

The third division of which we formed a part, fresh to this game of real war, was put into the sector as an oarsman is put into a safe and roomy tub to work up his condition. And as in all preparation for supreme effort, training took the form of the performance of tasks of progressive difficulty - with this difference; that the contest, fraught with danger, was for pride of place among the finest shock troops of the world, with the victor's wreath, too often a wreath, indeed.

Before the war, Armentieres was one of the large manufacturing towns of the north, with a population of 28,000. At this time it presented one of the greatest anomalies of the Campaign. Despite the fact that the communication trenches actually began in its two suburbs - Houplines and Chappelle d'Armentieres, it was possessed of a civilian population which carried on its private affairs, bought and sold, had its births, deaths and marriages somewhat as in normal times. The majority of the people however, lived, directly or indirectly, upon the soldiery, they waxed fatter when the Australians occupied the town - "Australian tres bon," and "Australien," "Beaucoup monnaie," being synonymous terms with the French of a certain class.

On the 9th. January (1917,) Battery Commanders proceeded to Armentieres to see the positions they were to occupy. The town was approached after passing through the two small outlying suburbs of Mieppe and Pont de Mieppe, by a stone bridge over the River Lys, and a long raised causeway. Even from the causeway the place presented none of the indescribable desolation soon to be familiar; factory chimneys were, in some cases, smoking, ordinary civilian traffic mingled with the soldiery upon the roadway, and dozens of "Mademoiselles" hurried to resume their work at the nearby mills or in Divisional Baths. The only outstanding reminder of the war was the spire of the Church of Notre Dame; the upper metal portion lay prone upon the masonry beneath one of the extraordinary balancing feats often performed by the targets of high explosive. Passing along the main Houplines Road lined with shops displaying goods of all descriptions, one came to the famous "Half-past Eleven" square. Here stood the Town Hall; the hands of the clock, stopped by the concussion of a shell, pointed to the hour, eleven-thirty. Turning to the right down the Rue Sadi Carnot, one came to the "Grande Place" facing the great Church. Here the seal of the Boche was plain for all to see. Used probably as a Zero Point, (a registration point for artillery) the beautiful structure had been struck by innumerable shells, the flying steel had gashed and broken its high red walls, marred the perfect symmetry of the great gothic arches that had once held its window glass, hammered the decorative front into a mere mass of rubble and shattered masonry, torn great holes in the roof through which rafters protruded like ribs through the rotting skin of a corpse. There is, about the great Churches of France, a peculiar aloofness that forces itself upon one. Whatever a man's beliefs may be, he cannot watch unmoved, the slow reduction to dust of these mighty and beautiful monuments of a great and powerful religion. Passing behind the Church, one entered the Rue Denis Papin; here was situated the house occupied by Brigade Headquarters, a fine chateau standing in its own spacious grounds in what was formerly the fashionable residential quarter of Armentieres. The house was large, and presented to the fortunate occupants, many things, considering that we were now actually in the line bordering on luxuries.

The Brigade was to relieve the 175th. English Brigade (Army) R.F.A. on the 17th, and the intervening days were spent by the men back at Strazeele, while the officers occasionally visited Armentieres. There were a number of restaurants in Armentieres still doing business at this time, the more exclusive of course, open to "Officers only." Here they foregathered each night, smoked and gamed, broke a bottle or two, and made the hours pass in good camaraderie.

The men sojourned each night to the many estaminets, a species of establishment apparently peculiar to France. The essentials are;- The permission of the A.P.M., a sufficiently sized room, a minimum of breakable furniture and a bar, and the important materials, Bock, Vin Rouge, Vin Blanc and Mademoiselle to serve it.

It is just half past seven in the evening, let us select an estaminet, test the wares and view the place. Here is one that will do. A pretentious establishment with a glass front and the sign, let us say, "Chapeau d'Or." At first, one is deafened by a babel of voices, and partially blinded by tobacco haze. On the left is a long counter topped with artificial marble, at the rear rises a pyramid of shelves loaded with bottles of all shapes; behind the bar is a lady of about 45, very buxom, her ruddy face moist from a performance of a multitude of tasks at one and the same time. She is washing glasses, handing out bottles of beer, wine and champagne, and abusing one, Alphonse, a small youth who has let fall a loaded tray and smashed her precious glassware. Hurrying from table to table are two girls of about twenty-two, sisters evidently, and daughters of the proprietress.