

It was spring time and the weather was clear and fine, making the wood bordered streams sparkle and dance, the whole picture of beauty and freshness being in vivid contrast to the war scarred areas we had just left. The woods were alive with game, the inhabitants were unsophisticated, and the liquors were very varied and very cheap. Short leave to Boulogne was also granted, so that with sports and rest and training, twelve delightful days flew past all too quickly.

On the return journey, back to business again, we left Bournonville on the 1st. May and took up wagon lines near Steenwerck on the 3rd. of that month. The following day the batteries went into action in the vicinity of Houplines, Bois Grenier and Fleur Baix under the technical command of the 57th. Division (Imperial.) During the occupation of this sector, activity was slight, no casualties were incurred and no work of any note was performed. The move of the brigade from this sector back to the Ploegsteert area may be said to mark the commencement of the artillery preparation for the Messines offensive as far as this brigade was concerned. During the latter half of the month of April and the earlier weeks of May, the change in the appearance of the ground was astounding in its rapidity and extent. April saw a net work of railways of all gauges laid down with remarkable speed and efficiency.

It would be impossible (though interesting) to describe in detail the railways here constructed, but we will be content in saying that the vast network of lines, their maintenance and repair gave employment to quite a small army of men whose life in the forward area was anything but free from danger.

Meanwhile the offensive positions for use in the coming operation were being constructed by large working parties provided by the infantry under the direct supervision of officers detailed from the batteries. They were commenced on 23rd. March and completed about the middle of May. In all twenty seven, six pit battery positions were made. The pits were sunk to a depth of some two feet, with no head cover, and screened from observation by one long line of "camouflage," which however, shewed up on aeroplane photographs almost with the distinctness of a road. Beside each gun was a splinter-proof recess for ammunition, and adjacent, a splinter-proof deep-sunk shelter for the gun crews. The artillery consisted of:-

7th. A.F.A.B.	Lt.Col. H.D.K.Macartney.
8th. "	Lt.Col. T.G.Alsop D.S.O.
3rd. "	Lt.Col. T.H.L.Burgess D.S.O.
6th. (Army) Bde. A.F.A.	Lt.Col. H.L.Cohen D.S.O.
12th. " " "	Lt.Col. R.R.Rabett C.M.G.
38th. " " "	Lt.Col. E.T.F.Hood.
175th. " " "	Lt.Col. Farnival

These seven brigades were arranged with five groups, four offensive and one defensive.

Three corps were engaged in the Messines offensive, viz:- The IX & X English and the II Anzac.

In addition there were other agents of destruction, until zero day potential only, the mines beneath the enemy lines. Month on weary month of dangerous and arduous work in dark and foetid galleries had been spent in the construction of these sixteen mighty engines of war.

Such was the gigantic machine that was to wrest from the foe the powerful and dominating positions that he had so strongly defended and so ably held for two years. In all the camps in the rear areas, from Neuve Eglise to the Iys, the infantry were training, schools being established in the newest methods of attack, bayonet schools, bombing schools, schools for Lewis gunners and machine gunners, and instruction in every one of the multitudinous branches of the "trade."

Between Neuve Eglise and the road from Bailleul to Armentieres and west of the road from Neuve Eglise to De Seule corner, for a distance of two miles, was a solid mass of men, animals and vehicles, the transport lines of all the artillery brigades in the area. Daily the ant-like activity throughout the whole area increased in intensity, daily the great dumps at railheads swelled in size, more and more guns of all calibres came into positions, the aerodromes were congested with machines and every few days a new balloon seemed to come into the air. The enemy began to be very active in the air. During March and April, he was extraordinarily so, and sent his fighting and reconnoitring machines over almost every hour of the day. In March he met with little opposition, in April it was harder for him, and in May, continuous battles took place for air-mastery. Towards the latter end of May he confined himself to very narrow limits. One of the chief missions of Fritz's airmen was the destruction of our observation balloons, and daily, almost hourly, wonderful and brave efforts were made to destroy them.