

On the 9th. February the brigade assisted the 10th. Infantry Brigade by covering a successful raid on Warneton. The rate of fire on this occasion, was 75 rounds H.E. and 25 rounds shrapnel, per battery, per hour. One battery, the 27th, fired a total of 636 rounds in the 45 minutes allotted for the "hop over" and return. From information gleaned from prisoners, an offensive was expected from the enemy and a short bombardment of H.E. and gas was anticipated. In preparation, the batteries had orders to "stand to" from 3.a.m. on several occasions, and at the same time the pioneers were carting back everything likely to be of service to the enemy.

In the air, the allied aircraft were markedly superior, and this superiority was commented upon in all observation reports. Though the enemy rarely succeeded in crossing our lines for bombing purposes, our machines, nightly, if the weather conditions were propitious, invaded his territory, and the reports of the exploding bombs could be distinctly heard. The brigade also instituted a scheme of building "Dummy" gun pits adjacent to the camouflaged pits, with the object of "drawing the enemy fire. In anticipation" also of a tank offensive from the enemy, the gunners were re-instructed in "open sights" laying.

On 1st. March, General Birdwood paid an unceremonial visit to the batteries and expressed satisfaction with what he saw.

Enemy artillery was at times, particularly heavy, and on several occasions, 1,000 rounds were reported as having fallen within the group sector.

On the 12th. March the 5th. A.F.A. Brigade relieved the brigade, which moved back to wagon lines at Sec Bois near Strazeele, the scene of our first encampment in France.

While passing through Nieppe and Bailleul, the enemy shelled the towns with a H.V. 24 c.m. gun, but the brigade was fortunately out of the line of fire.

The usual "Rest" schools of instruction were speedily introduced, and special attention given to open warfare. A large signal school was established ten men from each battery attending. The "Cooees" the 3rd Australian Div. Pierrots commenced on the 14th., a series of entertainments lasting a week, in the Hall Sec Bois. This troupe came along for the special benefit of the Div. Artillery who had had very little opportunity of seeing concert parties while in the line. To show the appreciation of the Boys for a little "music and mirth," in the midst of the drab surroundings of war, the "House Full" notice was posted up each night.

Arrangements were also made for brigade sports and for polo matches, in fact, recreation of all sorts was the order of the day. The percentage of men on "Blighty" leave was greatly increased; as the brigade was in reserve, as many as three battery men per day going on leave to England for the usual period of fourteen days.

Then suddenly, the enemy gave the Allies the greatest shock of the war. In the Brigade the blow fell on Saturday, March 23rd. and a blow indeed it was. A blow that was to shake and terrise the world only second to the first stunning shock of the announcement of war. The Saturday just mentioned, had been proclaimed a half holiday, and a large number of local leave passes had been issued. The lucky owners of these passes were well on their way when a despatch came from headquarters giving orders for the batteries to move off at 4.p.m. It was then 2 O'Clock. Heavens! only two hours to pack up a brigade and be off! Several guns were at ordnance in the vicinity of Neuve Eglise, many kilometres distant, and a mounted orderly was despatched to hurry men and guns back. They arrived after the main column had left. All leave was stopped. Men who had not actually reached England were brought back, but as the brigade was on the march, they floated about for days before being able to find their units. The brigade was on the road again. And why? Rumor had been persistent for a day or two previous to the opening of the enemy's big offensive. Signs were not wanting of the foe's activity. Even in the neighbourhood of Sec Bois, enemy shelling could be seen and heard in the distance. Hazebrouck, Merris and Meteren each receiving a share of hostile ironmongery, while night and morning, Le Bassie was subjected to a constant grueling. Bailleul! The seventh's old time friend! had been evacuated for some days.

The clock tower, on the Hotel de Ville, a most noticeable feature of the town, was hit by a shell and had crashed into the Market Place. This "hit" was read as an omen of disaster by the inhabitants, who hurried away in that frightened, heartbreaking pitiable manner known only to refugees from war areas. Bailleul had been a sort of home during the past year, but now the shops were shattered, and the goods strewn about the streets, brick dust and broken bricks littered the pavements. Desolation had stepped into the City and gripped in its black and cruel hands, the heart of the one-time, gay and prosperous town.