

## To France! And Back Again.

By RIFLEMAN LESLIE V. SHINN.

In this article, I will endeavour to give some idea of life in the Territorial Army, as far as twelve months' experience will allow me to do so.

I enlisted at the Regimental Headquarters early in May, 1915, and commenced duty on a very dull, rainy morning. The new recruits paraded in the drill hall with the rest of the battalion and the noise was appalling. Everywhere commands were being shouted—which to me were quite unintelligible—and men were hurrying about in all directions. The sudden silence on the entry of the Commanding Officer was an astonishing contrast to the previous babel of tongues.

Of course, I found my new existence very pleasant and beneficial, especially as I was billeted at home and was able to spend my evenings there or where else I wished. However, after six weeks of this ideal life, we were told that 450 men were shortly going to camp, and I was one selected, for, if I may say so with all modesty, I was very competent at my work. This happened on Thursday and we were leaving on Monday, so I made the most of my last few days at home.

Monday arrived, and the battalion paraded at headquarters at 7.0 a.m., and at 8.30 the camp party left, the remainder of the men giving them a rousing send off. From Camberwell, we marched with a full band to London Bridge Station and there entrained for Tadworth, a small village some  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles south of Epsom. Unfortunately, when we arrived it rained heavily, and we were compelled to spend the rest of the day in the tents.

There is very little to say about camp life. On the beautiful Epsom Downs, we were able to extend still further our military training, and blessed with fine weather as we were, drill and route marches were more like pleasure than work. After four months of this healthy and vigorous life, the men of the leading Company were sent to Rainham, in Essex, to undergo a course of musketry. On the whole we did remarkably well, several men gaining the coveted distinction of "Marksman." As for myself, I had to be content with a good second class. Little did we think when we were firing then that many of us would be firing at a very different target within a few weeks. On our return to Epsom a mysterious whisper of "drafts for the front" seemed to spread about, and we were scarcely surprised when the sergeant-major told all men, who had been passed as efficient in firing, to "hold themselves in readiness for a draft" to the first battalion in the trenches. We of the draft were getting somewhat anxious about



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our leave, granted to most regiments before leaving for the front, and imagine our surprise and disgust when we were told on October 7th that we were to leave at 10 a.m. for Southampton! Departing from Tadworth at 9.30, we marched to Epsom in gloriously fine weather. There we entrained in a special, and were soon whizzing away to Southampton. From the docks we marched to the rest camp, which was about three miles out of the town and uphill all the way. There we stayed a couple of days with liberty to do exactly as we wished. On the afternoon of Saturday, October 10th, we were marched to the docks, and by 6.30 we had embarked on a transport bound for France. I was lucky enough to see my parents at the Dock Gates before we left, but I think I was the only one. Immediately on embarking I went below, and, being a very poor sailor, I remained there throughout the crossing. Fortunately, I slept nearly the whole of the journey, waking up at 1.30 a.m., as we reached Havre—our destination. We remained on the boat another six hours when the troops disembarked and lined up on the quay. At last we started out for the camp and were able to gather our first impressions of France, which, as far as I was concerned, were distinctly unfavourable. We marched through a number of mean, dirty streets surrounded by a host of unkempt children, shouting incessantly "Biscuits! Biscuits!"

Then came the day for us to join our comrades in the trenches. After a final and rigorous inspection we left the camp and marched to Havre Station, where we entrained. I was struck by the difference between the French third class carriages and our own. Theirs are merely draughty wooden affairs without any cushions and having only one window each side. In these uncomfortable carriages we started our journey to Bethune. It was the most uncomfortable journey I have ever experienced. Eight men were placed in each compartment, and by the time they had got their rifles, equipment and themselves in, there was not much room to move. Luckily, there were only six in my compartment, but even then it was a tight fit. After playing cards for some time, we decided to have some supper of bully beef, "dog" biscuits, butter and sardines. By ten o'clock, most of us were dozing, and one by one we fell into a fitful sleep to be awakened by finding ourselves on the floor, with feet and faces horribly mixed. By 5 a.m. all thoughts of sleep had vanished. In the late afternoon, we came to country where signs of war began to make themselves visible—here a burned chateau, there a ruined house. Soon after, we reached our destination. The station was most depressing. On one side stood some dirty battered houses, on the other two or three huge brasiers and mine shafts. The



remainder of our journey was by road and it was dark when we started. After a mile of dreary plodding along broken, miry roads, we heard guns in the distance; first very faintly and gradually louder and louder, until the flashes seemed to light up the whole sky and surround us. About two miles farther on, we halted outside a small town, which had been bombarded at intervals, and prepared to spend the night in the open. Fortunately we discovered some disused dugouts, and after lighting a fire, we were soon sound asleep.

The morning broke fine and cold, and we breakfasted as usual on bully beef and biscuits. We were now quite close to the guns, and already seemed accustomed to their ceaseless barking. Dinner—the inevitable stew—was at one, and an hour or so later we started off on the last stage of our journey. We were quite a small party, but pretty jolly. Our route lay over a long, straight road, bordered by what had once been trees and houses. On either side the guns were hammering away with a deafening roar. We passed a large factory which had been reduced by shell fire to a tangled mass of steel framework, and farther on some of the “boys” were playing football in a field. The transports started from a row of ruined houses named — Street. We were glad to rest here as we had been marching ninety minutes with full packs and ammunition without a halt. Close by, a battery of French 75's was pounding away and the noise was overwhelming. By five the transport, which carried the next day's rations and water to the trenches, was ready, and we started off again. After a few minutes, a sharp turn in the road brought us on to a large flat space, bare of all signs of vegetation, the only thing visible to break the monotony being what were apparently long white parallel lines stretching from left to right as far as the eye could see. These were the trenches, and somehow one seemed to be in another world altogether. By now we were beginning to distinguish the different “tone” in the noise of the shells whistling overhead, and were getting some idea as to which were our own shells and which were the Germans. A few minutes more brought us to the last line of trenches, where we found our own boys, who gave us a hearty welcome. After being allotted to various platoons and companies, we jumped down into the trench. I was able to join a pal and the Corporal of my section gave me some tea to drink—the finest cup (or rather tin) of tea I have ever tasted. Feeling greatly refreshed I took a short stroll down the trench.

I expect by this time you have got a good idea of what a trench is like. In this one there were no dugouts, and we were compelled to settle down on the floor. Two of us decided to sleep



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side by side. We first laid down a waterproof sheet, and lying on  
 that, put another on top of us. But it started to rain heavily and  
 we were soon compelled to get up. The prospect of having to  
 stand in the wet all night was not very pleasing. One of the fel-  
 lows luckily knew of a disused dugout a little behind the line, and  
 the two of us hastened to it. It was an underground affair,  
 which had been occupied by an artillery general during the great  
 advance, and wasn't at all bad. There was a table and a couple  
 of chairs, all very much in need of repair, and also a switchboard  
 to which several telephone wires were attached. The table was  
 already occupied, but we soon settled down on the floor and put  
 out our little bit of candle. Then the rats came in swarms, running  
 over us in a most unconcerned manner. It wasn't very enjoyable,  
 but we slept all the same. I awoke about six and got out into the  
 open. It was very misty and no one seemed to be moving. The  
 daily artillery duel had already started, but I seemed to have got  
 quite used to that. After rousing my chum, we went back to our  
 section of the trench and lit a fire in an old petrol tin. Our daily  
 ration of bacon was soon sizzling away, and then came the great  
 luxury of some tea. As water was so scarce even right back in  
 the last line, we had to be very careful. After this appetising  
 breakfast my rifle occupied my attention for some time, as it had  
 to be thoroughly clean for the officer's inspection. The aeroplanes  
 were up the very first thing and received, from both sides, plenty  
 of attention from the anti-aircraft guns. Whilst collecting wood,  
 we made some very gruesome discoveries, including a fair number  
 of unburned French dead. There were also numerous discarded  
 packs lying around. The contents of these were rather interest-  
 ing, and I secured a very good hairbrush out of one and a tube of  
 tooth paste from another. That night we slept in another old dug-  
 out, which, fortunately, was not over-ridden by rats. We occu-  
 pied these trenches for two or three days, and then the order came  
 that we were to move forward to the support lines. We packed  
 up in the afternoon as we were to go up as soon as it was dark.  
 Every man had to carry something besides his full pack, and I  
 got a sack of wood, which was quite enough. Some had shovels  
 and picks, and others rations. Soon after six we lined up in single  
 file just in front of the trench, and saw the other companies start-  
 ing off. There was a pale moonlight, and the effect of seeing these  
 long files of men going forward was somewhat striking. Now it  
 was our turn to march off, and we tailed on to the last company.  
 We marched over shell-beaten ground for about half an hour,  
 though not without frequent halts, for the leaders to find the way,  
 and because of men falling into shell-holes and getting into vari-  
 ous difficulties. Stray bullets were now flying about, fast and



furious, and a few men were hit. Now we found ourselves parallel to a trench, and noticed that the men of the leading companies were getting into it. Many of us thought we had reached our destination, but we were sadly disillusioned as we had to tramp through winding, twisting and apparently endless trenches for another three hours before we finally halted. We were then crowded into a narrow trench with hardly room to move, and it was only with difficulty that two men could pass. However, we settled down somehow, and by squeezing tight we managed to pass the night, without shelter, on the floor of the trench. I awoke early next morning to find the rain drizzling down and my **feet and hands numb with cold**. Everything seemed gray and cheerless, and I leant against the side of the trench and gave way to some rather gloomy thoughts.

I soon pulled myself together, and, tugging a waterproof sheet across the top of the trench, I improvised a shelter. Breakfast over, we turned to cleaning rifles, and this was no easy task in the wet. Mud seemed to fly to the rifles like a pin to a magnet, and even liberal applications of oil seemed useless. Many fellows who were digging shelters had rather a nasty experience, as the trench, being cut out of chalk, collapsed in some places and buried the workers. It was only with difficulty that some of them were dug out. Fortunately our bit held.

That day wasn't a very cheerful one and at 4.30 I was detailed for a ration party. This meant that we had to proceed back through the trenches almost to our starting point of the previous night. Our equipment for the journey was rifle, gas helmet, and fifty rounds of ammunition, and these were naturally a great encumbrance. The outward journey was not so bad, though again the wires would insist on catching the tops of our rifles, and we got to the "Lone Pine" in about an hour. There the transport was unloaded, and each man received his share of rations to carry back. This was two large sacks of food—tins of Maconachie jam and bully beef chiefly—and very heavy. The return journey took roughly four hours; four hours of strenuous work, and the sight of our section of the trench was very welcome. Unfortunately, we had just come back in time for a digging party, so off we set again and were engaged digging for another five hours. Then we were allowed to get some sleep.

The following day was fine and there was very little excitement, except in the morning, when the Germans "strafed" us with shrapnel. In the evening I caught water fatigue, which is similar to, though slightly worse, than "rations." When I returned from that I went on digging again till the early hours of the morning.



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We stayed in the support trenches a couple of days or so longer and then came the order that we were to proceed to the front line. I felt a wee bit excited, as the front line seemed to be the real thing. The day was extremely wet, and packing up was a very rotten job. Again there was another awful journey up the communication trenches, which by this time, were over ankle deep in sticky mud, and it was three or four hours—perhaps more—before we halted and were allotted out to the various traverses. As soon as we had taken off our knapsacks, we started on sentry duty, which every man had to do each alternate hour. Naturally this was pretty stiff and practically prevented one getting any sleep. In fact, during that four days in the firing line, I didn't get so much as a wink. Here I was again put on rations, and so had to go right back, this time a much longer journey, and it took about seven hours to return with the rations. The next day was practically the same as in the support trenches, except that the sentry go was carried on. However, in the evening, I was selected for listening patrol, with a corporal and another fellow, and this job is one of the worst. We left our trenches and got out in front. The German wire seemed to be startlingly near, and the star shells were so frequent that we were on hands and knees practically all the time. We patrolled up and down ever expecting to catch a bullet or else run into a German patrol. It was a very eerie experience and a very unpleasant one, owing to the number of dead bodies lying in the tall grass. I was not at all sorry when it was time for us to return as the rifle firing, the darkness, and the risk of stopping something was somewhat trying to the nerves. The weather while we were in the front line was extremely wet, and this, with the hard work and lack of rest, made us feel a bit depressed at times.

After our spell in the front line, the battalion shifted back to the support and from there to the reserve line, and our experiences were pretty much the same in these as before. We had several casualties from snipers and stray bullets, but not a large number by shelling. No one was sorry when we left to go back to billets for the "month's" rest. We went to a clean little town and there forgot, as far as possible, our recent troubles. After the morning parade, football was the order of the day, and in the evening there were enjoyable little concerts in the theatre. It may interest you to know that our billet was an old barn with a very leaky roof which was rather uncomfortable in wet weather. I will not bore you by relating how I went to hospital and finally came back to old "Blighty," but I hope I have given you some little idea of what trench life is like in the water-sodden, mud-covered wastes of Flanders.