

Selections from Pvt. Donald Fraser's Journal¹

Private Donald Fraser was a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, which sent more than 250 battalions to serve on the Western Front during World War I. These excerpts from his journal are from 1915-1916.

September 1915

We made our first trip to the firing line with rations, etc. for the 28th Battalion. The night is dark, wet and boisterous and we feel cold and shivery all over. Nevertheless we leave the school, pass the chateau and halt beside H'Quarters, formerly the residence of the Belgian doctor. The house is in fairly good repair, only several panes of glass being broken and a few chips taken out of the building, whilst the garden possesses a souvenir or two in the shape of shell-holes. We line up for our loads, my particular one being sandbags. Being a bit green and confident of my powers I tell the fellow who is loading to chuck some more on my shoulder. Frisk, a Swede, who was behind me, not to be outdone accepted a bigger pile. We had not gone very far when we were sorry we had spoken. We had to go about three hundred yards across the open before we struck the communication trench which rejoiced in the Latin appellation of "Via Gellia." The path was muddy and slippery which added to our trials. At the entrance to the trench a fellow ahead of me slipped and fell into a ditch. The air was blue with rich language for the next few moments.

The trench led through a hedge then zigzagged for a few hundred yards. By this time it began to deepen and stray bullets were hitting earth

especially near an old haystack close by. A little further on the trench was six to seven feet deep so we were fairly safe from rifle fire.

Our loads were becoming troublesome falling off our shoulders and the Ross rifle inclining outwards, the muzzle now and then would catch on the side of the trench clogging up with mud. We had to rest frequently but not for long. Dead Cow Corner was passed and at Beaver Hat we entered the skeleton remains of a belt of wood.

Bullets were cracking in the trees. Strong Point 11 was soon passed. From here the trench began to wind up the base of the Wytshaete Ridge. On our right the support line branched off. A hundred and fifty yards further on we file into a trench without trench mats near a couple of crosses denoting the graves of former occupants. We are now only a few hundred yards away from the enemy so we move quietly up to the appointed dump in the front line. There is a perfect hiss of bullets overhead and a peculiar hum from those that ricochet. Our own men are firing in return and every bay gives forth a crack, crack. It is the custom as soon as darkness sets in for both sides to keep up a more or less continuous fire at each other's trenches, to keep one another from attacking and also, to keep patrols from No Man's Land. It also shows that one is awake and there is not the same chance of being taken by surprise. The tendency when firing in the dark is to fire high with the result that the majority of the bullets go fringing over the trenches, maybe to find a victim two thousand yards behind; many men get killed in this fashion. It shows, therefore, how risky it is moving around in the open within rifle range...

¹ From Reginald H. Roy, ed., *The Journal of Private Fraser, 1914-1918*, Canadian Expeditionary Force (Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1985). From the Internet Modern History Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1918fraser.html>

Tonight we had our introduction to dug-out life. The dug-outs were small, damp and cold and overrun with rats. It is needless to add once a fighting soldier leaves England he practically sleeps in his clothes till he gets back there again. Taking off our boots, there were three of us in the dug-out, we lay down between our waterproof sheet and overcoat and snatched as many winks as we could. There is a change of sentry every two hours, so the chances are you get wakened up between the shifts, either by your mate getting up or coming in or being wakened by mistake for guard. To interrupt your prospective slumbers, sometimes, the order to “stand to” for the night comes along which means you have to hold yourself in readiness for eventualities, in other words, you have to be wide awake with equipment on, etc. An order to “stand to” is equivalent to expecting an attack. Many a time we wished those attacks would materialize so that we could get a half decent sleep afterwards. At sunrise and sunset there is a “stand to” every day, these being the times the enemy is liable to come over. When the order is given everyone is supposed to get out of his dug-out; get his equipment on and have his rifle handy. “Stand down” is usually passed along half an hour to an hour afterwards, when the day shifts start. In the daytime two or three guards are considered sufficient to keep watch.

We notice our rations are increased but there is no variety—tea, bread, hard biscuits, butter, jam, bacon, bully-beef,² maconochie,³ fresh meat, cheese, rice, dried vegetables. These are the supplies but they are not of daily occurrence. It may be tinned food one day and fresh meat the next and so on. It is general knowledge that rations are increased when we go

into the line. The rum we heard so much about came up tonight. We are given a tot—a few teaspoonsful either at night or early morning. It is much appreciated as it helps the circulation which gets very slow these cold nights for want of movement...

The way our old soldiers, physical drill instructors, bayonet fighting instructors disappeared under the stress of battle to realms of easier work was a great disappointment to us. To instance a few cases. When the 31st became a battalion, the Regt. Sgt.-Maj. was a man named B__. He was one of the mainstays of the 103rd Calgary Rifles and naturally interested in military work. He was very insistent that we smarten up and be soldiers. His part of soldiering, however, was spent in England. He took good care to stay on the safe side of the Channel. As Sgt.-Maj. of our company—a hero of a hundred fights you would fancy him to be if you listened to his conversation—he wore four ribbons for service in Africa, Egypt and the Sudan and was a faddist on bayonet fighting. In England, he used to tap his side gently and remark that this, alluding to his revolver, was for N.C.O.s who refused to go over the top. I only saw this fire-eater pay a visit to the trenches once. I gave him the periscope to look through. He was very uneasy and had a half-hearted glance through it, slinking back to H'Qrs. a few minutes afterwards. This seasoned warrior obtained a commission and in addition managed to get back to Canada. I noticed his picture very nearly the central figure in a group of War Veterans, taken before their quarters on 9th Ave., Calgary.

² tinned corned beef.

³ meat and vegetable stew in a tin; named after the manufacturer.

During the day, if we are not on day duty, we are almost certain to be building dug-outs or fixing up the trenches, so our stretches of sleep even in the best and quietest of times is of short duration. If the line is quiet and the command does not anticipate trouble, two sentries can doze in their dug-out. The man on guard stands on the firing step and peers over the bags for any movement in No Man's Land at the same time listening intently for any sounds.

The ears are more dependable when it is dark than the eyes. The touching of the wire, the stumbling against old tins, or the swishing noise of the grasses moving are apt to give a raider or patrol away. Unless on the skyline, it is difficult picking up anyone moving till they are almost on you. If you are suspicious, the usual thing is to get someone to fire a flare over the particular spot.

A good sentry does not move much but keeps to a certain spot remaining mute for a considerable time and shows very little of his head. He is better able to detect and, what is of as much importance, he is less liable to be seen than a man who is moving around the bay. The majority of fellows, however, do not worry. They pass most of their time sitting on the firing step smoking the pipe of peace, with an occasional glance over the parapet. As a rule one can size up affairs pretty good. If Fritz is sending up star shells pretty frequently you can depend upon it his patrols or raiders are not out. If his riflemen are pinging bullets in our direction and they are low, you can rest easy in the belief that his men are behind his parapet. It is when his lights are not going up often or his shooting is nil or high, you should be suspicious and on the alert. It is then he is either up to mischief, making a relief or has fatigue parties out in front fixing up his wire.

A dull pop from the opponent's lines and one immediately scans the horizon for a trench mortar. In ordinary times such noises would escape one's attention. The German little fish tail bomb starts its course through the air with a swish, swish and makes a peculiar noise like wa-wa. Excepting high velocity shells, one has a fair indication of direction when he hears the report of the gun. Rifle grenades, when fired during shelling, are difficult to detect. I often wonder that when trench mortar companies intend throwing over their shells, they do not get the artillery to kick up a noise so as their opponents will have to rely solely on their sight to pick up what is going to happen.

At this stage it may be well to mention what the ordinary infantryman in the firing line has to go through and what his nerves have to stand. Old No Man's Land had an average width of 150 to 250 yds.; in many parts of the line it would come as close as 35 to 75 yds. As a rule, the narrower No Man's Land, the weaker the wire. The distance between is so little that fixing up wire is impossible. Ready-made wiring obstacles have to be thrown over and, of course, they cannot be expected to be very effective. In fact, later on, Fritz had the audacity to fix on one of our wiring obstacles and pulled it on to his own side. Anyway, besides being liable to be shelled at any moment, the man in the firing line is liable to have bombs, grenades and trench mortar bombs thrown at him. Machine-guns may open up and rip the sand bags at pleasure. Clamped rifles go off every now and then, trained at likely spots the infantryman has to pass. Any moment a swarm of Huns may rush him. He is liable to be blown up by a mine

tunnelled underneath the trench. On dark nights the enemy could crawl into his trench without being seen. It is the same when it is foggy.

He exists under these conditions, wet or dry, often in mud and slush over the knees and almost frozen with the cold. Sometimes he sleeps on the firing step or in the bottom of the trench with practically no covering or protection. When he gets wet, his clothes have to dry on him—at times he is worked off his feet digging, draining, making dug-outs, carrying timber, corrugated iron, etc. and has to run the gauntlet of being sniped on many occasions. Knowing that any moment he may be hurled into oblivion, his nerves are keyed to a certain pitch and his existence is one of suspense. No wonder the average man's stay in the trenches is a few months.

Unfortunately these men who brave such dangers daily, hourly, have nothing to show for it. A Canadian in England gets service stripes the same as he does, not so the British Tommy. A Brigade runner, who once in a while reaches the line, stands a better chance of a decoration. Hangers-on who are seldom within the fighting area and who sleep comfortably and soundly at night and can do their own cooking, get all the medals or clasps they are entitled to. It is high time some distinction was made between the actual fighting man and his numerous knockers in khaki who take practically no risk at all.

We have been out all day fixing up the communication trench which has collapsed owing to the recent rains. From now on "Via Gellia" keeps us busy when out on rest. The weather had changed completely, raining almost daily and the ground is in a sodden condition. For want of sunshine and wind, it is impossible for the ground to dry up and after a while we

learn that it is useless trying to keep the trenches passable. The rain loosens the earth and the sides cave in.

With additional rain the bottom of the trenches become liquid mud which defies all efforts at drainage. We shovel, shovel and keep on shovelling but it is of no avail, the trench absolutely refuses to clean up. It is a hard proposition, the mud sticks to the shovel and after vigorous efforts to dislodge it, it only comes off to fall into the trench again. In time the bank becomes so high that we cannot fling the mud up so we have to get up on top and in a crouching attitude shove the mud further back, terracing it so as to ease the ground pressure and keep it from sliding down. In wet weather it is stupendous work and is about as hopeless as shovelling water. When a little progress is made posts are driven into the trench and are strengthened by being connected by wire with smaller posts on the parados. The sides are now revetted with corrugated iron which is placed behind the posts being kept in position by them and thus keep the sides from caving in. The pressure of earth, however, is often so great that it bulges the corrugated iron or snaps the posts. One can imagine, therefore, the enormous amount of revetting that is required and the immensity of work in connection with it.

The bottom of the trench has to have the trench boards raised above the water or mud so that one can move up and down quickly. These boards are roughly 1 to 2 feet wide and from 5 to 8 feet long. They consist of a couple of deals with strips of wood laid crossways. These trench or duck boards are laid on a couple of supporting trestles.

Through usage or faulty positioning, many fellows, in the dark, become croppers by stepping on the edge when the board tips or slips

and down they go. Often some of the strips are missing or broken and down goes the unfortunate soldier. In some cases the trenches are wide and at night it takes some juggling keeping on the boards. Step to the side and down in the mud you go. On a dark night it is quite a problem manoeuvring along these boards. Without them it would be almost impossible to reach the front line.

Later on, we spend about a couple of days trying to drain "Via Gellia" a few yards from the firing line. There was quite a slope and we thought the mud would run if we could only get it started. We had rubber boots on and were up to our thighs in the stuff. It was too soft to shovel out and yet the darned thing was not watery enough to flow. This part of the trench we gave up as hopeless. It was only in March, when the ground began to dry, that the trench became passable. What we failed to achieve Dame Nature did.

For four months we were continuously wrestling with trenches and dug-outs, shovelling, draining, ditching, digging, revetting, filling sandbags, carrying timber, corrugated iron, etc. When in reserve almost every night, as soon as darkness set in, we had to hike to the Engineer's dump at Kemmel and carry stuff up the line. We were usually too early at the dump and lay around in the mud and rain for half an hour to an hour waiting for the arrival of the Engineer. Orders called for our presence at a certain time and orders had to be obeyed. Meanwhile we would hang around, too often soaked to the skin and our clothes and equipment as heavy as lead, waiting at the side of the road for word to load up and move on.

These working parties were a regular nightmare. Often when we were figuring on a fine rest, word would come along telling us to get ready for

fatigue immediately. Wearily and with many complaints we would get up, get our goat skins on, equipment, rifle, and lastly our raincoat. If it drizzled the raincoat was admirable, but if it rained it soaked up the wet like blotting paper and sent a perfect stream of water down our thighs and legs. With a view to improving matters many fellows cut several inches off the coat but it did not help. Others substituted the waterproof sheet for it. Anyway, night after night in mud and rain saw us squatting around Kemmel, shivering to the bone, waiting to set out with our loads for the line...

At the break of day, Gen. Turner, the commander of the 2nd Division, came down the line from the 27th direction and stopped to question Sgt. Boyd regarding the units on his flanks. He also enquired if the boys had their rations and rum. He was up looking over the line with a view to consolidating the position. Whatever plans he had formulated were never properly executed for Fritz shortly afterwards started shelling; the fire intensifying later and developing as the time went on, so that no opportunity was given for trench work. At 9:30 a.m. prompt the hostile artillery began to speak and by noon it was raging in all its fury. Shrapnel came pouring over the lines in a ceaseless whine, interrupted only by the crumps of 4.3s and 5.9s [shells]. From every direction this fire storm was turned upon us.

Every gun within range seemed to have cut loose and the very gates of hell let open. Overhead bursts, then deadly sprays of shrapnel, were showered into our midst. Heavy shells rocked the earthworks and buried their occupants. The artillery concentration was tremendous and

the range was painfully accurate. Imperials⁴, who had been at Loos and previous battles, never experienced such a concentrated fire on so small a frontage. There seemed to be a nest of batteries on the northern flank. Men were digging in feverishly to escape this blast of iron, but to no avail. The bombers were the first to suffer and before long half of them were casualties. Crater 7 quickly became untenable and the survivors stole along to Crater 6 for protection, but it was only going from the frying pan to the fire.

Sgt. Wilson of the bombers, one of our Company, was struck down early in the day. He lay there till darkness set in before he could be got at and removed. His injuries were fearful yet no one could succour him, his arm being almost blown off and bodily wounds besides. He was ultimately removed but succumbed later. The Cpl. of the bombers, George, who had found a German rifle and had taken it to the supports for safe-keeping intending to take it out as a souvenir, was returning to his post when a shell burst almost upon him, mortally wounding him and injuring an officer, who fled out to the dressing station. George, when dying, requested the boys to tell his parents "that he had died like a soldier." He left a widow and a child he had never seen. The second sergeant, with three or four bombers, was sent up to reinforce his badly stricken comrades, bursting into the crater in the face of heavy fire. But they could not stick it, they soon began to fall. Before being relieved the enemy had taken its toll. Tom Smith going to the assistance of a wounded man was sniped at receiving an explosive bullet in the arm and shattering it completely, returning to

⁴ This seems to refer to a soldier from the British Commonwealth (e.g. Australia, Singapore, etc.) who were under British command during World War I (like Fraser, who was from Canada).

Calgary several months later, an amputation case. Blackie Sayce had his arm almost torn off and is disabled for life. Hannan was also wounded and both bombing officers were casualties. L/Cpl. Dalziel, 6 ft. 2 ins. of humanity, finally came out of the shambles, leading the remaining bombers with an enhanced reputation. For his gallant work he was awarded the D.C.M.,⁵ but never knew of the honour, for the day it appeared in orders, he was killed in the Canadian Battle Of Ypres. Meanwhile the company was gradually being wiped out as shell after shell burst burying and unburying dead and living. The fire was so murderous that it was impossible to live under it. It was a miracle that anyone emerged alive.

One saddening case was a stretcher bearer near half a dozen dead Tommies, a little to the right of the trench leading to Crater 7. He was sitting with a bandage between his hands in the very act of bandaging his leg, when his life gave out, and his head fell back, his mouth open, and his eyes gazing up to heaven, as if in piteous appeal. There he sat in a natural posture as if in life, the bandage in his hands, and the Red Cross bag by his side. Lovett was his name, and he belonged to the King's Liverpool. Another strange, appalling spectacle was a couple of Tommies sitting on the firing step; the head of one had fallen forward on his chest, and between his fingers he still held a cigarette. There he was as if asleep, yes, but in a sleep that knows no awakening. His comrade beside him was in a sitting position but inclining sideways. Both were unmarked and must have met their doom by concussion.

⁵ Distinguished Conduct Medal, awarded by the British Army.

In the support line an Imperial with a Balaclava cap on was lying on a stretcher, dead. Eight bodies of British soldiers were collected in the crater for burial, when a shell came over and burst amongst them, plastering Webber and Doull with gangrened flesh. At daybreak one of the bombers was shocked to find himself standing between a dead German and an English officer, whilst close by was a German private and English Tommy. What trench mats there were seemed to rest on bodies. One could not dig anywhere without coming across a human corpse. Huddled together amongst the dead our men passed their lonely vigil in the early hours of April 4th. "Amidst life is death" was indelibly printed on the minds of everyone present on that fateful morning.

It rained practically all the time we were there, making movement almost impossible. The artillery concentration was too much for us and what attacks were engineered on our side were on a ridiculously small scale. There was not much display of generalship. Affairs ran themselves. Our men hung on till they were completely wiped out by shell fire. Unfortunately, though the opposing artillery held us, ours could not restrain them from attacking. Those who were in the center of the conflict quickly realized that the positions were impossible, that they were untenable, and casualties would have been saved by withdrawing, but the command only realized this several days later when the whole line was lost, and then they ceased aggressive action. St. Eloi taught us a lesson, a lesson the ordinary soldier through bitter experience quickly learned; namely, that it spells disaster to attack over a small frontage, for it allows the enemy artillery to concentrate its fire. The Canadian command, however, failed to grasp this

significance and the same errors were repeated at Fresnoy and Lens. Objectives at those places were taken but we had to retire shortly afterwards, after suffering heavy losses. As usual the command to bolster up their cause would give out the usual announcement that we inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy, when all the time the engagements were rank failures.

About 2:00 p.m. of the 19th the enemy started shelling, principally with light stuff. After a pause he reopened with heavies creating a number of casualties. Later on a bombardment of terrific intensity commenced and heavy casualties were created, many of the wounded were killed, and shelters smashed in. The gunfire switched to Crater 7 and shortly afterwards rifle fire opened up from the opposing craters and when it died down fifty to sixty Germans started across. It was raining and our men were glued in the mud. The survivors were in no condition to offer fight being dazed and shell shocked. The rifles were clogged and useless, only two or three being capable of firing. These commenced but the feeble fire soon died away. By this time the enemy were into Crater 7 and our men had their hands up surrendering. The order was given to those in Crater 6 to retire if they wished but only five did so, the rest being disinclined to take the risk. Out of this number, two were wounded. Along with a wounded officer they regained their lines, but only one man got back untouched. Thus ended the closing tragedy of the craters whose garrison of ninety men were practically all killed or taken prisoners. The Germans did not occupy the ground but left it to the dead.

For the last few days, shelling was more constant than usual but no prominence was given to this for the Ypres salient is at all times stormy and every battalion that takes up its abode in this stricken field usually returns to a more peaceful front very much attenuated in numbers. In these days it was a byword amongst the men that one was not a soldier unless he had served on the Ypres front. Since the fall of 1914 till armistice was declared this countryside has been bathed in blood. Here have fallen thousands of our best manhood.

Many a soldier grievously wounded has staggered back plastered with mud and blood from head to foot and dazed almost beyond reckoning. The traffic in human flesh in this region is scandalous. Thousands pass up to the line, returning shortly afterwards completely shattered. It will always be a debatable point—was the salient worth holding? The Germans themselves had a dread of this front. The mention of Ypres conveyed a sort of horror to them. It had always sinister forebodings of death...

About 6:00 a.m. of June 2, General Mercer, the 3rd Divisional General and Brigadier Williams of the 8th Brigade, with a few of their staff set out for battalion headquarters, which they reached about 8:00 o'clock. A few minutes later they started for the line and on the way up the comparative stillness of the morning was broken by a crash from the enemy's guns as a torrent of metal came streaming down on our trenches. The success at St. Eloi had taught the Hun the advantages of intensive fire and he prepared himself accordingly. His plans were laid; our trenches had been registered upon with an artillery accumulation and he simply sailed into us and we

soon floundered amidst the wreckage of obliterated trenches, smashed dugouts and torn sandbags. Our men simply melted away under this tornado. In less than no time the ground was strewn with the remains of the mangled and the dying. The survivors, few in number, tried to creep away. It was in this inferno that the Generals were caught. Enveloped in shell fire, the Brigadier was wounded and when the enemy came over, captured. General Mercer tried to win his way back, but he never got further than Armagh Wood for there his body was found several days later with three wounds in it. He was buried at Poperinghe, a village where, in the old cemetery on the western side of the Reninghelst-Poperinghe Road, lie the mortal remains of Colonels Hart-Machary and Boyle of the 7th and 10th Battalions respectively, killed more than a year previously in the Second Battle of Ypres.

The fire continued for about four hours and when resistance was considered broken the Germans emerged from their trenches in the southwest carrying packs and overcoat, and advanced in several waves. After pulverizing our front line the artillery lifted and barraged the supports and approaches, creating heavy casualties in the communications lines. Our supports held but if the enemy had never made the common error of easing up when the road was clear and the line confused, they could have advanced much further. As it was they threw away their opportunity and gave us time to rush up reserves. It is said some of their patrol penetrated as far as Zillebeke, but were beaten back in skirmishes, paying the penalty in full for their rashness. Though the attack started on the right it gradually worked its way north

and soon the 7th Brigade were in desperate straits. Both C.M.R.⁶ battalions had been snowed under and in consequence resistance was weak. The 4th C.M.R.s had 640 casualties and the 1st fared little better, their trenches being completely flattened and casualty roll 367. The Princess Pats⁷ now came in for a gruelling. They resisted valiantly, fighting rearguard bombing actions. Being surrounded, the remnants had to retire to the supports early next morning.

During the retirement two eighteen pounders, sacrifice guns, were lost in Sanctuary Wood. Sacrifice guns are placed in advanced positions to be utilized in case of emergency either for attack or defence. Consequently they are silent, till the moment arrives for special action. It is essential that they refrain from shooting if they wish to escape detection. Being so close up, an imprudent shot would be at once observed and woe to the unfortunate gunners. These guns opened up when the attack started and kept on firing till the enemy appeared over Observatory Ridge. Practically all the gunners were killed. The attack still continued northward but came to a halt opposite the R.C.R.s.⁸ Instead of pushing against a weak line, the enemy made the fatal error of digging in in Armagh and Sanctuary Woods. The Engineers who followed up the infantry quickly had suitable trenches dug.

A counter-attack was planned but it had to be postponed several times because certain units did not reach their jumping off positions. When it was ultimately launched, there was no co-ordinated effort and it failed,

⁶ Canadian Mounted Rifles, who fought as infantry.

⁷ Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, formed largely from former British soldiers living in Canada; http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/cef_battalions.htm

⁸ Royal Canadian Regiment, the only "regular" Canadian Army unit at the beginning of the war. http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/cef_battalions.htm

nevertheless a few patrols were brushed away and we established ourselves nearer the German line.

The members of the battalions participating belonged to the 7th, 10th, 15th, 14th, 52nd, 60th and 49th. The casualties were heavy, the 14th losing nearly 390 men. The attack should never have been delivered. The artillery preparation was poor; the exact positions of the enemy uncertain—and the time was daylight. In addition there was no cohesion or definite understanding. Our men were met by a withering fire and did the best they could in digging in. The 52nd and 60th were badly cut up in the communication trench having been caught in barrages. The 49th had also a disastrous time getting in. It is estimated over eight thousand took part in the assault. The troops were the Wurttemberg, under the command of the Duke of Wurttemberg and the furthest point they reached was seven hundred yards in the direction of Zillebeke. They captured besides General Williams, Colonel Usher, thirteen officers, 518 non-commissioned officers and men, 168 of whom were wounded. The enemy was now in possession of the Ridge and our left Rank was in the air. Up to this period our losses were about 80 officers and 2,000 men...

Word has just eked out that we are in for our third engagement: first, St. Eloi; second, Third Battle of Ypres; and now the Somme, this time not as defenders, but as aggressors primed up for the event. The announcement that at 6:20 tomorrow morning we would make a charge, co-operating with the British and French created quite a stir. Some looked upon the matter in a serious light, others were indifferent while

the remainder treated the whole affair in a humorous vein. A few discussed the mode of attack, chances of success, but the knowing felt and knew that the result depended upon the artillery. Exaggerated tales had reached us that the attacks on the Somme were a series of walkovers and there was nothing for us to do but gather in the spoils. I believe most of us hearing such stories, treated the defences with, if not contempt, at least with levity...

As zero hour approached I glanced around looking for signs to charge. The signal came like a bolt from the blue. Right on the second the barrage opened with a roar that seemed to split the heavens. Looking along the right, about forty yards away, I caught the first glimpse of a khaki-clad figure climbing over the parapet. It was the start of the first wave, the 27th Battalion. More Winnipeg men followed. Then glancing back over the parapet I saw Sgt. Teddy Torrens rise up from a shell hole and wave his platoon forward. So quick, however, were the men of the 31st on the heels of the 27th that when I turned my head, those of my platoon beside Sgt. Hunter were actually up and over the parapet with a good five to ten yards start ahead of me. In a hurry to overtake them and carry the line as even as possible, I was up and over in a trice, running into shell holes, down and up for about twenty yards, until I found that if I continued this procedure and rate, loaded up as I was, I would be exhausted before I could get to grips with Fritz.

It was at this juncture that instinct told me to avoid the shell holes and move along the edges. I raised my head for the first time and looked at the Hun trench, and to my astonishment, saw Heinie after Heinie ranging along the line, up on the firing step, blazing wildly into us, to all appearances

unmolested. Seriousness and grim determination took possession of me as I stared hard and menacing at those death-dealing rifles. Strange to say they all seemed to be pointing at me, an illusion but nevertheless that is how it appeared. My eyes were for a moment glued a little ahead to the right on Sgt. Hunter, who was leading with little Lt. Newlands beside him. He appeared a picture heroic in the extreme; his rush had dwindled to practically a walk, and he strode forward with body erect, rifle in the forefront, a target for innumerable shots. As I was fast levelling up on the left, it seemed a thousand miracles that he was not laid low.

My wits sharpened when it burnt deeply into me that death was in the offing. At this stage an ever changing panorama of events passed quickly before my gaze, and my mind was vividly impressed. The air was seething with shells. Immediately above, the atmosphere was cracking with a myriad of machine-gun bullets, startling and disconcerting in the extreme. Bullets from the enemy rifles were whistling and swishing around my ears in hundreds, that to this day I cannot understand how anyone could have crossed that inferno alive. As I pressed forward with eyes strained, to the extent of being half-closed, I expected and almost felt being shot in the stomach. All around our men were falling, their rifles loosening from their grasp. The wounded, writhing in their agonies, struggled and toppled into shell holes for safety from rifle and machine-gun fire, though in my path the latter must have been negligible, for a slow or even quick traverse would have brought us down before we reached many yards into No Man's Land. Rifle fire, however, was taking its toll, and on my front

and flanks, soldier after soldier was tumbling to disablement or death, and I expected my turn every moment. The transition from life to death was terribly swift.

Halfway across the first wave seemed to melt and we were in front, heading for Fritz, who was firing wildly and frantically, and scared beyond measure as we bore down upon him. Their faces seemed peculiarly foreign to me. Their trench was full and firing strong and as the remnants of us were nearing bombing reach, we almost, as one man, dropped into shell holes, a move wisely done and swiftly executed. Further progress and it is more than likely that we would have stepped into a volley of grenades. At this time, I had the shell hole to myself and took cover behind the left front edge, which was higher than any other part of the lip, and I could see without being seen from the immediate front, the flanks to the Hun line and the left rear right back to our trench. I was hardly down, when a man around the forty mark, medium-sized, well built, with a heavy sandy moustache, of Scandinavian appearance, came up on my left and stopped not a yard away. He seemed to be non-plussed as if wondering what came over those who were ahead of him a moment ago, as it suddenly dawned upon him that he was the nearest moving soldier to Fritz. I will never forget the look of bewilderment which came over his face, but it quickly changed to puzzled thought, as if wondering what to do next, when a rifle bullet caused him to shudder as if he had received an electric shock. In a flash another must have tore into his vitals for he winced with the shock, then his eyes opened wide and a terrified look of despair and helplessness crept over his features, his eyes rolled, and with a heart-rending shriek as

he realized his end had come, he fell forward flat on his face, stone dead, almost on top of me.

It all happened in a twinkling, his death practically instantaneous, but that fatal moment, the wincing, the hopeless, piteous look, were indelibly printed on my mind forever. Glancing back I saw waves of men coming on, right away back to the parapet, but they were collapsing right and left and not a single one got as far forward as the remnants our own Company. I saw one poor fellow stretched out, apparently dead, with a bullet wound in the head beside the ear, with a face waxen white, and a line of blood tracing down his cheek and neck. The moment after dropping into shell holes we started sniping. The target was so easy it was impossible to miss. The Huns, not many yards ahead, were up on the firing step, blazing in panic at the advancing men behind us, seemingly with only one thought, namely to stop those moving, and in their fright and fear, forgot our little band lying close at hand. Heiny after Heiny fell back in a heap as we closed upon the triggers.

On my left at the edge of the shell hole, a few inches from my shoulder a little ground flew up, and at once I saw I was observed and that a Fritz had just missed me. Pulling in my rifle I lay quiet. Looking back not a man was moving, the attack had stopped. By this time, Cross and Judge, formerly of the 56th Battalion, had jumped into the shell hole one after the other. Fritz finding no movement across No Man's Land, turned his attention to those nearest his line. Cpl. Recknell, who was in a shell hole about ten yards away on my right and very slightly ahead, got up on his knees and stretching his head,

curious to see what was happening ahead, got slung in a second by a rifle bullet, quivered, doubled up and dropped forward, killed instantaneously. He appeared to have been struck in the body. Bobby Bisset, a stocky little Scotsman, who was lying in the same shell hole, crawled up on Recknell, caught him by the shoulders, as if to speak and shake him, and immediately his head fell and he practically lay dead on the top of Charlie. The next instant, adjoining Recknell, still further to the right, another soldier was killed as he peered over the shell hole. It looked like Thiebot. Nearer still and on my right was Grewzelier. He was sniping steadily. I saw him get shot also. Just when he was on the point of firing, a bullet got him and he rolled completely round on his back, stone dead. They were killed within a few moments of each other and I think by the same Hun.

At this time a strange incident happened; a German, without arms and equipment, climbed over the parapet on my right and ran into No Man's Land, shrieking and waving his arms, apparently stark, staring mad. He ran about twenty-five yards, wheeled round in a circle several times, the circles narrowing each time, then flopped dead. It was a weird and uncanny spectacle and I was held spellbound, watching his cantrips. I do not think any of our men shot him when he was in the open. He seemed to be in his death throes when he clambered over the parapet and reeled into No Man's Land. Thrilling sights passed before my eyes, during what must have been seconds though they could easily have been construed into hours, so great was the tension, and so miraculous was it that I and a few others in this vicinity escaped destruction. Lt. Newlands rose up a little from me and gallantly endeavoured to signal us forward by a sweep of his hand, but the time was inopportune and no one moved. He himself was hardly up, when

he was wounded and fell back into the shell hole. In the adjoining shell hole, almost touching ours, Lt. Foster got up almost simultaneously with Newlands and promptly collapsed back again, having been hit in the upper arm or shoulder. Freudemacher jumped in beside him to render first aid. It seemed that Foster was painfully hit, for I could see for a minute or two, an arm waving back and forward above the shell hole, as if he was in pain.

As the attack subsided and not a soul moved in No Man's Land save the wounded twisting and moaning in their agony, it dawned upon me that the assault was a failure and now we were at the mercy of the enemy. It was suicide to venture back and our only hope lay in waiting until darkness set in and then trying to win our way back. During this period of waiting, I expected we would be deluged by bombs, shrapnel and shell fire, and when darkness set in, ravaged by machine-gun fire, altogether a hopeless outlook, especially for our lot, who were lying up against his trench. The situation seemed critical and the chances of withdrawal to safety nigh impossible. So many things had happened, so many lives were snuffed out since I left the comparative safety of our front line, that I lost completely all idea of time. Lying low in the shell hole contemplating events with now and then a side glance at my sandy-moustached comrade, lying dead beside me, his mess tin shining and scintillating on his back, a strange and curious sight appeared.

Away to my left rear, a huge gray object reared itself into view, and slowly, very slowly, it crawled along like a gigantic toad, feeling its way across the shell-stricken field. It was a tank, the "Creme de Menthe," the latest invention of destruction and the first of its kind to

be employed in the Great War. I watched it coming towards our direction. How painfully slow it travelled. Down and up the shell holes it clambered, a weird, ungainly monster, moving relentlessly forward. Suddenly men from the ground looked up, rose as if from the dead, and running from the flanks to behind it, followed in the rear as if to be in on the kill. The last I saw of it, it was wending its way to the Sugar Refinery. It crossed Fritz's trenches, a few yards from me, with hardly a jolt.

When first observed it gave new life and vigour to our men. Seeing away behind men getting up, and no one falling, I looked up and there met the gaze of some of my comrades in the shell holes.

Instinctively I jumped up and quickly, though warily, ran to where I could see into Fritz's trench, with bayonet pointing and finger on the trigger. Running my eyes up and down his trench, ready to shoot if I saw any signs of hostility, and equally on the alert to jump out of view if I saw a rifle pointing at me, it was a tense and exciting moment but I felt marvellously fit and wits extremely acute, for any encounter. I expected opposition and was ready for danger, but a swift glance, and to my amazement, not a German was staring at me, far less being defiant. Down the trench about a hundred yards, several Huns, minus rifles and equipment, got out of their trench and were beating it back over the open, terrified at the approach of the tank. Only a moment sufficed to show that it was safer in the German trench than being up in the open, where one may be sniped, so with a leap I jumped into the trench, almost transfixing myself with my bayonet in the effort.

When I jumped into the trench, the sight I beheld, for sheer bloodiness and murder, baffles description. Apparently our artillery had sent over a

last minute shrapnel barrage, for the Huns were terribly mangled about the head and shoulders which coupled with our sniping, completely wiped out every Heiny in the bays in front of us. Everyone of them was either dead or dying and the trench literally was running blood. As each bay contained three to five men, it required no imagination to picture the carnage. In the middle of a bay, a Heiny with a dark, stiff moustache, completely doubled up, was suspended, stuck between the parapet and parados. It seemed a peculiar and strange sight to see this Hun, head and knees almost touching, blocking the trench. A few feet north, at a corner, another Hun lay in the bottom of the trench, his head and face terribly lacerated, feebly groaning to death. Every soldier practically stepped on his face when passing south along the trench. Lying around a bend he was trod on before one was aware of his presence. Several times I ran over him. He appeared to be unconscious and was gasping his last breaths.

A German with ruddy face, clean shaven and intelligent looking, was lying on his back on the firing step, minus equipment, as if he had been placed there. At first I wondered what happened to him for he appeared unmarked. His feet, however, were torn to shreds. He had a pleasant countenance and looked as if he was smiling in death. It was from that I took the Iron Cross ribbon. A typical Hun, big, fat with a double chin, was sitting on the parapet in the south corner of the bay, his stomach so protruding over his thighs that very little of the latter could be seen, stone dead, and not a mark to be seen. There was no shell hole near him, so I conjecture he must have died of fright and not concussion. In the other corner of the bay, reclining back against the

parapet, lay a young German, a bullet wound in the head, his face ashen white and with a look as if he sickened to death. How deadly the sprays of metal had done their work, how effective our sniping had been, was plainly discernible.

In every bay lay dead and dying Germans, lying in grotesque shapes, and some huddled on the top of each other. Most of them had fearful wounds and the whole line resembled a shambles.