

THE "BOTS" RETREAT,  
"LOBBES", BELGIUM.  
14. 3. 19.

Dear Old Sadie,

By now I expect you have read my letter to Beryl in the last "Yanoo". I promised to write to her again this time but she's gone "stone fache" on me because of a certain paragraph in our "Scurrilous Rag". Oh well "Ce ne fait rien", I'll scratch a few lines to you instead.

In the last letter I got as far as September 24th, when we were at TINCOURT. On the 28th the Brigade set out after the 'Orrible 'Un again & we made waggon lines near ST EMILIE. We pulled in here on one of the blackest of black nights & Fritz thumped the vicinity well and truly until daybreak. Then our stunt opened and Fritz got the thumping. This was the first major operation in which the Americans & Australians had fought side by side. The Yanks made the initial hopover but being a bit inexperienced they got too far ahead without mopping up. Fritz then crawled out of his burrow & began to make trouble. About 800 Yanks were cut off, so the Aussies then "hopped the bags" & after mopping up went on & gained the objectives & succeeded in rescuing the lost Yanks. The casualties in this operation were very heavy, especially with the Americans.

Before the attack we were on the fringe of the great Hindenburg Line. You have read in the papers how the Hun was forced to give up this strong line of defence, so I won't bother repeating it here. Talk about barbed wire! The country was literally sown with it. There were five separate belts of thickly laid entanglements, each about 25 yards in width, with a "No Man's Land" of 100 yards or so between each line of wire. The shell craters, mighty big ones at that, were linked together, so numerous were they. Derelict tanks dotted the landscape, some sprawled on their backs, others with noses pointing skyward, for all the world like some kind of defunct mammoths. Mine fields had been responsible for their down fall.

Battered 5.9 & 4.2 guns were to be seen here and there and as often as not the German gun-crews alongside, the latter as full of holes as the former. The trench systems behind the wire belts bristled with machine-gun posts & strong-points; many of which were connected by underground passages. Behind and parallel with this defence zone ran the ST. QUENTIN SCHELDT CANAL. The width of the canal was approximately 25 yards, & the water level 100 feet below the ground surface. The sides of the Canal cutting rose at an angle of something like 60 Degrees, and were thickly covered in scrub. A narrow tow-path ran along the bottom of the cutting close to the water's edge. The steep banks were honeycombed with tunnels, dug-outs & concrete machine gun posts. Some of the tunnels led out under the barbed wire systems to the trenches. All the tunnels had been strongly timbered & had off-shoots which terminated in spacious chambers many feet underground. Electric light had been installed in all the tunnels.

Near the town of BELLICOURT the canal disappeared into a great tunnel, similar in size to a double-line railway tunnel. At the entrance a concrete wall 4 feet in thickness, reaching from ceiling to river-bed had been constructed, with a heavy iron door opening on to the tow-path. Another great concrete barrier was built several hundred yards away down the tunnel. The walls of brick and concrete were everywhere pierced & passages led from the entrances to workshops, engine rooms & Cookhouses. Some of the passages ascended steeply in continuous flights of steps & came out along the canal top. The exits were inconspicuously small & well concealed. In the water in the tunnel lay many huge barges & these had been converted into living and sleeping quarters, but all were scuttled by the Hun before he was driven out. An electric light plant was also installed, but at this time the place was plunged in darkness, & one wishing to see the tunnel had to do so by torch and candle-light. The air underground was foul, & the barges & dug-outs indescribably filthy. How human beings could eat, live & sleep there and still remain in a healthy condition, has one guessing. An army of soldiers could be easily accommodated in that tunnel and could be perfectly safe from all flying ironmongery ever invented. The length of the St. QUENTIN Tunnel was approximately 3 miles. It was close to this tunnel that our waggon lines were made on October 7th, and from there the Batteries went into action again.

At 5.30 a.m. on the 8th. at WIANCOURT another barrage was fired; the cavalry and armoured cars broke through, and a couple of hours later, the enemy was reported to be in full retreat. The Battery positions were bombed almost every night, and also the traffic-laden roads on the 13th the Brigade moved on via ESTREES, RAMICOURT, MONTBREHAIN, BRANCOURT, PREMONT, to BECQUIGNY. On the outskirts of the last mentioned village, waggon lines were taken up.