



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 11: Pages 170-179

September 1916 – January 1917

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

1917.]

The Adventures of an Ensign.

47

began barking very close up behind the Guardsmen's position. Then a few British aeroplanes hummed out into the clear morning sky and flew away. Not long after a regular covey of German machines sallied out and hovered above the Guards, cramped up in their shallow and altogether unprotected trench.

"Now we shall catch it," thought our Ensign, and catch it they did. It was mostly shrapnel, H.E. shrapnel, black and vile-smelling, with a deafening detonation, that the Hun sent over, reserving his heavier stuff for the little battery behind, which barked incessantly notwithstanding. The German shooting was bad, and the shells fell short of or over the trench. Several shrapnel bursts clanged and whizzed and pattered round the heads of the officers as they sat in the bottom of their corner of the trench, but they had no casualties. In fact, although the shelling went on at intervals all through the day, the casualties were few.

But it was an arduous time. There was no means of proceeding along the trench, for it was far too crowded, and, indeed, there was no object in doing so. One could only sit there and attempt the impossible—namely, to pay no heed to the shells. The little group of officers was strangely isolated, for there was no movement to be observed, either before or behind them. The ground in the rear was in full view of the enemy, so communication with the troops in

the line behind was cut off during the daylight hours. It all gave our young man a queer sort of "desert island" sensation, and he kept on thinking of the shipwrecked pleasure party in "The Admirable Crichton."

Some of the officers slept, others ate, others took turns at assisting the orderlies to deepen still further the trench, the bottom of which was found to consist of live German shells in their wicker cases. One of the orderlies, stoutly wielding a pick, made this interesting discovery, upon which the pick was unanimously disqualified, and only very gentle scraping with the entrenching tool allowed. Our Ensign slept a little and ate a little and drank a little, and then did a thing he had never done before, being a strict Tory, . . . he read 'The Daily News' from cover to cover—leading articles, Women's Page, advertisements, and all, and then passed it on to somebody else, who did the same. It was the only newspaper in the trench.

But the green panorama stretched out before them was not without its compensations either. Ever since the previous afternoon the British Heavies had played a wonderful game with the pretty little hamlet with the yellow church tower peering forth from among the trees. Huge projectiles whooshed noisily through the air, and hurled destruction among the red roofs and the verdant foliage. A great pall of smoke, flanked by spouts of

170

black and brown earth, and topped with eddies of coral-pink haze, was the last that our Ensign had seen of the little village by daylight. At night, as he went round the outposts, however, he had still heard the great shells crashing into the village, and watched a house blaze heavenwards with a glare that lit up the surrounding spouts of smoke. In the first light of morning he had seen the yellow church tower but a single ragged stick of broken masonry amid a tangle of broken trees and gaping roofs. And still the shells went pounding in. Ah, the guns of the Somme—they do their work thoroughly!

It is not often in this war of trenches that a man can get a comprehensive view of an attack. To the little group of officers, cooped up in their narrow trench, was vouchsafed that morning as grandiose a spectacle as (our Ensign believes) any man has witnessed in this war. Somewhere about the hour of half-past nine a light infantry brigade over on the left attacked, and from their "grand stand," as the men, delighted, called it, the Guards could see every detail of the advance. It was a sight, too, to gladden brave men's eyes! For though the little lines of brown dots that went creeping forward up the distant green slopes were swept away again and again, while across the valley echoed the loud stutter of the German machine-guns, yet the succeeding lines went on. The tiny brown figures seemed literally

to be blown down, yet others struggled forward, wave upon wave, until they were lost to view. Through the glasses one could see the wake they had left—little figures crawling about, hobbling, with the stretcher-bearers darting and ducking and dodging to and fro. Once a figure detached itself from the advancing line, right in the teeth of that whirlwind of death, bent over a prostrate figure, picked it up, and started to struggle along . . . probably towards the shelter of a shell-hole. But, even as our Ensign watched, with bated breath, the little brown figure and his burden rolled over and lay still.

All the valley now re-echoed to the roar of artillery, and the Germans left the Guards alone while they concentrated on the attacking forces. The British supports were seen coming up through a heavy barrage, then men began to trickle back down the slope strewn with brown figures left in the trail of the advance. What had happened? No one knew. Had the attack failed? None could say. Little by little the artillery fire slackened, some inquisitive aeroplanes came out and hovered over the scene, and, by-and-by, the noise and the smoke subsided. Then, after a pause, the enemy turned his attention to the Guards, and started his intermittent bombardment again.

In the course of the day word at last came up from the rear. The Guards were

to maintain their position, and might be called upon to support an attack. In the afternoon the troops on the left went forward again to the attack, but the wind blew the smoke across the field of vision, and the Guards could not exactly see what was going forward. Germans, however, could still be discerned in and about the ruined village.

Towards dusk that evening our Ensign and a Grenadier officer took a party of men and raided some *chevaux de frise*—trestles garnished with barbed wire—which the lynx eye of our Ensign's Commanding Officer had noticed in front of a German trench in their rear. This was lifted bodily in sections, and put out in front of the trench to furnish some slight measure of protection in the event of a German attack.

Night fell again, dank and cold, with a menace of rain. Still there was no word of relief. How distant seemed that fresh dawn when, under the paling stars, the Guards had gone forward to the attack! Everybody was worn out. Excitement, fatigue, want of sleep, had done their work. But no respite could be granted. Again, at nightfall, the line of outposts was posted; and again the ensigns, haggard and scrubby, did a shift each in turn. The men were so utterly exhausted that they literally could not keep their eyes open as they lay crouching in their shell-holes in pairs, their faces towards the spout-

ing German lights, their backs towards the blackness of their trench. Our Ensign, moving continually during his turn of duty to keep himself awake, had to go from shell-hole to shell-hole and assure himself that the sentries were watchful by kicking the soles of their boots.

While our Ensign was out during the hours before midnight, in company with one of his sergeants, he managed to get in touch with the troops who had made the gallant attacks that morning and afternoon. In a sunken road which had been wrested from the enemy, and was strewn with German and British dead, he found the wounded laid out in long lines of stretchers, moaning, shivering with cold, pathetically asking for cigarettes—a thing he could not give them. They were waiting their turn to be carried down over the broken and shell-swept ground to the rendezvous of the field ambulances, a mile or so back.

In a German dug-out our Ensign found two battalion commanders supping off bread and chocolate and a drain of whisky in a bottle, with them two or three young officers. They were all mud-stained and worn, but they made our Ensign welcome and offered him a share in their drain of whisky. They told our Ensign they were momentarily expecting to be relieved, and promised to inform their successors of the Guards' line of outposts, so that they

D

VOL. CCH.—NO. MCCXXI.

* I was told by special runner that the Guards had been ordered to take des Boeufs at all costs about 3pm to relieve our situation!

could join up with the Guards.

When our Ensign got back to the trench, he heard glad tidings: the Guards were to be relieved that night. It was half-past one in the morning, but there were no signs of the relief as yet; and presently our Ensign was sent out again with another party of men to strengthen the outpost line, for there were rumours of a German attack to be delivered at two o'clock.

Once more the weary men, many of whom had already been three hours on outpost duty that night, fared forth into the blackness in a smother of rain. The night was very dark, and it was hard work getting the men out of the trench and lined up, for they were heavy with sleep. Perhaps this operation created an undue amount of noise; but the fact remains that hardly had our Ensign led them into the open than a perfect storm of German bullets came over—machine-guns stuttered loudly, and a great shower of German lights soared up into the sky.

Everybody flung himself flat on his face, our Ensign reflecting that the enemy seemed to anticipate a further British attack rather than to contemplate launching one himself. Presently the storm abated, and our Ensign rose to his feet. But the man at his side did not stir. Bending down, our Ensign shaded his lamp with his hand and flashed the light for an instant

on to the prostrate figure. It was our Ensign's orderly—his third since the attack started—lying dead on his back with a bullet through the head. He was the only casualty.

The cold night was all but spent, and the sky was slowly changing to the play of the approaching day, when, from out of a scene of some bustle about the trench, word came to our Ensign to bring the outposts in . . . the reliefs had arrived. Never was relief effected more swiftly. It went at a whirlwind pace. Stiff and aching, the outposts stumbled in and were pushed by their comrades into their places in the sadly shrunk companies of the Battalion; a blur of figures groped their way into the trench, a couple of infantry subalterns emerged and reported to the Commanding Officer . . . how fresh they looked, thought our Ensign . . .

Then a German shell screamed over and burst noisily, scattering a pailful of shrapnel about: another followed, and another. The sky is flushing with the coming of the sun: every moment the light grows brighter. Hurry, hurry, or the Huns will finish off even that wasted shadow of a battalion before it clears the ridge. What are they waiting for in front? Clang . . . whee . . . ee . . . oo . . . oo! goes the shrapnel. Why the devil don't they move on? Crash! there falls another shell. . . .

Truendecourt Attack. Sept^r 1916.

we arrived back at Albert about 12^h Sept^r and were the Div^l Reserve in the great attack on 15^h Sept^r. 15^h Bde led - and took Switch Gap Trench + 42nd we passed through advanced to Bulls Road where we were held up. We moved up that night from Reserve original front line in front of Delville Wood relieved the R. S. L. 1 Cox Bucks L. 1 on Bulls Road and were ordered to attack Truendecourt next morning. We did not attack. We lost 17 off^r + 380 men this attack failed. In the evening we were ordered to renew it - myself + 2 others (Stewart Todd) led about 70 men to the line reached by the first attack. We were relieved on night of 16^h/17^h by 21st Div^r & being slightly wounded in left arm by portion of a M. Tom bullet which took out both eyes of Co. S. M. Williams who was lying next to me in same shell hole went down to trench where remained about 10 days. We then marched through by easy stages and took over H. 2. Sector S. E. of Arras. This was a fairly quiet Sector except for trench mortars North of Beaurains. We held this line here from 29^h Sept^r to 29^h Oct^r when we were relieved by 12th Div^r and came out to rest at Sibrille. We received some drafts

The arrangements for removal of wounded in this attack of the 15th & 16th Sept seemed disgraceful. There were hundreds of wounded up at Bulls R^d no stretchers. Throughout the day of the 16th & night of 16/17th I was surrounded by wounded men & dead & dying but could do nothing for them. During that night we carried in numbers but had to leave them behind when we marched out next morning without handing them over to anyone. It was a heart-rending scene.

The relieving troops did ^{not} arrive until practically daylight & as soon as they arrived - no C.O. coming to me - I just gave the men in Bulls R^d the order to M^l 2nd X 13th Bⁿ. Left them & marched them straight off without handing over to anyone. M^l 2nd Medals 6.
I had only about 120 men with Todd, Stewart & 1 2nd Lt. who had turned up during the night. Cost S. M. Wakeham (S^{er}g^t Chicken) & S^{er}g^t Major Slater.

43rd Bde

Raiding party left our front line at Zero and lay down in No Mans Land about 40 yards from German Front Line for 3 or 4 minutes pending lifting of Barrage onto Second Line.

Our objective was from to but wire was not cut to the South of M 56 33.93 - this caused ~~waves~~ the two waves to bunch and parties to intermingle as well as congestion in the portion of the trench entered.

The wire was well cut North of the point mentioned and the front line was much filled in though dug outs found appear to have been intact. These were bombed with Mills & P Bombs. They were occupied by Enemy but were not actually entered by us. No Germans emerged from them but the Officer Commanding Raid shot one at bottom of Stairs.

Germans however emerged on each flank of raiding party and bombing encounters commenced in which the O.C. 2nd Wave who entered the Trench on right flank became engaged & was slightly wounded.

Meanwhile 2nd Lt. Bell - O.C. C Detachment collected a party corresponding in

176

member to his original party and led up the right branch of the forked C.T leading to German 2nd Line. This trench was much filled in.

A portion of B Detachment went on over the top towards German 2nd Line but the officer who was to have led it, as previously stated, had become involved in the Bombing on our Right Flank.

B Detachment seeing the Bombing attacks on both flanks of A party became anxious lest their line of retreat might be cut off and when close to the Second Line withdrew to the First Line.

O.C. Raid seeing there was return + as were making little progress on either flank decided to withdraw. Thinking the returning men were the whole of B & C Detachments - after being some 20 - 35 minutes in front line.

Meanwhile O.C. C. Party pushed on up C.T. to its junction with 2nd Line M 56 38.88 - two Dog Outs were bombed here and two Germans ran away. Thence

party proceeded along 2nd Line to
 junction of C.T. at M. 5 b. 50.75 leading
 to Third Line. Here he left two of his
 nine men and proceeded towards 3rd
 Line as far as M 5 b 50.70 - when
 finding he was unsupported he got
 out of the Trench and looked at
 country beyond. He then decided to
 withdraw which he did without opp-
 osition until ^{about to} cross German First
 Line about M. 5 b 33.93. where the
 party was bombed from the North - our
 troops having by that time evacuated
 the Trench. One man was ^{+ several wounded} killed here
 and 2 Lt. Bell who was himself slightly
 wounded remained with his wounded
 men in a Shell hole. in the Mans hand
 clear of German wire until dusk
 when he brought the party into our
 Trenches - having had 2 men killed
 and 5 wounded besides himself

178

out of a party of 11.

He reports all Trenches and wire very severely damaged - Entrances to Dig Out often partially filled in. An Iron Gate was found standing in C.T. between 2nd & 3rd Line trench was pulled down.

~~Machine Gun~~ Machine Gun and Rifle Fire ~~to~~ negligible. Barages excellent also Stokes Motors.

After the Raid was over O.R. Riding Party & Lieut Todd ^{with} R.A.M.C. ^{men} searched No Man's Land for wounded and brought in some half-dozen casualties.

Casualties at present ascertained:

Officers - slightly wounded 2.

O.R - Killed 7 Wounded ~~3~~ Missing 3

6-1-17

J. H. B. / J. H. B. / J. H. B.
10/10/17

179