



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 6: Pages 100-113

December 1915 – June 1916

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

Lloyd George - Dec. 20th 1916.

OUTPUT OF MACHINE-GUNS.

I come now to the equally important question of machine-guns. The dimensions of the machine-gun problem will be realized if the House will consider not only the increase of the size of the Army, but also that the number of guns per division has increased many-fold. When the war began our ideas were that each battalion should be supplied with two machine-guns. The Germans supply each with 16 machine-guns. There is no doubt that a machine-gun is by far the most destructive weapon in the whole of their Army; it has destroyed far more lives than their rifles. I am told that the machine-guns and artillery between them are probably responsible for more than 90 per cent. of the casualties, rifles being responsible for not much more than 5 per cent. We were rather late in realizing the great part which the machine-gun played in this war, and I think I am entitled to say that the first time that the importance of the problem was impressed upon me was by the Prime Minister in one of his visits to the front in June. (Cheers.)

Mr. ASQUITH.—The first visit.

Mr. LLOYD GEORGE.—When my right hon. friend returned from the front he impressed upon me, in the gravest possible language, the importance of supplying on a very large scale machine-guns; and one of the first steps was to make arrangements for multiplying many-fold and as quickly as possible our output of machine-guns. We immediately placed large orders at home and abroad. We assisted firms with machinery, labour, and material, and completely equipped a new large factory for the manufacture of the Vickers gun. All the machine tools and equipment have been delivered, but production is delayed for want of skilled labour. In another part of the country an existing machine-gun factory has been extended in order to increase its output of machine-guns. Two new factories have been erected elsewhere to turn out other types of machinery. At two other works extension of plant has been made for the production of machine-gun plants which are to increase the machine-gun production. The net result since we began these operations has been to increase the production five-fold; we turn out five times the number we were turning out at that date. In the New Year there will be a production greater still, and, in short, our requirements are well in sight of being fulfilled.

This is the most astounding statement of all. Considering that within 6 weeks of declaration of War - every man in the sheet was aware of the use put to M-Guns by the enemy of their great superiority to them. 16 per Batt: they have - we want abroad 9 months after War was declared with 2 per Batt: - those were only not shortly before going out. We had been training men with rough made wooden models - as the Govt. had not ^{until} 6 months of War realized the importance of them. Consequently every M-Gun in the Brigade had to be utilized in the front line Trenches.

Defence.

It seems that one side can generally shell the other out, if it so desires, by concentrating sufficient Art? Fire - this is partly the reason for attacking on a wide front.

Sometimes we hold what we take sometimes we can't - If we can't hold it why can the other side? that is what puzzles me. No doubt a lot depends on how the arrangements for supply of Bombs etc work out, which side is better placed for observation of Art? Fire.

6. Defence - Ability to hold one's trench appears to depend largely on the accuracy of the hostile Artillery Fire. You can be literally blown out.

Trenches are sited in every conceivable position but trenches sited behind a rise so as to be out of view are far safer as regards shell fire than the more exposed ones. These covered sites are particularly desirable for Support & Reserve Trenches.

The Germans are said to hold their front line largely with M-Guns and with only few men. M-Guns are kept under cover until the last moment & are seldom fired except in emergency. My experience has been - as a rule - that Support Trenches are more shelled than the fire trench - more especially if these hostile trenches are close. Also how to reinforce the front line quickly in case of attack is

Defence

not such an easy matter. What to do with the Reserve is another question I am not quite clear about.

I think a small local counter-attack should be launched immediately - also a big one if it can be done at once. But if the enemy have had say 6-8 hours to "consolidate" I think a counter-attack requires a thorough Artillery preparation.

I don't think we make our trenches as well as we might - i.e. they are not revetted with boards or hurdles etc as a rule - our dug outs are far too flimsy - and our Communication Trenches not numerous enough. We don't fortify houses like the Germans as we find them shell traps & avoid them.

In our Divⁿ we only had 2 M-Guns per Battⁿ to start with anyway - we had all the Guns in the Brigade in the front line as a rule - I am sure this is not right. We had no really strong emplacements - later we did have one or two Concrete ones in the 2nd Line.

The Germans make much use of laid M-Guns for night fire - also probably of rifle Batteries - The former are a great nuisance & cause inconvenience & a certain number of casualties. We never made use of either.

M-Guns are kept under cover during the bombardment & are only mounted when the Infantry advance. The success of the Defence depends very largely on them.

Sniping - Gas

7. Sniping - The enemy "Snipers" certainly are harassing at times - The German trenches are all fitted with iron or steel-plate loopholes. I fancy they frequently snipe from these. Anyhow whatever it is I am not satisfied that our Sniping is as good as it ought to be. We don't put in iron loopholes - when we do they are put in badly the men won't use them. The Germans expose themselves very little targets are hard to find. I think they lay rifles or M-Guns for night firing - the latter being used as a single loader. I believe in night firing - even if not accurately aimed as it causes a feeling of insecurity behind the lines.

8. Gas - The first "Gas" used by the Germans - was towards the end of April at Ypres - with excellent results from their point of view. Respirators were devised & as we entrained at Aldershot in May they were issued to us. Later we had two - and had to constantly practice adjusting them. In the second Gas Attack in May the Cavalry were inexperienced in their use & suffered accordingly. About June "helmets" with Talc eye pieces were issued. The Talc was of bad quality & broke at once. These were improved later & every man had two. About September

Gas - Liquid Fire

a third pattern was issued with a tube for breathing out air.

In June experiments took place with helmets respirators. Officers Men with respirators helmets were sent into a room full of German Gas - those with helmets did not suffer - those with respirators were more or less badly gassed. We used our Gas on the 25th Sept. at Loos - but not at Ypres. It was not an unmitigated success - partly owing to the direction of the wind - not being right.

Gas Shells are used at any rate by the French Germans. They no doubt affect the eyes - but some say do not do much harm. I have not experienced them.

9. Liquid Fire - the Germans first used liquid fire against us at Hooge - the R.B. & K.R.R. of 4th 1st Bde were holding the crater adjoining trenches were attacked at dawn with this fire. It caused more or less of a panic - though did not do very much damage. It is said to only have a range of 30 yds. There seems no particular method of counteracting it.

10. There is no doubt for War - one wants active Generals & C.O.'s. As a rule men of over 50 are too old & are

Generals R.S.O's. Xmas - 1915.

not up to tramping round boggy trenches. Our Brigadiers were all "dug ups" - Nugent - Markham - Cockburn & Prouse (R.A.). After about 3 months in France all these were replaced by younger & more up to date men. Brigadiers should be appointed from Officers who have proved successful in command of Batt^{ns} in action. Staff Officers should be thoroughly acquainted with the Trenches & should consider the best way of strengthening the line - by observation of the ground. They should also visit their sector at critical times to see the actual situation. This is not always done (in our Bde anyway!)

On the night of the 15/16th Dec. we were relieved from trenches in the Wietze Sector - supposed to be our last tour in France. Shell fire in this Sector had recently developed a great deal. Things had been much more unpleasant than a few weeks earlier. On Sunday morning 19th Dec. the Germans attacked with Gas in this sector but the attack does not seem to have been pressed. Our Gas Helmets seem to have been effective. About the 26th Dec. after being in readiness to move

105

About this time the Germans used to heavily bombard a trench and then send forward patrols to ascertain if it had been evacuated in which case the patrol would be followed by reinforcing troops. On this occasion when the bombardment lifted one of our bombing posts looked out to see an officers patrol already close up to our parapet having crept up an old hedge ditch. One of our men whose brother had already been killed in the war could not be restrained from getting out of our trench going forward alone to meet the patrol to whom he shouted every abusive term he could think of. He was shot by the German patrol who continued to advance but were killed to a man by our post before reaching our parapet.

Feb. 1916. Ypres.

to a Port of Embarkation all orders were cancelled we were ordered back to the same Sector of trench we had been holding.

We held these Trenches - Potige - D 21 - Willow Walk etc until about Feb. 12th. About this time we had to endure some heavy bombardments and the Germans made one or more efforts to attack - in one case a patrol approached our front line - about 6 men - but were all killed. I believe a stronger force left their trenches but were stopped by our Art.

On or about the 12th Feb. we were relieved on a night of very heavy bombardment by the XXth Division.

The trenches we had held in this part of the Salient were the worst we had been in - merely detached posts in "Crouse Butts" in the front line very wet. The Germans had a high command redoubt which seemed to be unaffected by our Artillery fire - there were practically no C.T.'s to front line going round ^{the trenches} ~~at night~~ was only possible at night - there was much M. Gun fire.



Casualties from 21.5.15 — 74.2.16.

Officers: Killed 5
Dd/Wds 2
Wounded 24
Shocked 1
Missing 1
Sick (to fight) 3
36

Other Ranks: Killed 125
Dd/Wds 19
Died 3
Wd. 520
Shock 45
Gassed 2
Missing 4
718

When the Coy Comd^rs were going round the Trenches & billets into their French opposite number the French Captain introduced Capt. Parr to a very nice looking lady in one of the billets at Achicourt. The French Captain asked Parr his opinion of the lady. Parr said he admired her very much and thought she looked charming. The French Captain replied "Ah! Yes - but she is not for you - she is for the Colonel!"

Casualties 8 Months
36 off^s + 718 OR.

without doing anything!

Ypres — Arras - Feb. 1916.

The Batt^y was left the accursed salient after an 8 months sojourn there - having lost some 500 men + 30 or more Officers having accomplished + or even attempted nothing. To crown everything our valued & deeply respected & revered Serg^t Major Noble was killed the day before we left the salient - we hope - forever. He was buried with the greatest respect and manifestation of grief by all ranks at Poperinghe. Upwards of £200 was raised by the Batt^y for the benefit of his widow & children whilst a suitable Tomb Stone surmounted by a bronze eagle marked the position of his grave. He was beloved by all.

The Batt^y was proceeded by rail and march route in snow & wintry weather to the vicinity of Arras to join VIth Corps - Lt. Genl. Sir J. Keir - in the 3rd Army - commanded by Genl. Allenby known as "The Bull". We took over G Sector also H & I from the French. They appear to have been on very good terms with the Germans & both sides appear to have lived in peace. The front line trench was good the wire on both sides - especially

In May 1916 - Steel Helmets were issued to the Battⁿ prior to that some men wore French Helmets which they had salvaged.

During our tenure of these trenches Lt. Dorrell was shot by a sentry as he was going out wiring killed. A good deal more patrolling was done than had been the case at Ypres where the conditions were so bad. Capt. Pumphrey - Lt. Todd & Marx were the principle performers.

The soil was chalk the French had constructed a number of "improved" dug outs - some 20 feet below ground level - we subsequently added considerably to the number of these. In these one was practically immune from shell fire. The difference in the shelling here the security of these dugouts compared to the conditions at Ypres was very marked. In a tour of six days it was exceptional to have a single casualty. In 1916 - the use & improvement of Trench Mortars was very marked on both sides. The Germans as usual were ahead of us - having a very heavy & destructive kind which they fired with considerable accuracy - also various lighter ones. We introduced a medium (60 P^r) and a light Stokes which was thought a lot of. The improvised T^{or} was also used. Our T. M's however were not so skilfully employed as those of the Boches. About 10th March I rejoined the Battⁿ & took over command from John Lintack who had been in command for 6 months. About the 15th Jan^y 1916 I was attached to 60th (London) Division - Bulfin's & worked with Studd's Bde at Saffron Walden



Part of our front in G 1 + 2 Sectors - Arras - Albert P.
& Chat Margre

G 2 Agny Sector. Feb. - June 1916.

later at Warrimster. The 43rd Bde was still com-
manded by P. R. Wood with Congreve as Bde Major.
We used to go in front line 6 days - Agny Village in
cellars - in support - 6 days - front line 6 days &
in Reserve - Dainville 6 days.

In April acted as Brigadier in absence of BGC
on leave. Our principal work whilst in this
Sector was constructing a Support Res Line which
the French had allowed to fall into disrepair.

About the end of May went on leave and on my
return a mine scare had been started with
reference to our front line on the Railway - this
part of the front line was therefore evacuated.
When the Germans evacuated this part of their
front we found no traces of mining at all!

Unthank was shortly given command of a Highland
Territorial Bde. Rosher was transferred to 14th Bde.

In June we were relieved by the 55th Division &
the Division took over I. J. & K. Sectors - North &
South of the Scarpe - Reserve Bde in Arras. "I"
was very quiet but J & K Sectors which included
a number of Mine Craters were not so quiet.

S.L.I held 1 Sector - Y.L.I. J1 & K.L.I J2.