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No 5533

K.K. Saxby  
3<sup>rd</sup> Aus Battn

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Jan 10<sup>th</sup> 1917 Wednesday. This morning we sent the parcels & souvenirs away. The big one we sent through Cook's agency. There was miles of Red Tape & it costs 2/6 to send. After dinner we packed up & left the WCC about 2:30 pm & went to say goodbye to Mrs Primmer. We left there about 3:15 & took a bus to Waterloo Stn getting there about 3:25. The station was crowded with soldiers returning to France & their friends. Mrs Jennings' sister

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whom we met out there, promised to see us off, but was unable to come. We were feeling very sad & just about 4pm we got wind that the men returning today had come over a day before us, so we hurried off to the R.T.O (Railway Transport Officer) & interviewed him with the result that he marked our pass to report at Waterloo at 4 pm tomorrow. As we left the station we had smiles all over us. A day extra we had not thought off & to us it was a gift of the Gods. We repaired back to Mrs Primmer's & nearly gave them all a fit & explained things, then back to the WCC to dump our gear & then I went back to Mrs Primmer's, as I had made no arrangements & they asked me to come. They are very nice people & it was the next best thing to home to us. Since coming on leave our writing list has increased by two Mrs Primmer & Mrs Jennings. We had a pleasant evening till about 11 am [sic] (like the others we had) & then went back to the club & turned in.

Jan 11<sup>th</sup> Thursday. Rose 8 am & had a hot bath (one of many I have had here) & then breakfast & went down to Cook's & Sons to finally fix up about the parcel. It wasn't fixed up yesterday.

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Then I went to South Kensington in the tube to the Museum & put in the morning there. The museum is wonderful, especially the science part which comprises some 16 large rooms & has working models of everything in the scientific & constructional line. I could have put a week in there if I had had it, but I had to get back to the club for dinner.

It is now 1:15 pm & I am in the recreation & reading etc room of the club. I have just had dinner (my last "civilized" meal for some time now I guess) and am writing up my diary. I will also write a few letters.

London as a whole has impressed me favorably. It is exceedingly large & bewildering. Only for the policemen (who are marvellous) we would be continually getting lost. I am only just beginning to get a sense of direction & where & what the main centres & streets are. At first we never knew where we were or in what direction "home" or any other place lay we just trusted the coppers, buses & tubes & came out all right.

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The immense traffic didn't impress us as much as if we had not seen the traffic in France, which was much heavier still & of course under far worse conditions. It was very nice to get among ordinary people instead of everlasting khaki clad people. Except the very big places, it struck me that the

shops & shopkeepers were a good bit behind the times. We had great difficulty in getting things that we would get anywhere in Sydney & simple little things you may not get at all. We have had very good weather considering the season & the sort of weather they had been getting just before we came. We have had drizzling rain & sleet & snow & mists along with occasional bits of sunshine, but no heavy snowing or fogs or anything like that. It doesn't seem cold much to me, after having been broken in, in France.

The London barbers are good. We had some lovely shaves etc. The concerts were good & we saw Capt Scotts Expedition at the pictures which was very excellent. The ordinary Pictures were passable. Went to no theatres.

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Caught train at Waterloo at 4:30 pm arrived at Southampton about 7 pm & went straight aboard the boat which left soon after. It was cold & we didn't pass a very good night. Arrived at Havre about 4 am. Friday 12<sup>th</sup> Jan. Disembarked at 7:30 am & marched to the Rest Camp arriving there about 9:30 am. I think we will be stopping here for the night.

Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> Jan. Rose 8:30 am marched to train about 3 miles. Luckily this time we got 2<sup>nd</sup> class carriages instead of 3<sup>rd</sup> & the seats were softer. We went back the same route as we came & arrived at Albert about 9 am Sunday 14<sup>th</sup>. All along the way the fields were covered with snow. It was very pretty. We had another "bun rush" as before at the same place for tea. After reporting at the Anzac Reinforcement Camp we were told to report to Contay some 8 miles away. We caught a motor lorry just outside the town & were taken right into Contay where we found out our Battn was some distance away

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near Warloy at a little village called Baisieux. We were directed a short cut across country & had a good sloppy slippery tiresome journey there, nearly losing our way, only we were re-directed. We arrived here about 2 pm & found them in a shed adjoining a Tommy Field Ambulance Hospital & really part of it, although not used. There we have a little compartment at the end of the shed to ourselves for eating sleeping etc. The rest of the shed about 20 yds by 12 ft is the hospital, full now about a dozen patients. Work is very much in evidence. Sick parades average about a hundred. It is very hard to come back & we are in the "blues" but I suppose we will settle down soon. It is cold & wet & muddy. No Bien!

Wednesday Jan 17<sup>th</sup> Been here 3 days now. Plenty of snow & cold & wet & mud & work. Otherwise nothing doing. Snow very pretty! Sick parades about 100. Hospital full. Work – beaucoup.

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Got a lot of mail. Wrote a lot of letters.

Monday 22nd Jan. Nothing special doing this week. Tonight we packed up for we leave tomorrow morning for Becourt.

In this billet we have fed like fighting cocks. Plenty of meat & fresh vegetables, besides ordinary rations. Eric & I have been very lucky in being broken in so gently to active service life again. We are now settled down again & feeling contented again. The weather is very cold. Snow has covered the ground for a week now & all water freezes. It is healthier however than wet & we can stand it. The men are feeling in much better health now than a fortnight ago. I am feeling A.1.

We left on Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> Jan about 10 am & marched via Henencourt & Millencourt through Albert & on to Becourt about 10 miles altogether. It was very cold but we

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did it in good time & condition.

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> Jan. It is freezing. Everything is frozen. Medicines in our bottles, water bottles frozen solid, all water tins likewise, and last but not least, us. It must be about 10° below zero. Things

freeze in about 5 minutes. This morning none of us could get our boots on, they were all solid. I am glad I have no longer to wear army boots. Our gloves & scarves are now coming in very handy. I wish I had the sheepskin vest I left behind now but it is no good waiting for it as it would not get here til after the winter ended. It will only last another couple of months. We are in the middle of it now. It will be tres froid in the trenches.

We are in sheds here like last time ie Kaffir Huts. We have one to ourselves this time for a Sick Inspection Room. Sick parade this morning very large. Mostly sore feet from the march yesterday. They say

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we are going into the line in a couple of days now. If the frost continues it will be better than last time, as there will be no wet, although the cold will be pretty awful!

Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> Jan. Still as cold as ever. We have a young hospital again now & still going strong. We are shifting tomorrow.

Friday 26<sup>th</sup> Jan. We moved off this morning about 10 am after packing up etc & marched to Bazentin Camp about 4-5 miles away. It was cold & real good marching. Bazentin Camp is very similar to the others i.e. huts in rows. We have a hut here sharing it with 11 machine gimmers. With them, and all our gear things are pretty crowded when sick parade arrives. We had a crowded time disposing of them during the afternoon. Then we unpacked the Maltese Cart which carries all the medical gear & took what we wanted storing the rest in the QM Stores. The S.B.s collected their stretchers & we packed up for

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the line. We slept close together that night as usual & so kept warm. It is the only way. Next morning there was the usual frost & our boots etc were frozen & had to be thawed out over a fire before we could get them on.

Sat 27<sup>th</sup> Orders came out for us to move. The Battalion is going into reserves first & will be divided, five companies taking one position & two another. Eric & I are to go with the left hand lot, the Sgt coming up later, when one of us will join up the right hand half with the Doctor & one man, the other two men are staying here to look after water supply & run a bit of a hospital.

Sick parade was in full swing when Eric & I set out. We only had ½ hrs notice to pack up & get ready, so we missed the advance party who was to take us there & so we had to get directions & set off ourselves. The directions turned to be a bit faulty & set

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on the wrong track. We found ourselves near Delville Wood, en route for Flers, instead of High Wood on the way to Le Sars so we set across country for high wood which was just on the horizon & passed round it & safely reached Bge Hd Qrs, where we inquired for further directions. After waiting awhile we got them & set out but went astray half way & didn't get onto the right way again for some time. However we reached "home" safely at last, about 3 pm & were showed into our dugout, still occupied by the Tommies we were relieving. They left about 6:30 when the Battn arrived. The duckboards all the way are frozen & slippery like glass so everybody wears sandbags round their feet to stop slipping.

All around here is very flat country & is all under observation while we were coming,

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every time we got out of the trench, Fritz saluted us with a few Whizz-bangs. Luckily his shooting wasn't very accurate.

The post here is a small network of trenches, with dugouts in it. The other companies have a similar post. The aid post we have is a little elephant dugout about 7' x 8' x 5 high with a narrow twisting entrance about 2 ft wide. There are 6 of us sleeping in it, Sgt Corruthers, myself & 5 SB's. Eric left this

morning Sunday to go to the left half, as he was the one who lost the toss-up. (Neither of us wanted to be with the Doc. We had had enough of him last time in). The dugout is practically no use as a dressing station & it will be awful if we get many wounded. However it is the best we can get & we will have to make the best of it. Fritz shells round here considerably.

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Harry arrived about 6:30 pm Sat. & the Tommies cleared out & the SB's came in & we settled down for the night. We were nice & warm too, being crowded.

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> Jan. This morning Eric left. Soon after, Taubes came over, real low & our fellows were working on a small dugout enlarging it. There was considerable movement besides & soon after Fritz started shelling. He was pretty wide of the mark at first, but gradually got right on us. He blew several dugouts in including the cook house where all the cooks were killed or wounded & he made a bit of a mess altogether. Harry & I were very busy all the afternoon & the Doc, who just popped over on a visit, came just in time to help us. It was terrible job getting them into our dugout & only those who had to come in, got in at all & then we had a terrible job getting them out. Most

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of them, we dressed outside & sent them straight away to the next dressing station about ½ mile away run by the 1<sup>st</sup> Fld Ambulance & called Seven Elms Dressing Station. Altogether we had 4 killed & 12 wounded 8 of whom were stretcher cases & pretty bad. I think Fritz has got this place set now. I hope he gives us a rest. We will keep low after this. We were very handicapped in our work, having no room, no water & few dressings, but within a couple of hours of the end of the shelling, they were all away. Some of the poor fellows were bad too.

Rations & water are very scarce just now & we are doing a bit of a perish.

I have put in an application for a transfer to the SB's from the AMC. I think I can do more as an S.B. than here, so I hope it goes through. Eric thinks he is doing more good

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as he is so he is stopping, but we won't be separated much as the SB's & AMC are always closely associated.

Monday 29<sup>th</sup> Quieter today. Men keeping well under cover. They learnt their lesson yesterday. Frost still on water sent up each night in sand bags of ice. Bit of a stunt on tonight by the Jocks. They are after the Butte de Warlencourt. At the same time the Anzac Heavy Artillery will open up on the right. It ought to be a pretty lively little go.

Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> Haven't heard much about the stunt. There was a bit of a flutter about 1:30 am but that is all. We had a couple of successful raids during the night though I think the other was postponed. They say we are moving up tomorrow.

Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> Jan. Moving 5:30 pm up the line to Coy Hd Qrs by myself. Harry is reporting

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to Bn Hd Qrs. I have to carry all the gear & what 3 of us carried up. I will have to get a couple of SB's to help.

Set off about 6 pm & made our way in parties of 10 at 40 yds apart single file for our destination 2-3 miles away. It was a bright moonlight night & you could see everything for miles against the snow. It was very cold but it wasn't long before we were sweating. We had such a load up & it was hard work as the road was rough & slippery. We followed a trench for about ½ mile & then out across the top to another trench where Bn Hd Qrs were to be in a deep (40 ft) German dugout & then we crossed over the trench & kept on for another mile to two or three more dugouts in a group. One big one (like that Bn HQ were in) was for the company & one for the M.G.S. & one small one for Company Hd Qrs. I am in the last. There are

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seventeen of us & we haven't even lying down room, just about enough room to sit on. There are Signallers, Scouts Runners, 2 SB's & myself. Fritz has all this country for miles around under observation by day & no one is allowed to poke his head outside except at night & so we have to stop down this cramped smelly little dugout all day & night, except for a while at night, when I make a round of the dugouts & attend to any sick there are. If there are any I cannot attend owing to stress of circumstances I send down to Bn Hd Qrs, where the Doc & the Sargent [sic] & Eric are running an Aid post in a small dugout nearby. The other 3 of our men are back running a small hospital & attending to water duties (& chlorinating it, but I don't see how he can do it as the water is all frozen & sent up in bags often!) The other dugouts are crowded even worse than this so I have not much chance of carrying on my work, especially

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as it is freezing cold & dark & all my gear has to be left outside. Even the men's personal gear has to be left outside the dugout!

Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> Feb. Today we have spent in the dugout cramped & stiff & unable to move. Water is finished & we all have a terrible thirst up. Rations arrived last night so we are not hungry luckily, as we might be.

When dark came I went my rounds but found no sick so I trotted down to see the Doc & Eric. When I got there I found Eric had some of a parcel from Mrs Midgley with apples & cake & some letters. They were both very welcome & I stayed awhile. While there we bombarded Fritz like mad for about ½ hr & of course he replied. It was a bit of a raid by us & later in the night he replied to it but nothing happened. Just as I was leaving Eric I had a look around & there I could see the flashes of a dozen bursting shells

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right around C.H.Q so I stayed yet awhile till it cooled off a bit, when I set off. I got across all right & got down inside the dugout again where I read my letters & sampled the contents of my parcel with great gusto.

I have all the gear stacked outside the mouth of the dugout all in the weather, but it can't be helped. It gets covered with snow & frozen hard but that is all. Luckily there is no rain. Things are miles better without it. This time is not nearly so bad as last time.

The entrance to the dugout is a duplicate one in case one gets blown in, we can escape by the other. The German dugouts are all like that. It is just big enough for a small man to squeeze down comfortably & consists of steep slippery steps about 2 ft wide & 20 ft deep. Men sleep on the stairs as there is not enough room inside.

There is no actual firing line this time, but a string of posts & machine gun positions, behind which

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are the support lines, where we are. This is A Coy & B Coy are manning the posts. After 4 days here, A Coy will move up & B Coy will come here. We are about 500 yds from Fritz here & the line is a horseshoe. At night flares go up all round you except one small sector to our left. It is just as well that the Saxons are holding this little bit or we would get a rough time. They are almost neutral, & always have been since the war started. They seldom fight unless forced & appear to be even friendly. They walk about in view to our men & make signs & try to talk to them. Our boys are not as lenient as the Tommies however and they Saxons are not treated as well now as before. Our chaps say that it is not the way to win the war. However we can't do much as he holds by far, the better position. Even at night he could do us a lot of damage as it is nearly as bright as day & he must be able to see us, but for some

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reason refrains to fire. We are not sorry, as you may guess.

I think Eric is relieving me tomorrow night & we will do 2 days each turn about up here I expect we will get about 2 days each & that is quite enough here. It is better down there as there is more room. Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb. It is now about 6 am & I have been writing my diary. I will answer the letters I got last night, today. There is nothing to do. You can't sleep much as the floor is very hard, even the little spot you do get is bumpy.

The shells do much more damage now than before when the mud was on. The earth now is hard as iron & there are very few duds & as soon as the shell strikes almost, it bursts, scattering all round. Before it used sink down way into the earth & lose half its force.

This place is terribly lousy & we feel it. I was

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pretty free before thanks to a Lice Belt & some Harrison's Pomade we got in England, but the effect of that is wearing off now. Lice are one of the petty horrors of the war.

Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. Last night Eric arrived to relieve me with the Doc, but we came back together as there were no sick & it was useless staying down the dugout each day doing nothing. We will visit them each night instead as it is not far.

It has been clear & sunny lately, but the frost is as hard as ever. I am here, near Bn Hd Qrs with Eric & Harry. The 4<sup>th</sup> Battn AMC are with us. We have a dugout in the Hd Qrs trench, about 12' x 17' formed of corrugated semi-circular steel cupolas, covered with sandbags. It is OK after the dugout I have been in. I slept like a top last night & it is tres bon being able to move about by day. I have just been watching an air duel about 6 of ours & 6 of Fritz's had a battle. The manoeuvring was marvellous & very pretty.

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One of Fritz's was brought down & the rest made off over their own lines as hard as they could go. They hovered about at a distance for some time & in the end disappeared. Our big double battle planes had proved too much for them.

We have had very few casualties so far. I think we are going out soon for a week or so before coming back to do another 8 days. I wish they would finish it all off at once. From here we can see Flers just to our right. We are on the Le Sars front near Factory Corner. Bge Hd Qrs is at Cough Drop.

Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> February '17. I am now in High Wood Camp with one of our companies along with another of our men, Mason. We are looking after the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bn men here with a few of the 4<sup>th</sup> & 1st Bns. I have been here 2 days now & it is alright here. Went down to see Eric first night at Bazentin & took him his parcel & letter & got some of Auntie Clara's

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parcel which had just arrived. Also dropped into 1<sup>st</sup> Fld Amb. on the way & got a requisition for medical stores. The Doc holds sick parades each afternoon & we look after the men.

Fritz shells very little round here.

Frost still holds. Getting used to it now. We are in here for the rest of the winter.

America & other neutrals broke off diplomatic arrangements with Germany on account of her submarine policy. I wonder what will happen now? Some think the war won't last long now. I hope so anyway. I give it until next summer at least!

My leg is still sore. I have asked the Doc to examine it but he keeps putting it off. It doesn't worry me much though, the only thing is that I am afraid it might develop into something worse. There is a breakdown of the muscle & it isn't healing too fast. It is 4 months since it happened & the Doc gave it 3 weeks to heal.

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My transfer won't go through until we come out of the line again now so the adjutant says "That oughtn't to be long now."

Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> This morning Fritz shelled around the camp with big hig [sic] velocity high explosive naval shells. He made things lively for a while but didn't get anybody. We are shifting out tonight. We have had few casualties this time which is lucky as it is very difficult to get them out.

Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> We moved out last Thursday and reported to Bazentin Camp no. 5. I wasn't feeling too good ever since morning & by night I was bad. I turned in as soon as I could & didn't get up for over two days. I was 103.4° the first night & haven't been at all good since. I am recovering now though & ought to be quite alright in a couple of days.

We are very busy here & I had a bad time as the work had to be done & I

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wasn't feeling up to it.

We have had a couple of parcels from Mr & Mrs Midgley & one from Auntie Clara & one from E Maitland Comforts Committee so are doing alright. We have had several letters also.

Fritz paid us a few attentions here one night here also but nobody was hurt.

The thaw is starting & mud is reappearing. Soon we will be up to our necks in it.

My transfer has gone through to the ambulance & I am to see the O.C. tomorrow morning.

We are in round huts here & are just behind the line. We will be here another week or so yet I think & then back we go to the line. I hope a frost starts before then.

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> Feb. I am feeling alright again now. Weather continues warmer & muddier. Have had fair amount of rain the last few days. Weather like what we had when we first came to France.

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Work going on as usual. Fairly busy. Sick parades in morning & treating men nearly constantly all day. Fatigues, i.e. cleaning up, washing up, getting water etc. is all extra.

Rumour that we are not going into the line now for some time. We are supposed to be in the Reserve army now & if so will be billeted way back for some time doing different sorts of work, roads, railways, etc. We all hope so, as by that time it will be well into the Spring. My transfer should be through soon now.

Thursday Feb 22<sup>nd</sup> Today I joined the SBs & paraded with them. I am now up in B Coy's hut with the others. It has been alright so far. Mud is again in full swing. The transfer came through a couple of days ago.

Fritz send a few shells over here nearly every night but has not got anybody so far.

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Poor old Fritz must be tired of our artillery. At any time day or night sometimes near & sometimes far away but always somewhere on the front if you listen (if near by this is no effort) you can hear the guns thundering away, big & little. It must be awful where they are lobbing. There are a couple of 8" Howitzers just behind the camp & they are always going & when they fire everything falls off the shelves & it nearly deafens everybody. I am now a private in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Battalion. No longer an AMC man thank goodness.

The rumour about going back is wrong we are going up the line again shortly. It will be a new experience for me.

Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> Feb. Rumours of all sorts are flying. Yesterday we were told to hand in our tin hats

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& would probably move off this morning going back. About 2 am this morning we were all wakened up & told to dress quickly & arrange our gear in battle order ready to move off at a minute's notice. The Germans were evacuating in front of Bapaume & we might be called upon to advance. We lay

down in our clothes & went to sleep again & were not disturbed until next morning. We are now under orders to move at any minute. The parties who were stationed at High Wood who came back yesterday to here, returned today. The official account of what was happening last night was that our men advanced 1000 yds & dug in, encountering no resistance & seeing none of the enemy. It is believed that he is falling back a considerable distance. If so we can expect some nice little surprises like what we left for Johnny Turk on the Peninsula, in the

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shape of mines, pits, spring bombs etc. etc. We don't know now at all what is to happen to us. We took 3 cases away this morning sick. Carried them from their hut to the road where the car was. I was mess orderly today. It isn't any worse than what I have been doing & a good deal better than some mess orderly stunts I have done.

No mail yet. Something must be wrong.

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday. Probably moving up today or tonight. Bge Hd Qrs are now in the old German trenches called "the Maze". We are going into a big stunt. It will probably be fairly open action, unlike Pozieres. There will be plenty doing. The mud will be a big drawback. Fritz will very probably use gas too, which he has had plenty of time to prepare behind his lines. Weather is wet & fine by turns. Not too cold but mud is bad.

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Everybody seems in good spirits which is funny considering how they growl at little things. A stunt of this kind, however, changes things. I guess I will know what hard work is soon.

I will leave this diary behind with my pack as there is a lot of information in it of value to the enemy if it were lost or captured.

No blankets to be carried only waterproof & greatcoat. No cookers will be able to operate in all probability. It will be bully & biscuits for us.

Wednesday March 7<sup>th</sup> Here we are in Mametz Camp. We were relieved from the firing line last night about 9:30 pm & had a very long hard march through the mud etc. for about 5-6 miles to Bazentin Camp No 4 arriving there about 1 am. We had some tea & stew which the cooks had ready for us & which was very acceptable indeed. We

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were dead tired as well as ravenous so after the feed we rolled in & slept like logs. I was particularly tired as besides our gear & the stretcher I had a German rifle & a haversack full of souvenirs to carry & besides we carried a sick man's gear a long way as well as our own, so you can guess I was tired. It was a great job to get us up in the morning, but eventually got up, had brekker, packed up & left about 10 am & marched a couple of miles to here, Mametz Camp. We are probably leaving here tomorrow.

It is now about 4pm. We have had dinner, had a parade & gas helmet inspection & also had our feet treated for trench feet by the new French method. Whale oil has proved a failure but this new method is a great success. You wash your feet with camphor soap & rub talcum camphor powder into them, putting a little into the socks as well. This

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is done before going in & after coming out of the trenches.

We have had some mail too & there is more to come. Letters from home dated early in New Year. It is now eight days since we left Bazentin for the line. The trip in has not proved so exciting as we expected but it was good enough. We arrived at Oak trench after about 5 miles march about 9:30. We were very tired & it was cold & muddy. The battalion we relieved left & we stayed there till about 5 am next morning. We carried out one of the last Battn's men whom they had left for a start. He was terribly heavy & the carry was long, too long in fact, quite 2 miles the going being



abominable. The ground was quite as much cut up as it was at Pozieres. The Reg. Aid Post was at Yarra Bank which was our old front line before the advance. Before the Aid Post was at Hexham Road, about 1 mile behind.

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We left Oak Lane about 5 pm & marched about ½ mile to Rye trench where we took charge. It was one of Fritz's old trenches & so he paid it a few attentions knowing where it was, but although he damaged the trench considerably we had no casualties as the Germans had left a couple of their big dugouts intact having probably used them up until the last minute & we all got down into them. We stopped here all that day & the next night & day & shifted up into the line the next night. While here, the Doc shifted his Aid Post up into an old Bomb store of Fritz's just near us, in an old sunken road called Blue Cut. Another road, Yellow Cut runs parallel to & 200 yds from it. Another SB & me went to see the Doc & struck them in the middle of cleaning it out so we were called in to give a hand. We toiled & sweated for an hour or so & then went back. There

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were boxes & boxes & bags & bags of bombs of all sorts. Pineapple bombs, egg bombs, broomstick bombs, detonators etc. etc. but they got it clear at last. About 1 hr later I popped back for my scarf I had left & found it with the entrance all blown in. Fritz had spotted it & sent over about 6, 5.9" HE & finished it. They had to find a new dugout, pack up & retire then. It was horribly bad luck. The new post was in Wheat trench, a continuation of Oak Lane across Blue Cut. They were in with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battn M.O. Just at this time our own Doc left & we got a new one Major Beamish. We are all pleased as he is a first class fellow.

In fine weather all this ground for miles around is under observation & often Fritz snipes with Whizz Bangs & even 5.9's. It is too far away for the rifles. The ground is terribly chopped up & muddy.

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The 11<sup>th</sup> Battn whom we relieved left a lot of rations & gear behind them so I paid their trench a visit & got some biscuits & cheese & a bottle of pickles! We were very pleased! I also got a "housewife" which I wanted badly & a lovely little razor left by one of the 11<sup>th</sup> Bn.

We left Rye trench about dusk & marched single file through the mud, round the shell-torn village of Le Barque to an old chalk quarry where we stayed for an hour or so & then went on. There are trenches running from this which is the front line trench. We were to advance about 500 yds & dig in & consolidate. We advanced the 500 yds & met no opposition at all. We then set to work to dig in. The SB's got to work too & by morning we had a line of trenches about 4 ft deep with a bit of a parapet. It was pretty shallow for a front line trench but was the most we could do at the time.

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We were all dead beat when we had finished as digging is hard work. Luckily we had no cases or we would have had hardly the strength to carry them out. Just as it began to get light we lay down & slept in the trench. It was terribly cold & we were cramped but we felt better after the sleep. The trench being new was not sloppy although the ground was cold & damp. The morning was very misty & just as dawn broke, Fritz started bombarding. We all kept low & then there was a call for the SB's. We hopped up, grabbed our respirators, dressing bags & slings & out of the trench & along to the place where the wounded were. There were 3 of them, one broken arm, one with shattered foot & one with bullet through the leg. We fixed them up & the stretcher party started off down the road. I followed with the man with the broken arm. We had gone about 50 yds when I happened to glance to the right, having

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hear some bombs exploding & there were about 6 Huns, heaving bombs & firing as fast as they could at our trenches & they were behind us too. The man with the bullet in the leg gave a yell 'They've outflanked us' & ran for his life, gammy leg & all. My he did go. It was very funny seeing how fast a wounded man could go when necessary! The stretcher party were about 100 yds ahead & under cover, but the bank of the road was low just where I was & if I had gone on they would have spotted me, so we ducked in under the bank & from there I watched them with my eyes just above the bank & the wounded man crouching underneath. The Germans were standing up to it well & firing as if on parade. It was like watching the pictures. I could only see about 6 on account of the mist but there was a big party (about 80-100 we afterwards learnt). As they fired, they

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they were edging towards the road all the time. I don't think they knew it was there as they never looked across, their attention being fully occupied in front where our fellows were in the trenches. They were about 20 yds off the bank & I was beginning to think that in a few days time I would be in Berlin a prisoner, when I saw some more of our fellows coming from both ways up the road. They were the 4<sup>th</sup> Battn support company. The [sic] crept up & lined the bank & started in on the Fritz's. I must say the Huns took it well. They retreated one at a time keeping up the fire until they were all in a line of shell holes curving & facing the trenches & the road as well which were at right angles. I then told the wounded man to get on to the Aid Post by himself & he set off. I then fixed up a 4<sup>th</sup>

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Bn Corporal who had got a bullet through his leg & broken it. Some of his mates took him off & I went back to my own post. The 4<sup>th</sup> Bn were over the top by this time, driving the Huns in front of them who were retreating well, taking a lot of prisoners with them. They had been successful so far but just as they probably thought they were getting away, they ran right onto the line of trenches we had dug the night before. They didn't dream of their existence & here they met their fate. It lasted about ½ hr & then those who were not killed, surrendered being mostly wounded. It is very improbable any of them got back. They were all big fellows & picked men, every 2<sup>nd</sup> man have some decoration, a lot of Iron Crosses amongst them. They were men of the Prussian Guards & Grenadier Guards.

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Our intelligence people searched the dead & wounded Huns for papers etc. & for ½ hr everybody was souvenir hunting. I got a couple of bayonets & tassels & a rifle in good condition, a belt & buckle & a few other things including a little Hun cap. It was a great success for us & we were all jubilant. Our casualties were about 5 killed & 7 wounded. All the fellows who were captured & being taken back by the Huns got away alright except one who was killed. Some of them had narrow shaves. That same morning, however, another German patrol surrounded & captured one of our advanced M.G.\* posts also about 15 men of one isolated post. However they are better prisoners than dead. The say Australian prisoners are treated well in Germany. About ½ hr or so after it was all over we

\*Machine Gun

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Were all hunted back to our trenches, as the mist began to clear. Evidently the German patrol had sneaked through the line, between the posts, bombed the dugouts etc. behind, capturing a lot of prisoners & were on their way back when they bumped the new line we had just dug & which they knew nothing about & so it proved their undoing. They fought well but our chaps fought better. They were splendid & were congratulated by both Divisional & Army Hd Qrs on the work they did that afternoon. Fritz shelled but he didn't know exactly where we were & so couldn't get right onto us luckily. That night we deepened the trench, built little dugouts & consolidated generally. Next day

was fine & we got more shells but they were unsuccessful. We had to lie low as rabbits in our burrows as Fritz had snipers both rifle & machine guns, posted everywhere & he paid us

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plenty of attention to the slightest movements. Our chaps did the same to Fritz. We were terribly cold & it was rotten having to sit still in a cold trench all day & we were very glad when it got dark & we could get about & get a stretch & a warm. We lived on bully & biscuits & the little bread & jam & cheese issued each night. We made a little tea on Tommy Cookers taken from the Germans. We also had a little Primus & we got a little kerosene from the Aid post once when we went down with a case so we had some hot tea & fried the bully beef & so didn't do too bad.

We did 3 days & 3 nights in the front line & were glad to be relieved & went back to the Chalk pit into supports. The night we left they connected up the various sections of trenches, making one continuous trench, deepened it & strengthened it, placed about 8 rows of

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barbed wire & about 10 ft of trip wire in front, dug close support trenches 100 yds in rear, set lines of communications, brought up supplies of flares, rockets & S.O.S. signals & made a real front line trench. The reason was that at that point we were far advanced of the rest & they are going to keep still there until the flanks move up into line & then go ahead again. The three villages, Le Barque, Ligny Thillois & Thillois are behind us, the latter to our right & behind. Bapaume is still ahead & just over the ridge. The Hun lines are well ahead but he has snipers, men with flare pistols placed quite near. Patrols go out each night from both

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trenches to see that everything is O.K. between the lines. When we arrived back at the Chalk pit we found we had been left out in the cold. For an hour we walked around in vain looking for a posy, until at last in desperation we went into the village (Ligny Thillois) about 200 yds behind & found a cellar with mattresses in it. We were in luck & soon turned in. We got to sleep about midnight. The mattresses were too soft & we didn't sleep too well but it was heaven compared to the cold trenches. When we woke up the ground was covered with snow. We thought we had seen the last of it but here it was again. The sun soon melted it however & made everything wet & sloppy.

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The weather was clear & some silly fellow went & lighted a fire to heat some water & Fritz spotted the smoke. We were all down below in the cellar when wood, crash came the first shell, followed by another one going over & the next falling short. Next minute, the third shell, 5.9 HE came bang right on top of the cellar. The whole thing shook, debris crashed down the steps blocking them up & the air was filled with smoke & dust. Two men had been on top, one came stumbling down with a broken arm. We fixed him up & sent him away. The other chap we couldn't find. Next day we gathered up the bits & buried them. Another shell lobbed

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short into the chalk pit, burying a couple of men. One we got out & brought round, bandaged up & carried him away. The other was done poor fellow. Next day Fritz shelled again but unsuccessfully. We were relieved at night & were very glad to get away without further mishaps.

Friday March 9<sup>th</sup> We are still here, contrary to expectations. We may even be here for another fortnight & then go back into the line here again. I think we are doomed to stop on this sector forever. We are all sick of it & are hoping to be sent north either Armentieres or Ypres. The weather here is still cold. Snow & cutting winds make things tres froid. We have 2 parades a day, as before. The new Doctor

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is O.K. after the other chap. Casualties in line last time about 40 not counting the 18-20 captured. Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> March 1917. Beautiful day today. Bright & warm. Hope it stays like this but there is not much change I am afraid. More letters from home dated Jan 14<sup>th</sup>. Probably moving in a few days. They say we are going to take over the Verdun front. Anyway wherever we go it can't be worse than what we have had & there is a chance of it being better.

Monday 12<sup>th</sup> Today the 16 Regular SB's were put in a hut together with the Hd Qrs Sigs making 28 in all. We are now attached to Battn Hd Qrs, as a body & are only attached to the various companies when in the line. Had heavy rain last night & today.

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> March 1917. We are now in billets in Dernancourt. We have been here two days now. It is a change from the old huts. It is 2 months since we were in a town last.

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This is a fairly large village but nothing much in it. It is mostly mud walled barns & farmhouses. A few small shops, a church & a YMCA & Church Army huts. Nothing much to do but parades, 2 a day, & 9-12 & 2-4 pm, stretcher drill, bandaging & lectures.

Last night, Eric with some others, went to Fricourt to have their medals presented. He ought to be back today.

Weather getting better although it is cold again today. Our billet is an old barn with wire bunks built in it. It is fairly comfortable.

Bapaume fell to out 5<sup>th</sup> Divn last night. They say there was heavy street fighting. There is trouble in Russia too. We don't know where we are going next. Some say back further & some say the firing line again. It is hard to guess as anything may happen. You never know where you are going or how long you may stop there.

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Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1917. We are moving this afternoon at 1 pm for Ribemont about 4 miles away. They say we stop there a couple of days and then go on to Corbie but we don't know for certain. We think we are entraining for somewhere but where we are not certain. Maybe North to Ypres, perhaps Arras or Armentieres or even Verdun. Nobody knows.

The Germans are still falling back rapidly. We are right up to Cambrai & St Quentin. The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade marched through here this morning on their way to the line. They have a long way to go now. About 3-4 days march. Most of us think the war is coming to an end now, we all hope so anyway. The Light Horse are doing most of the work this time for the first time too.

Weather still alternately snowy & cold & warm & sunny. Spring is doing its best to make itself felt. It seems hard that, after

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us doing such a lot of hard bullocky work in the line for about 2 months, we should be withdrawn just as the Germans started falling back. Then the other divisions get all the credit for taking Bapaume etc. We are all out of it here, although we had a bit of a stunt when we were up there last time. Still, I wouldn't be surprised if we were put into a push or something around Arras or somewhere where Fritz hasn't begun to fall back yet.

Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> March

Arrived here in Ribemont yesterday afternoon about 3. Our billet was horrible but we got out of it into a better one. Fairly big village but we have no money just now so we are not feeding as well as we might. However we ought to get paid tomorrow & then we will visit the butchers shop & have steak & eggs for tea.

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It snowed off & on all day yesterday. Weather still cold. Rumour says we will be here a few days & then go to Arras.

We had a Battalion concert tonight. It was very good indeed. Our regimental band was A1 – just like a 1<sup>st</sup> class orchestra. It was a bit of a surprise to most. The other items were good too & we had a good evening. It was held in the big shed with stage etc, complete which had been built for a picture show.

Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March

Still here & no word of moving yet. Training pretty hard. Paid today so we will have a good feed of steak & eggs for tea.

Monday 26<sup>th</sup> Raining all day again. We have all decided that the four seasons in France are not Spring Summer Autumn Winter. But Wet Season, Cold Season, then the Rainy Season finished up by the Big Spring Push. A month from now it ought to

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be alright though.

We were supposed to have Brigade stunt this afternoon but on account of the rain we just did a bit of a Battalion affair. It was an imitation attack. I suppose the Brigade affair will take place as soon as weather permits.

Tuesday April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1917. 4 pm We are now at camp in Montauban on the way to the line. We still have a long way to go. Next stop is probably Bapaume tomorrow night. The line is then still about 8 miles away. It will be very interesting to see the country around about & behind Bapaume with the villages taken recently in the advance. It ought to be better this time than before, more open.

At Ribemont we had several mimic captures of various villages so it looks promising. We also had several good concerts at Mericourt Hall, especially the last night when a proper concert party gave an entertainment. Altogether

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we have had a good spell – for us at any rate. It will be a month since we were in the trenches by the time we get back there, although we were in reserve for a good deal of that time. We left Ribemont at 10 am & marched here, about 10 miles, getting here about 2 pm. It was a pretty stiff march. My pack is particularly heavy owing to the souvenirs I am carrying. We are in huts again now.

The weather lately has been very bad. Cold & windy & rainy & some heavy snow. Today for some time we have had a bit of sun. We all hope it lasts as it will dry things up a bit up the line. It is terrible there when things are all wet & muddy & cold. It is about time we had better weather. We have had winter now since the middle of October about 6 months now.

We have had no mail for weeks now. We are all getting tired of waiting. They say a lot has been lost. It looks very much like it.

All the AMC surplus gear

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had to be dumped so my rifle couldn't be carried, so Eric left it with the French woman in Ribemont where they used to get "fried oeufs" for tea pretty often. She said she would look after it & when we are coming back we ought to be able to get it. It is the only chance anyway. I think I will leave my pack with Eric's this time too as the weight may cause some souvenir seeker to investigate. I don't want to lose them.

Thursday April 5<sup>th</sup>

Here we are at Fremicourt about 6 miles from the line at least it was last night, it might be more now. Things will be lively up there.

We left Montauban at 8 am yesterday morning & after a terrible long & heavy march of about 8 miles (it seemed like 18, the way was so bad) we arrived here at 4 pm. We are now advanced of Bapaume & to the right. The country round here is lovely, green fields

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& woods & no shellholes. It is good to see. The villages however are in a bad state. Fritz has smashed them all up just for spite. It is pure vandalism. Fruit trees & all other trees are cut down. Gardens & houses wrecked, roads blown up & wells destroyed. We have no proper billet & water is scarce & muddy. Our billet is the remains of a room in a house. It is about all that is left except for parts of the walls. Half of the walls of the room & most of the roof is gone. The floor half covered with bricks & debris, we have cleared enough room for the 16 SB's to sleep on & built a fire place to keep us warm. We slept well last night in spite of the hard ground & cold.

Yesterday, the weather was horrible. Cold & it snowed like fun. We were all wet & tired & hungry & covered with mud by the time that we arrived. Today the sun is shining but it would take a week's fine weather to dry up the mud now.

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The church & all the big houses here have been mined & are a total wreck. There are no decent billets in the town. We are lucky to have even a bit of a roof & luckier still it didn't rain last night. We may dump our packs here or maybe carry them to the next stage & dump them there. From there we carry our overcoat (perhaps a blanket too), stretchers, waterproof, Iron Rations etc. only there is a big village just in front of Cambrai they say we have to take. Leaving this in my pack, so will continue when I get it again.

Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> April. We are now in the trenches in front of the village of Hermes, which was captured by the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade two days ago. It is a pretty big village but is now in ruins. There were about 250 casualties in the Brigade. Our battalion was one in support so our casualties were not too heavy. Fritz defends these villages one by one, leaving only a few men & some machine guns to bar our way. He fires until we get close & then surrenders. This village was defended more strongly than most. We captured over 200 prisoners

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& 16 machine guns in it. In between the villages he has isolated strong machine gun posts but the villages themselves are the main points of resistance. His main body are probably consolidating "The Hindenberg Line" long before this bit are only fighting his rear guard. From his point of view, this method of fighting is good as he only stands to lose a few men & a gun or two, but unless we are very careful we suffer heavily.

We arrived here last night relieving the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battn & set to work to dig a "possy" for ourselves. I had got a fairly good one going, with a hole dug in the bank & waterproofs & a sheet of tin over it & a mattress in it! I found this next door & instantly appropriated it. It is tres bon! Before I was finished however I had a call. We had two cases to carry back to the Aid Post. One of our patrols had been fired on by one of our own advanced posts who had not been

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warned that a patrol was going out & so took them for Germans. We went out & got them & took them down. The aid post is fully 1 ½ miles away, which is a long carry. We went right through the village instead of around it as the way was shorter.

The weather has been terrible lately. Cold & windy & snowy & rainy & we have been all frozen.

After leaving Fremicourt last Thursday afternoon after about 5 miles march (packs & blankets etc & stretcher) through green fields & woods & a big chateau grounds, along an old railway line & roads, we arrived at the outposts where we relieved the 53<sup>rd</sup> Battn. The post was just about 20 yds of trench with a few dugouts built in it. It was one of a chain of similar posts about 100 – 150 yds apart all along the front.

The company was split up in Platoons so three

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of us had gone with the first two platoons & three with the other two. The two platoons I was with then divided again so I went with one & the other two went with the other taking the stretcher. At first they were in a mine crater at a cross roads ½ mile back but afterwards they moved up onto our right flank.

After we had settled down we dumped our gear, advanced about ½ mile & with patrols out & sentries posted, we half dug another post to be finished & occupied next night. The other posts did likewise. Then we went back & turned in. Possey was very wet & muddy & cold but luckily Fritz was a long way off so we could move around a bit. Next night we packed up & moved up to the next post. It was raining & cold but we soon got warm working. When we had finished, we tried to turn in but found there was not nearly enough room & so three of us (I

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was one of the unfortunate ones) had to sit out in the trench, all the rest of the night & all next day. It seemed an eternity to me. We were all wet through & a cold piercing wind was blowing with snow & rain & I nearly froze to death. As soon as it was dusk we three turned to & dug a 'possey' for ourselves, going back to our old post for a cover (wood & bit of tarpaulin) for the roof with these & our ground sheets, we got a real nice comfy little home. In the end it turned out to be the only dry place in the post so we felt a bit paid back for the bad time when we had no home & the others had. Next day was a nice & dry 1 (although cold & blowy) so we dried our things & scraped off as much mud as possible, put a few finishing touches to our home. (collected some dry straw for the floor) They used to bring us breakfast about 4:30 am & tea about 8 pm from

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the cookers which were about a mile back, during the hours of darkness. The men do very little except keep watch & do a few fatigues. There is a different password each night & patrols go out each night sometimes meeting Fritz's.

We were very sorry indeed when we had to leave our home to come up here which is now the front line after 'the hop over'. Before it, we were the front line.

Since we came here we have advanced about 1 ½ miles in about 3 stages. Battn Hd Qrs, Company Hd Qrs, Aid post, cookers etc. all move up. Probably tonight or tomorrow night we will advance again towards the next village. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battn will be in the first wave then.

We have carried our packs with us all the time this time. Seems as if we have come to stop.

Got some letters the other day, the first for 3 weeks. We'll have a lot of writing to do next time out.

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There are souvenirs of all sorts lying around if only a chap could carry them. We have had a couple of meals off German bully beef & bread & jam. The beef is O.K. like brawn almost, but the jam & bread are very rough. We heated some stew on a German trench cooker (just like our Tommy cookers). Fritz has been good to us lately.

Wednesday April 25<sup>th</sup> 1917 ANZAC Day.

Here I am in Boulogne in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Gen. Hosp. with a bullet through my chest. Not very bad as luckily it missed all vital organs. Fractured rib & punctured lung – not very sore now. Have been here 2 days now & was 8 days at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Aus CCS at Grevilliers near Bapaume. Was hit on the 15<sup>th</sup>. On the 13<sup>th</sup> we packed up & advanced 1000 yds from our trenches in front of the village. Dug in. Not much opposition on our sector although considerable on our flanks. Next day uneventful. Next night advanced another 300 yds & dug in again. Very close to Fritz now. Flares & machine guns all around. Standing to all night. Very early in morning of Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> Fritz opened up a barrage pretty heavily, then he attacked – came over in swarms. Our front line had to

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retire as it was merely a string of small posts & pretty weak. Fritz advanced a considerable distance on a 6 mile front they say, before we could get up a proper resistance. When we did, however, he got it all back with interest. They were all killed or wounded or captured & the line ended up in its original position. Our side had a good few casualties. I was one. The other SB & I were sitting in our little posy during the bombardment & as it seemed to be getting worse instead of better we popped out to see. Our posy was a little way away from the post & I popped over to see how the boys were & found them gone. They had evidently forgotten us. I went back to our posy & the SB had gone too so I thought I had better go. Then I saw a whole heap of men approaching. It was rather dark & they were on me before I knew. One of them challenged me in German & before I could do anything, woof. I got it & my legs gave way & I fell. The Fritz's then ran all over me & left me behind. I didn't feel too pleased. It looked as if I was to be captured as well as wounded & I didn't like the idea. I lay there for hours it seemed (it was only 1 hr I think) & then tried to rise but failed. Then I started to crawl & a Fritz

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machine gun started on me. I stopped but as he wasn't too close (not nearly as close as I had had them while I was lying there) I started again. He started again but he was a long way off & so didn't get too close & there was a sunken road where my old posy was that I was making for. I was going to hide. After a painful journey I got to the road & stood up rather shakily & started off for the dugout. Saw two figures coming down road & thought the game was up, but instead of Germans they were our chaps. I was rather pleased. One of them helped me down. We missed the dressing station &

2399 McRae Pte A Coy Scout Sore feet. [written upside-down at bottom of page in indelible ink pencil] Landed in Blighty 30<sup>th</sup> April Taken to Eastbourne [written at bottom of page in different pencil]

walked 3 miles to the ambulance waggons. I was just about done. Taken to the Field Amb. & thence by car to the CCS. Washed, inoculated [sic] for Tetanus, pyjamas put on & put into bed. Wound dressed properly. Hardly remember much of this. Kept here for 8 days & then sent on to Base. All chest cases kept 14 days in France, so I have a few more days to do here & then probably it is Blighty for me "Take me back to dear old Blighty". I am looking forward to a good holiday. It is tres bon in hospital now that I am getting better & I intend to have a good time on my furlow after I get out of hospital.

1831 [written upside down at bottom corner in different pencil]

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Marbled end papers

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Back cover