

CHAPTER 3.

PLOEGSTEERT - MESSINES - YPRES - PASSCHENDAELE.

On the 16th. and 17th., the batteries left good "homes" in Armentieres and moved into positions further north to cover a front extending from "Pear Tree Farm" on the south to a cutting before St. Ives Post Office on the north.

This move closed for the time being, the brigade's operations in the Armentieres sector and took it into the preparatory stage of the operations against Messines Ridge.

The tract of country on which were to be constructed the gun positions was roughly in the shape of a very blunt wedge. Its base was on the Leinster Road, which runs from the town of Neuve Eglise through Le Romarin to the neighbourhood of Le Rossignol, its northern edge abutting on the ridge which runs from Neuve Eglise east, to the crest of Hill 63, at that time the most lofty ground in our possession opposite the Messines sector. Its southern boundary was a line from Oostowe Farm North East of Deleville Farm, its blunt point lay along the Messines Road from Hyde Park corner to Le Bizet. At this period, our front line ran practically parallel to the Messines Road about 2,500 yards in front. The greater part of this area was flat and lowlying, rarely exceeding an elevation of 20 metres. Divided into farms of varying sizes, it was criss-crossed in all directions by hedges and shallow ditches, with here and there, a clump of trees.

The batteries occupied the following positions in Ploegsteert:-

The 25th. Battery occupied four sunk gun pits near a laundry at Le Bizet, the balance of two guns being at the Houplines as a detached section. The 26th. Battery had four guns in a terrace on the main road to the north of Ploegsteert village, and two guns in a farm. The 27th. Battery had their whole six guns in a terrace in Ploegsteert. The 107th. Battery had four guns in Deleville Farm, and two guns at Houplines.

From the 17th. March to 2nd. April, activity was normal, nothing worthy of note occurred, save that the enemy became daily more active and aggressive in the air, perhaps already being suspicious of the concentration. On 2nd. April, the 26th. Battery was shelled with aeroplane observation, 150 rounds of 5.9 being hurled at positions. No damage was done and no casualties occurred to battery, though infantry and transport parties using the road, suffered, unfortunately, to some extent. Again on the 5th., the same battery again had 120 rounds of 5.9's let loose on them and again without loss, though the transport suffered once more. The road intersection on which these casualties occurred, from this date on, became a very dangerous locality and was known as suicide corner.

On the 6th. the 107th. Battery was shelled with aeroplane observation, and on the 9th. it was again bombarded with H.E. and gas shell. It was on this latter day that the first decoration was won by the Brigade. After engaging the battery for some 3/4 of an hour, the enemy ceased fire, a fitter sergeant and another man took advantage of the lull to visit a pit that had been damaged, and while examining the gun carriage, hostile shelling recommenced, a 5.9 burst on the pit and both men dropped unconscious from the shock and concussion.

From another position this was observed by Lt. Shelley, - Jones and Gunner C. Kirton, and although two hostile batteries were actively firing on the position at the time, these two darted out and brought back the unconscious men to safety. For this act of bravery, Lt. Shelley-Jones was mentioned in Divisional Orders, while Gunner Kirton received the Military Medal.

After these bombardments, the Howitzer Battery moved to a position near the Ploegsteert Churchyard, the guns being under camouflage. This change for the time, successfully baffled the enemy observers, and the batteries carried out ordinary routine work unmolested.

On the 14th. the brigade was relieved by the 8th. Brigade under Lt. Colonel Allsop, and on the 15th., the guns proceeded to the wagon lines and remained there one night. The 14th. March however, will be sadly remembered as it took from us one of our most popular and capable officers, Major Petterson, commanding at the time, the 107th. Battery. The Major was killed by a shell while indicating the sector to an officer of the 108th. Major Petterson was beloved by the boys for his "bigness" of heart and vision, and respected by them for his undoubted ability.

The 16th. March saw the brigade en route for the rest area via Wallow Cappel, and Longuenesse, arriving at Bournonville on the evening of the 18th. Bournonville is a small village to the west of St. Omer, about five miles from the mining town of Desvres, and some thirteen miles from Boulogne. It is situated in a large cup-like depression amid hills, known as Queque (pronounced oak) Valley, the whole area being well watered and thickly wooded.