



DURHAM
AT **WAR**



**MY EXPERIENCES & IMPRESSIONS SINCE THE
DECLARATION OF WAR (volume 1)
by Hubert Horatio Shirley Morant**

The Story of the 10th Battalion Durham Light Infantry
in the First World War
by its commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Morant

PART 5: Pages 81-99

September - December 1915

This volume was purchased in 2013 by [Durham County Record Office](#) with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Friends of The National Libraries and the Trustees of the former DLI, Ref. D/DLI 7/1230/3



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

You can download this work and share it with others as long as it is credited, but you can't change it in any way or use it commercially
© Durham County Record Office: Ref. D/DLI 7/1230/3. Email record.office@durham.gov.uk

Sept 29th. 1915.

Dear Colonel.

We have just come out after the Straaf. Wyllie was wounded in the head just before we went up. We were in L dug-outs & he went to tell the Battery Commander about a signal that had been reported. The 42nd owing to having 2 R.B. Batt's were selected for the attack & made a mess of it as you see from the papers. They got there alright 2 lines of trenches i.e. up to Bellewarde lake, but did not get their Bombs up & were not in close enough touch with the 9th K.R.R. their supporting batt: so that they could not push up more troops to hold the line before the Bosche (reported Prussian Guard) had stepped out of their train & counter attacked. Every man with bombs this tactically was the feature of the Straaf, this counter attack was completely successful. The 3rd Div: had failed to make any headway whatever on the Chateau which was packed with M.G. The disposition of our troops was 9th R.B. Sunken Rd to H19, Ox & Bucks H19 to H16, Shropshires H16 to H14, then the 3rd Div:.. Well to continue, the R.B's blew up the redoubt opposite Sunken Rd but were driven out, the Ox & Bucks ~~also~~ also retired from Bellewarde lake, this left the Shropshires (who did very well & might just have turned the scale) with both flanks in the air. The Germans immediately bombed into them from both sides & few got back so that we finished off as we started. During all this the 9th K. R.R's had moved up into the firing line but not until much too late to be pushed forward into the captured trenches. Somersets from G.H.Q. to Rly Wood, ourselves from L dug-outs to G.H.Q., then at night we went up & with the Somersets consolidated our old positions which were flat. We have had several compliments concerning the work done in the 3 days we were there. Wounded were coming in & being brought in all night. They suffered very heavily. One of our new officers was slightly wounded in G.H.Q. Jordon coming up the Sunken Rd & Stobart badly shocked. Poor Parke who we had lent to the 9th R.B. to lead their bombers as their officer was wounded the day before, was last seen wounded in the crater i.e. the old German redoubt. Such very bad luck as he was just off to be A.D.C. to Nugent now G.O.C. Ulster Division. I gather the authorities are not on the whole displeased as our attack was meant to draw the German troops in which it was completely successful as these big fellows came up by train & counter attacked in mass.

The artillery preparations had been very thorough lasting about 8 days. All their trenches had been blown to pieces. An extraordinary incident happened the 2nd day we were in, a wounded R.B. started howling in delirium just 20 yds from the crater & 60 yds from our Sunken Rd Barrier in the middle of the afternoon. Two Bosches came out of the crater in full view to attend to him. Our men clapped & cheered them this frightened them away however. After a bit the R.G.A. Trench Mortar Officer Shouted to the Bosche "Peace for 5 minutes" the Bosche said Yes & this officer climbed up on the parapet with a stretcher & said Who's coming. Dixon our company runner jumped up & off they went to within 10 yds of the Bosche, saluted twice with great ceremony, Dixon took his coat off quite calmly, put the man on the stretcher made him comfortable & returned to our trenches. One of our new officers Horner then went back & they got another wounded man. They then gave 3 cheers for the Bosche which was duly answered & all was normal again. Etc, etc.

(signed)

Yrs sincerely
J B Resher.

COPY.

Dear Colonel.

Probably you will gathered from the meagre reports in the papers what has been going on here - but you may like to have some details of events. Of course the 25th was the day of the general offensive but for a week before that we had rather stirring times & new experiences. One of them - the least enviable that has yet come our way - was being shelled fiercely as we went up by train, packed in open trucks without sides - though by luck we got off with 40 casualties thanks to stopping the train & dispersing. Going through the town nowadays is a great risk as strafing of it is continuous.

The artillery preparations for the divisional show was I believe wonderful & lasted for several days with definite daily programmes of targets. They didn't knock out the M.G.'s in the farm however!

From the 20th to the 23rd we were in reserve & spent most of the time in the L's. They put a battery actually in the same field so it wasn't a quiet time as the din was terrific & the enemy found them out. My company was then put in the white chateau where we made accommodation for the whole battalion as this was to be our battle station. By some error we were all sent back to V the night of the 23rd to bivouac (pouring rain & no accommodation). On the night before the day of action we got an hour's notice to get back to the chateau where all arrived safely.

Meanwhile the 42nd were making the really wonderful preparations for an assault! Bomb stores & S.A.A. stores were made all along the front line & battle H.Q. for the Bde were dug in the H 180 sap. The saps were to be the main accommodation for the assault & other lines were dug near them & covered over with brushwood, bridges being put over them. We did some of this work. At 3.50 on the 25th the preliminary bombardment started & lasted until 4.20. From the chateau I witnessed the show - it was really a most tremendous affair & most effective. At 3.15 the mine in H 21 went up turning the redoubt into a vast crater, 60 yds square a most prodigious hole. I believe it killed more of our own side than the enemy's.

At 4.20 3 bn's assaulted in fine style & carried the whole front, the K.S.L taking five lines, the O&B 3, the R.B. 2 & the crater. The enemy's shell fire was terrific & along our front there is a zone of mangled dead cut off before they could get clear. The K.R.R. then reinforced the rifles.

No one knows the true sequel. They hung on till 8 & then frittered back, very few arrived - about a hundred or so of each regiment. Pumphrey has a story of every bosche carrying bombs but it seems rather to have been a question of lack of supports. The front is very long & the enemy had full warning it seems... The Somersets in G.H.Q. were hurried up at 8 & took over the L sector, we going to F.13 & G.H.Q. The shelling was frightful but we lost very few considering.

Gradually things quieted down. As the 6th bn' in the show we expected to have to counterattack but nothing of this sort happened after all.

At 7 p.m. we relieved the R. sector with 3 companies. The most appalling relief I've ever experienced. In pitch darkness & pouring rain, with whiz-bang storms, & an irritable enemy.

There was not much left of the front line, heaps of sandbags crowded with remnants of 4 units. After 2 hrs I got my men into H 19, H 18, & S 19 & we spent the night getting things square.

Meanwhile the Bosche was bombing himself back into his own lines. At 9.30 p.m. he occupied the crater. (Heaven knows why we did not get the order to anticipate him). There were not many wounded left, - only about 40 in my trenches & these were away in 24hrs - the arrangements in this respect were

wonderful, about 1500 passing down T in the course of the day.

At dawn one could see the situation - one vast herd of dead in heaps and rows between the lines and the gaunt cliffs of the crater towering over the grim array.

All day on the 26th we worked at the trenches and spent the night getting in the wounded. They sniped very effectively in the clear moonlight from the crater but all were fetched in, in a sorry state... Suddenly at midnight the Boche attacked on our right (where the - division had fared similarly with our division) & we had for an hour a regular "Hooge" bombardment. I had been out to the crater half an hour before & seen them busy sandbagging the interior so knew we had nothing to fear at our end, the Boche trenches being in too frightful a state for him to mean business. The last two wounded were lying on the parapet but one could see S B's there in clear moonlight.

The brigade I hear, got the wind up, hearing the din but our fellows were quite bored. Most extraordinary of all - during this really heavy shelling, the front line being crumpled with clean hits many times and blown flat. I had not one single casualty!

One man was lifted right over the parapet but jumped back with a smile. And one of the wounded (in a parlous state) was completely buried for 10 mts. by the fall of a 10" mortar bomb. He being unearthed lit a cigarette.

By the time the 41st relieved us on the night of the 20th the trenches were worth calling such again. Windy

They came in in a frightfully state as the last disaster was caused by the enfilade Flammenwerfer from a crater!

As for our officers Wyllie was hit & slightly concussed - a most grievous loss but he's doing well I hear. One of the draft officers was hit, Stebart mortared again and shocked, Jordan rather seriously injured & dear old Parke missing.

We lent 32 of our best bombers to the assaulting forces and Parke went with them ... He came to see us the evening before after a weeks training on facsimile trenches to the enemy's trenches - and knew he was going to certain death though he was the same as ever... He was last seen in the crater, so there is a faint hope. Some say he was wounded.

Now we belong to the 41st & with those & Col. Rawlin's bn' run the line. It means little rest.

On the whole, as usual we missed the charge & came in for the crumpling and digging! So here we stay for the winter

I suppose the losses were justified by the army's successes as a whole, everyone one is quite cheery about the show!

One strange incident.

The day before we were relieved we reported a relief by the enemy. That morning two Germans S B's clambered out of the crater in broad daylight to succour the two of our wounded there. Our men clapped and thinking themselves shot at they retired. Immediately Horner, one of my officers shouted in German for "five mins! peace" & an enemy officer looked over and assented. This officer and Dixon then fetched in the two wounded from the foot of the crater and saluting, thanked the enemy for their courtesy! About 20 of them looked over at the ceremony. They were shelling us all the time & 4 mins! after we were sniping and mortaring the crater again as usual.

(later)

We had lent 32 of our best bombers to the R B's because they had been too casual to train their own. Twelve returned last night, one out of the eight I sent. It appears they led the whole assault on the left, the rifle bombers doing the rming & they the throwing. After the first line had been taken the carriers fed up and went back. Our men reached the third line finding the bulk of enemy here in deep dugouts underground connected by passages.

They hung on till noon & were then **practically alone**. Parke was seen in the second line cheering them on. He himself led the show Carmichael followed up but soon fell.

We have had 48 hours at ... in the rain & are now up again in support ~~on~~ on the left of the town, **getting horribly cramped thanks to the batteries all around**. A most unpleasant journey here last night.

The news from the south keeps coming in better and better though I fear the weather will scupper the whole thing. Poor Parke was to be A. D. C. to General Nugent this week. That brigade is not popular with the D. L. at present.

Strength of Battⁿ by Companies Oct 1915.

Sir H. Plumer's Inspection

"A" Coy. 250 O.R. distributed as follows.

11 Sick in Rest Camp
98 On command and
Attending Courses of instruction
27 On Regt^l Employ.
114 On Parade

Officers 3.

1 Officer on Boulton
course
1 " On Engineering
course.

B. Coy. 247 O.R. Distributed as follows.

5 Sick in Rest Camp.
45 On Command and attending
Courses of instruction
25 Regt^l Employ.
173 On Parade

Officers 5

1 Officer Bde. M. Sec.
1 Course of Engineering

C. Coy. 251 O.R. Distributed
as follows.

8 Sick in Rest Camp.
33 On Command and
Courses of instruction
24 Regt^l Employ.
186 On Parade

Officers 4

1 Officer Bde. M. Sec.
1 Officer Sick

D. Coy. 251 O.R. Distributed as follows

7 Sick in Rest Camp.
44 On Command and
Courses of instruction
27 Regt^l Employ.
173 On Parade

Officers 3.

1 Officer Course of
Toby. Motor

Oct 1915

Total Strength 25. Officers 1003.

Total No of Drafts that have joined 9

Casualties Among Other Ranks

Killed in Action 85
Died of Wounds 17
" Natural Causes 3
Wounded Shock 395
Evacuated Sick 35
Total 587

Casualties Among Officers

Killed in Action 4
Died of Wounds 1
Missing 1
Wounded 15
Invalidated Sick 4 Total 25

Aug - Dec.

47

a quiet Sector as regards Shell fire - chief annoyance being M-Gun rifle fire. The trenches ^{which} were mostly a long way from the Germans - as much as 900^x in places - collapsed badly owing to the wet-weather the communication trenches were impassable.

Thigh Boots - Watertproof Capes - & warm clothing were generously served out by the Govt. - The efficiency of a Batt: became to be judged by the number of "Trench Feet" cases among the men. Socks were sent up every night the wet ones taken away. Stringent orders were issued as to the care of feet.

During my absence the following officers were wounded & in addition several of new boys joined ones I did not know.

Wyllie - Jerwood - Jordan - Stobart - Long - Rogers - Parke who was sent to the 4th Bde on the 25th as Bomb Officer is still "Missing".

Whittle - Dorrell - Fitzgerald - Kelham - and one or two others who joined later were also wounded or shocked.

We lost a number from both M. C. Os - early

88

Lloyd George 20th Dec. 1915

indicate what headway we had to make. There was undoubtedly a shortage. That was known. Our troops knew it; so did the enemy. But neither of them knew how really short we were in some very essential particulars. Now I can with impunity give at least one or two figures. I would take gun ammunition, gun ammunition is roughly divided into high explosive and shrapnel. There is no doubt that military opinion, at least in this country—I am not quite sure about France—was wedded to shrapnel for reasons which are not unconnected with the events of the South African War. It was supposed that the days of high explosives were numbered, except for siege guns, and that shrapnel was the only weapon for fighting in the field. The developments of this war—many of them unexpected, and many of them unexpected by the greatest soldiers—proved that that expert opinion was not altogether correct in its anticipation of the demise of high explosives. We were late and reluctant converts, and, like all reluctant converts, we were very tardy in giving up the old shrapnel. We came to the conclusion that at any rate a very high proportion of high explosive ammunition was essential to success in the kind of trench warfare to which we had settled down. I think we still have a higher opinion of shrapnel than either the French or the Germans. It is not for me to express an opinion on it. My business is to take orders on this point, and to supply whatever the military opinion concludes is best. There is a good deal to be said on both sides, at any rate our military experts concluded that a very considerable proportion of high explosives were necessary—quite one-half. But we came rather late to that conclusion, and that accounts for the shortage in the beginning of the year, and later on in April and May and further.

OUR DEFICIENCIES IN MAY.

Now I will give the House an indication of the leeway we had to make up. The Germans at that time—I have already given the figures to the House—were turning out about 250,000 shells per day, the vast majority of them being high explosives. That is a prodigious figure. The French have also been highly successful in the quantities which they have been turning out. But they have great armies, and their arsenals which were turning out the materials of war for their army were naturally on a larger scale than ours. Our large arsenals naturally took a naval turn, and the bulk of the engineers who were turning out munitions of war were engaged on naval work, so that in the month of May, when the Germans were turning out 250,000 shells a day, most of them high explosives, we were turning out 2,500 a day in high explosives and 13,000 in shrapnel. (Cries of "Oh.") That was neither right in quantity nor in proportion. I have already given the House some of the reasons why the supply was so low. One was the lateness at which we came to the conclusion that high explosives were to play a great part in the war.

Artillery

48

in the summer - this was mere bad luck. Supt. M. Blakey - Cassels - Toon - Furness - the two latter were especially cool & gallant men. Also Supt. Stoddart - M. Gun Supt. - Beaton. Bomb Supt. and Supt. Barrett - Philipps' late servant - a tip top man.

The following are some of my impressions of what the War has taught me.

1. Beyond the principle that the organization of attack & defence should be in deeper trust broader that Reserves should be held in hand for Counter Attack - I do not see that our training has been on the lines required for the class of fighting in hand.
2. The power of Artillery - especially howitzers - never appears to have been fully recognized before. We had to wait till we experienced the use the Germans made of their Art! to realize its possibilities. Their Artillery is extremely good & plentiful Ammunition ditto. Their observation is wonderful their communication ditto. If 2 or 3 individuals walk about - not under cover - they are nearly certain to be

90

Artillery

observed and a Gun (Ft Gun) is switched onto them at once. Consequently M-Guns cannot be fired from their Battle positions rare seldom fired at all except in emergency - this applies to both sides. Our Art^y Observation & communication was not good (in Lt^y Div^y) through out the summer and the Artillery suffered grievously from lack of munitions - 3 Rounds per diem was their allowance whereas the German all^y seemed unlimited. Any attempt by the Infantry to work during the day (in view) was immediately stopped by the Art^y. They appear to bring their Ft Guns very close up to their front line Trenches - but they were always admirably concealed. The German Artillery did more firing on communications, buildings & villages behind the line than we did. Villages within 6 or 7 miles of the front were completely destroyed and important places even further off such as Poperinghe were rendered very unpleasant for occupation. The Ypres salient was especially unhealthy owing to the enfilade reverse fire experienced. Over 75% of our casualties must have been due to Shell fire.

Art^y - Fortification

and it follows that - owing to the comparative ineffectiveness of our Art^y? Five for the reasons stated - our casualties during the summer were a good deal heavier than their's. The 14th Divⁿ was said to have lost 14,000 in 6 months. Owing, I suppose, to their superior strength in Art^y? during the early part of the War, they seem to have driven us off the high ground onto the near slopes or onto lower ground - consequently they now hold the high ground which has great advantages for "observation" purposes. Our efforts to retake high ground of importance - such as Hill 60 - Belleward Farm - Hooze - have not met with success which shows the value it is to the Enemy. The difficulty of "observation" from low ground of enemy positions behind high ground are obvious. The Artillery of either side seldom hit each other's Guns.

2. The fortification of Tactical Points - is an art in which the enemy excels. He has stronger better material than we as a rule - works assiduously and hangs on very tenaciously. He is expert in the use of Machine Guns. After an extremely heavy bombardment prior to attack - places like the ruins of Hooze - Chateau - Belleward Farm

Lloyd-George - 20th Dec.

NECESSITY OF BIG GUNS.

Up to midsummer of this year big guns on a large scale had not been ordered. We came rather late to the conclusion that on that scale big guns were essential to the successful prosecution of the war. The kind of gun which was regarded as a prodigy in the Boer War was just a poor miserable medium gun. Now the soldiers are doubtful whether it counts in the least in trench warfare. The heavy siege gun which we had at the beginning of the war is now the lightest. Facts have forced the conclusion on us that it is only the very heaviest guns that will enable us to demolish trenches, which are getting deeper and deeper, with trench behind trench—trenches of every conceivable angle. There are labyrinths of trenches with concrete casemates, and nothing but the most powerful and shattering artillery will enable our men to advance against them except along a road which is a road to certain death. Therefore the War Office came to the conclusion that it was essential to success and victory, and to the protection of the lives of our soldiers, that we should have an adequate equipment of the heaviest possible artillery. (Cheers.)

This seems to answer the question why the Germans hold out in houses which we can't.

Suppose we had

93 (1)

Bombs

still bristle with M. Guns & hold up our Attack. I fail to understand this. I should have thought our 9.2 Guns would have ground these clearly marked localities to powder. We can make nothing to resist their 17" shells and during the Summer (1915) I know we had not a single fortified ruin—such as the École—orange Chateau—which could be called a strong point & would be calculated to resist the bombardment it would inevitably receive if attacked. We do not seem to have this art of defence unless our Artillery have not the art of knocking these places to pieces.

3. Bombs - The reintroduction of grenades & bombs was quite a novel result of the War. The Germans introduced them & it was sometime before we were provided with them then the supply was short. We had a number of different kinds during the Summer which was confusing. I believe we have standardised on two patterns now. They have proved themselves the most important weapon of infantry for trench warfare.

93

94

Lord George - 20th Dec. 1915

PRODUCTION OF SMALL ARMS.

With regard to rifles, we have taken steps similar to those taken with regard to shells and machine guns. The plant has been extended at home, and new large important orders have been given to America. There is one feature which is worth mentioning here. We have peddled out a large amount of work to certain firms. They have not turned out rifles, but have made some component parts, while other firms turn out other parts of the rifle; we peddle out these parts to a great many firms and we propose to have them assembled under the supervision of some expert firm like Enfield, and by that means obtain a considerable increase in the possibilities of output. (Cheers.)

I come now to the trench mortar. This is almost a new development, and yet although it is a new development there is no part of this war where the soldiers have resorted more to old methods—catapults, spring guns, and, of course, grenades and the helmet. All that I can say about this is that since we undertook this task the grenade output has increased by 40 times. There has been a school established for instruction in connexion with this work. The output of trench mortars has greatly increased. The present output in a fortnight is equal to the whole output in the first year of trench warfare. There are several branches which I might have dwelt upon—for instance, the output of optical work. We were so dependent on Germany for optical glass that when the war broke out there was an acute famine in this country. Orders have been placed wherever possible abroad. Steps have been taken to extend largely the operations of the few firms in this country. With regard to explosives, I have already told the House of the steps which we have taken, and of the important new works which have been constructed in different parts of the country, so that I feel confident that, while the output of shells and munitions becomes very considerable, the amount of high explosives and propellants to fill them will be quite adequate. Not only that, but I think we shall be able to supply, as we are supplying, very considerable quantities, especially of high explosives, to our Allies who are in need of them.

Introduced by the German in Oct or Nov. 1914!

956)

Bombs - Aeroplanes

We commenced by having an establishment of 16 bombers per Co. or 64 per Battⁿ. The German Counterattack at Belleward on the 25th Sept^r however opened our eyes - as every Boche was said to have carried Bombs. Now every man is directed to be a trained bomber - Each half Battⁿ having a Reserve of one Platoon of "First Class" Bombers. Rifle Grenades are vastly things and have a longer range than bombs. We did not use them much. I think our's were not very reliable. Trench Mortars were also introduced by the Germans - under the name of "Minenwerfer". Their's again have been superior to our's - throwing bombs of 200 lbs and their large ones having a range of 800 - 1000 yds. They make a terrific explosion & have great local demolition effect. I believe our's are improving. They are taken up & down the trenches & fired from different places on each occasion.

4. Aeroplanes - When we arrived in France in May we appeared to have command in the air. This however was not the case by August. the Germans

Aeroplanes - Attack.

having produced a powerful armoured double engined machine - which outpaced our's was more heavily armed. Our Machines, however, did very good and gallant work. They are invaluable for reconnaissance were it not for them we should know nothing about the back of the German front line. As it is we have excellent accurate photos taken by Airmen of their trenches for miles or more behind.

They are also invaluable for spotting for Artillery, locating Gns, observing movements of the enemy in rear, especially of trains.

Our Airmen say they hardly ever see a German behind their lines. This is most inexplicable to me - as any hostile aviator could not fail to see thousands of us in bivouacs etc behind our lines.

5. Attack. As a rule attacks on a small front have proved futile. They may be necessary occasionally to straighten the line or seize some work that is harassing us especially.

Attacks - are in reality "assaults" - what we were taught in fact to be the last stage of the attack.

Attack

This we used to be taught must be carried out by a line 5 or 6 deep - charging as hard as the men could go. Genl. Sir Neville Lyttelton once told us in Ireland - that the men ought to be able to charge for 500^x to 1000^x as the Japanese were alleged to have done in Russo-Japanese War.

In this War - generally speaking - no Assault is possible unless the Trenches assaulted have been subjected to such an intense accurate bombardment that the holders have vacated them or practically all killed - M. Guns destroyed wire broken.

The Infantry then advance in ^{slow} quick time with arms at the Slope. Bombers proceed up Comm. Trenches & to the flanks erect barricades to resist counter-attacks - & proceed to work up the trenches clearing them by bombing.

The whole thing is worked by the Clock. The Art^y commence by the Clock, switch off to further back by the clock - which is the hour given for the Infantry advance to take place. The Infantry for the assault, who usually occupy specially prepared trenches in front or behind our real line, generally advance at one or

Attack

two paces interval in successive lines - about 50 - 100 yds apart.

If any part of the enemy's line has been missed by the Artillery - trouble will ensue the attack may not progress in those parts.

The next line is then submitted to a similar bombardment & so on. The Artillery are expected to breach the enemy's wire.

The trenches captured - it is absolutely necessary to start "consolidating" at once - which means converting the parapet - barricading communication trenches - bringing up bombs - Ammunition - & M-Guns - digging communication trenches to the Rear - as the Enemy's bombardment & counter-attack is nearly certain not to be long delayed.

The question of sending up reinforcements has also to be considered - as there is usually a curtain of Shrapnell to prevent this ^{so} it is not always easy to do.

The difficulty of retaining the trenches is sure to be very great - and will depend upon the tenacity of Officers & men - and the completeness & effectiveness of the arrangements for their supply with men & ammunition.