

CHAPTER 4.

PLOEGSTEBERT - WARNETON - LE BIZET - ARMENTIERES -
HELLY (SOMME.)

It was a wet windy morning, sleet and mud underfoot, that the Brigade set forth from the ill-fated Ypres sector on the march back to wagon lines in the vicinity of the junction of the Neuve Eglise and Bailleul Roads. It will be remembered that these positions were previously occupied in July and August, and the "Diggers" immediately set about renewing acquaintances with the French folk who were very glad to see the boys again, for it must be conceded, that though the Brigade had more than its share of "hard cases" and "hard doers", they, at all times, earned and retained an enviable reputation in the matter of exemplary conduct.

The brigade was instructed to hold itself in reserve, and of course, we thought that it would mean quite a long spell if only as compensation for the period of rest of which we were recently "robbed." The usual routine of parades, grooming, harness, cleaning, and exercising horses, marked these few days of "spell," but in contrast to the disastrous and laborious weeks at Passchendaele and Ypres it was nearly akin to Paradise.

Looking back now, it is hard to realise how human beings could live through the strenuous hideousness of those weeks in the Passchendaele area, and when one considers that the brigade did its duty then, that is, did as it was told and acquitted itself honorably, it, from this pinnacle of time, appears to have been a miraculous performance. But I suppose it is a manifestation of the Australian temperament which does its best, heedless of circumstances. Not many men would face that area again, under like conditions without a few gray hairs revealing themselves. The warfare there was not human, if warfare can ever be human. A man felt he was a piece of machinery; a little infinitesimal dot in the Big Scheme of Things, and that he could disappear into a shell hole, or be blown into nothingness and none might care, save that another reinforcement would be required. The immensity of it all was overpowering, the horror of it was devilish, the misery of the mud and filth was sickening, the peril of the shells and gas and bombs was constant. How do human beings survive? It is hard to tell. It is certainly not conscious faith in religion, it is not wholly belief in themselves, their nerves and their strength, rather do I think the secret of the endurance and the cheerfulness and the pluck is to be found in a wave of "Fatalism" which permeated many of the lads. Anything might happen, nothing might happen, it was a toss of the Coin of Fate, up went the coin, and no man blinked while it was falling. "Heads" and he went unhurt - "Tails" and if he was lucky, he was given a blanket and one of his cobbers laid him to rest, to sleep through all the ages of time where, we hope, sorrow and warfare and hatred are unknown, and only the Beautiful and Generous survive and have their being.

Back in the wagon lines at Neuve Eglise, the boys frequented the "Estaminets" (what was now left of them) and in music and song endeavoured to forget the black and immediate past, and it is strange how these men veer from tragedy. All, no doubt, thought very often of the fine fellows gone "West" but a few days before, but all avoided the subject in conversation and things jogged along in the old accustomed way. Occasional periods of leave were granted, and were usually spent in Bailleul, in which town, however, the enemy was periodically putting shells of large calibre and making ugly gaps in the continuity of the business blocks.

On the morning of 9th. November, after Reveille at 4.a.m., the brigade took over the sector stretching from the Douve to the Lys in the Warneton area, and in front of Hill 63.

When batteries first moved into this area they had not yet recovered from the strain of the Passchendaele campaign, and the general policy during the first few weeks was to give vigorous retaliation for enemy action, but not to engage in any offensive action ourselves, as a result of which the personnel might be prevented from regaining their full strength. At no period, however, was there any loss of opportunities afforded by the enemy, and officers at O.P.'s were instructed to fire on the enemy wherever he was seen. Fire was directed on enemy roads on which traffic had been heard by the infantry. From reports received from the infantry, this fire was apparently successful and effective on a number of occasions.

On the 13th. December, a light fall of snow covered the ground and was quickly frozen, serving to recall the vicissitudes of the previous winter.

On the 21st., the brigade was relieved in this sector and returned to the Armentieres sector.

Christmas day was marked by very little activity on either side, though enemy trench mortars did some damage. The plum puddings however, did more. They were on issue in godly numbers, and as usual, the boys cheered up for the festive occasion and passed as happy a day as war duties will permit.