took us over the highest point of the ridge and the *2nd Lieutenant* (I never heard his name) halted us to see the battlefield and visit the temporary *Canadian Memorial* (plaster cast) which had been erected on the site (later replaced with granite).

After a night on the road we reached *Dieppe* and consigned the two workshops and one store wagon to the cross-Channel ferry. The boil on my elbow had become very painful and I was glad to find a *First Aid* hut on the docks manned by a *RAMC* private. He did a splendid job bathing and bandaging my arm. We all boarded the ambulance for our return to *Lille* greatly overloaded — six

drivers, a *2nd Lieutenant* and an *RAMC* ambulance driver. Like all docks *Dieppe* was a maze of railway lines and as we crossed the first set the one side of the ambulance chassis fractured. The *2nd Lieutenant* said we must carry on, so looking and feeling like a lame duck we limped into *Abbeville* and parked for the night. We all quickly found recreation according to taste — *Picture Palace*, *estaminet* or *housey-housey* [bingo]. The *2nd Lieutenant* disappeared and everyone was happy. He arranged bed and

breakfast, and, after another ambulance arrived from *Lille* he took us to the city headquarters of the *43rd Motor Ambulance Company* where the drivers were all *WAAC's* [*Women's Army Auxiliary Corps* — first war only].

We expected and soon found ourselves due for demobilisation. As a first step we were sent to *Boulogne* by train and a base camp. After one night in this we were paraded and proceeded

to the “*merry-go-round*”. This involved stripping naked for a medical inspection, then a shower bath then a complete change of underclothes which had been washed, fumigated and thoroughly deloused. We were given khaki uniform which had been similarly treated then marched to another camp designated the “*clean camp*” to await ship to *Folkestone*. This involved another night in *Boulogne*. A Cornishman named **Pengelly**, who spoke fairly good French, proposed that we explore the town and finish up our last night on French soil with the best supper or dinner that





The 99th Siege Battery & 43rd Motor Ambulance Company? - Humphrey is in the front row, third from left.

could be obtained. We selected what looked like a stylish hotel and with the aid of Pengelly's French ordered a substantial meal to be washed down with *Vermouth*. We did full justice to this and returned to the "clean camp" for the night. Next morning, after breakfast, we marched to the docks and in due course embarked for *Folkestone*. The ship's name was *Duchess of Argyle* — the same ship that brought me to France in March 1916.

Landing at *Folkestone* we proceeded by lorry to *Wilton*. We arrived at the *Salisbury Plain Demobilisation Centre* at 11pm on a lovely July evening. The NCO in charge reported our arrival but was told that the demob centre's staff had a day off and were not due to resume duties until midnight. At last we were informed that all was ready and we entered another merry-go-round handing in at the first tent one rifle and bayonet, at the next

great-coat then to the cashier to receive pay to date and a rail warrant to home town. A civilian suit was thrown at us regardless of cut, style or fit and finally a brief interview with a *Chaplain* who told each to "fight the good fight" under very different conditions backed by the Church. Several of us were bound for *South Wales* and we found that by hiring a taxi we should just be able to catch the night train at *Salisbury*. We got a taxi all right but succeeded only in getting to the station in time to see the train's red rear lights disappearing around the bend. There was no choice but to knock up someone at the nearby *YMCA*. This was home and we settled in for the night.

Next morning, after a grand breakfast of ham and eggs at a reasonable price, we caught a train and arrived in Newport at dinner time on 1st August 1919.

ROYAL ARMY SERVICE CORPS.

THE British Armies in France, which once stood in such urgent need of your services, are now able to release you to take your place among your friends at home.

I am very glad that you have come safely through the Campaign. Before you quit the shores of France, I want to take advantage of this opportunity to thank you, both officially as the Director of Transport and personally as one who is proud to have served for 27 years in your Corps, for the really magnificent work which has been done by all ranks of the Transport Branch.

It has not been possible for me to be in such close touch with you as I could have wished—but I know well of the long hours at the reins while well cared for animals plodded through shattered roads, of the wonderful feats of lorry drivers who held the wheel for days and nights without rest, of the artificers on whom all relied—so rarely in vain—and of all the others who played their part in the organization, and I know also that you never failed to “deliver the goods.”

I hope that you will meet with the same success at home as has the Royal Army Service Corps in France and Belgium.

Good-bye. A long life and every happiness to you.

B. Boyce

Major-General.

Director of Transport, British Armies in France,

Humphrey Spencer Swinnerton

Service No 148946, RASC Private



WW1 medals awarded to Humphrey:
British War (above) & Victory medals (below)
were awarded on 6 Aug 1920
(Documents at RASC Records Office, Woolwich, London)



IN FLANDERS FIELDS

In Flanders' fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place, and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders' fields.

Take up quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to hold it on high,
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
in Flanders' Fields.



John Alexander McCrae
(1872–1918) - Poet

Poppies photograph by CLAUDIA DEA licensed under creative commons

