

Terrace houses are split in twain, an iron bedstead hangs suspended over the flooring of the top story, a silent witness to the breaking up of a home. In all houses the same desolation and devastation can be seen. Shells had torn walls away, revealing the furniture of the homes, dust stained and rain swept, while the wearing apparel was still suspended on walls, indicating that the occupants had made a hurried exit. Street after street it was the same story, the relentless search of the shell and the inevitable and cruel, pitiless result of war.

A couple of hundred yards from the railway line we enter the grounds of a splendid chateau. It stands in 4 or 5 acres of land with massive fences, ornamental trees and an imposing entrance, drives encircle the mansion. The house has evidently been the residence of a wealthy man, large staircases, splendid large and numerous rooms, with carriage houses and gardening houses at rear. This is the first position the 25th. Battery occupied in France. At the foot of the gardens you look straight into the German lines, but to prevent possible observation, it is crossed at intervals by screens of wire netting and neutral colored cloth.

At this time the first essential of a battery position was invisibility, particularly from the air, both from balloon and aeroplane. All immediately set out to make their various gun pits harmonise with another. Immediate surroundings as one blade of grass harmonises with another.

The batteries formally moved into their positions on the 17th. January 1917. The 25th. Battery as stated, occupied Chapelle d'Armentieres, the 26th. were up a side street not far from barbed wire square, the 27th. were down the Houplines Road in a large spinning mill, with its pits concealed among the many buildings, and the 107th. Howitzer Battery occupied the gas works in the Rue d'Houplines.

By the 20th. the relief of the 175th. Brigade was complete, and the command passed to Lieut. Colonel Macartney. The Divisional Artillery now covered the front from the Lys River on the north to a little village, Wez Macquart, on the Little Road. The ordinary routine of trench warfare was immediately embarked upon, calibration of guns, registration of enemy front line and of special targets in support, subsidiary and back areas, preparation for concentration at likely points liable to strong enemy assault, temporary moves of one or two guns for special tasks, firing of S.O.S. barrages to repel hostile raiding parties, support of our own infantry in small operations of the same nature.

This meant that every day, a battery officer trapped to some observation post close to the front line, and if the day was dull or the registration required one of delicacy, he went to the front line and registered from there and observed from a bay of the trench. Often communications did not exist, and battery telephonists had to lay out and take up some hundreds of yards of wire under arduous and dangerous conditions. When one considers that this routine went on day after day with monotonous regularity in mud, sleet, snow and bitter cold, one appreciates the fact that the specialist had no cushy job.

Indeed, throughout the whole time from January to the middle of March, the gunners had a comparatively easy life, not so, however, the drivers. The wagon lines were in the neighbourhood of Jesus Farm on the Armentieres - Croix du Bac Road, quite four miles from the guns. The billets here were only partly constructed so the drivers and spare gunners as well as grooming horses, washing vehicles, cleaning harness and carting ammunition, had to convert themselves into a species of Labor Corps. They laid down horse standings, built kitchens and incinerators, forage rooms and mess huts, dug drains and made roads. At night when frost had made the roads iron, hard and slippery as glass, there was the long journey to the batteries. To sit for three, four, five hours in the pitchy dark, on the back of a pulling horse, whose feet might fly from under him at any instant, with the stiff leather of the reins bruising fingers numbed with cold, faces stung by an icy wind that hurt like the lash of a whip, boots almost frozen to the stirrup irons, toes impossible to move - such was the common task of these men, week after weary week. Then at midnight to arrive back "home", unharness the horses, and if not on "picquet", tumble into a rough bed of straw with the prospect of a morrow of feed and water and groom, groom, feed and water.

But with characteristic adaptability, the drivers made some fine homes at Jesus Farm. The wagons seldom went to the guns without the bringing back of some furniture or domestic utensils for the "home."

The wagons would pull up in front of a likely looking establishment, a couple of the drivers and the gunners would disappear through the dark gaping doorway, to return later with chairs, tables, pots, pans, cups etc.