

## The Battle of the Somme: A Canadian Adjutant's Perspective

November 18 marks the centenary of the end of the Battle of the Somme, an event that passed essentially unnoticed, though it was a seminal event in the development of modern Canada. Its carnage was over 1.1 million casualties from a combined population (both sides) of about 170 million. (For a scale, there have been approximately 35,000 U.S. casualties in Iraq from 2003-1016.)

I became interested in the Battle of the Somme earlier this year due to a sheaf of papers in the back of my mother's china cabinet, which I noticed while she was moving. The papers were copies of transcripts of letters from the front by the adjutant of the 75<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion (4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division), one of the battalions which led the closing assault at the Battle of the Somme. While other war-time correspondence in family archives tended to be sincere but dreary epistles, these letters were full of interesting details about life at the front – not just mud and food, but flares, “dug-outs”, young men having horse races, sightseeing at Amiens Cathedral five days after a battle in which 25% of the battalion were killed or wounded, the moral quandary of court-martialing soldiers who had wounded themselves to avoid further battle, typically because of what we today call post-traumatic stress disorder, with penalties shocking to today's sensibility.

The adjutant was killed on March 1, 1917 at Vimy Ridge, a month before the major victory in April 1917, in an ill-conceived raid, which the general command had ordered over the objections of seasoned battalion commanders.

In this note, I've collated all of the letters available from the china cabinet, interweaving with information from War Diaries, providing context and location of the battalion. I've used November 18 as a cut-off date: there are lacunae in this collation that I will try to edit.

### *The Battle of the Somme*

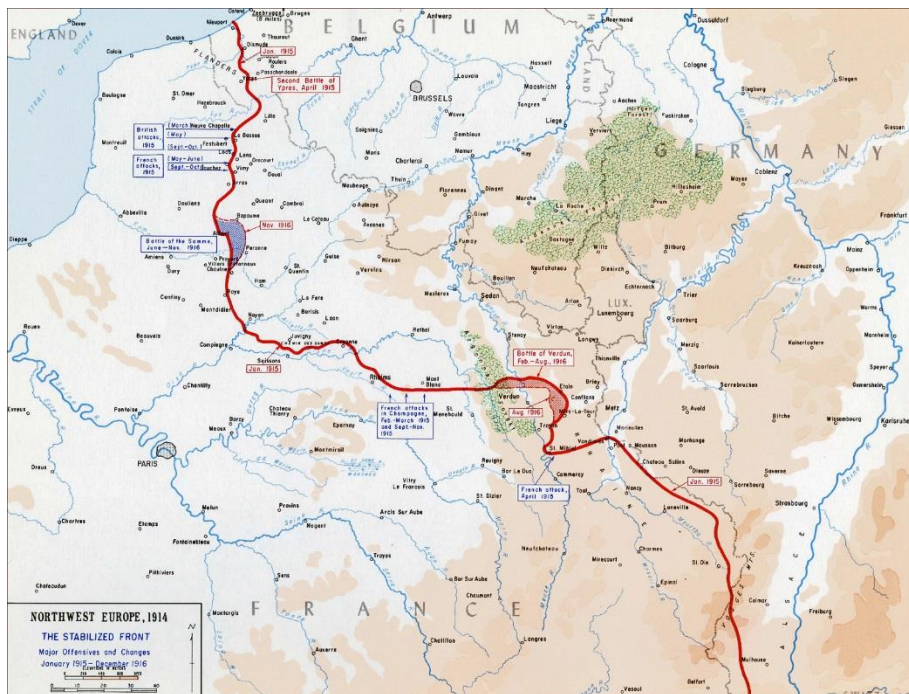
Until this year, I only knew the Battle of the Somme as one of the pantheon of horrific World War I battles (together with Ypres, Vimy Ridge, Passchendale). At the time, the Battle of the Somme was described by Lloyd George as “the most gigantic, tenacious, grim, futile and bloody fight ever waged in the history or war”. Total Allied casualties on its first day alone (July 1) were 57,000 killed and wounded – a day that still holds the record for most casualties in the history of Great Britain. The slaughter of Newfoundland regiments at



*Figure 1. This painting by Captain Kenneth Keith Forbes shows Canadian artillery supporting British troops attacking the village of Thiepval on 16 July 1916 during the Somme offensive.*

Beaumont-Hamel still resonates in infamy on the island<sup>1</sup>. The eventual Allied casualties (killed or wounded) in the Battle of the Somme were 550,000 men, with German casualties of more than 650,000.

The Somme is a short river in northern France, debouching in the English Channel. The Battle of the Somme was fought in 1916 between July 1 and November 18, more or less where



the Western Front crossed the Somme, a location that was almost equidistant from Paris, Brussels and England. It was one of two major battles in 1916, the Battle of Verdun having commenced earlier in the year. The length of the front was about 40 kilometers. Over the next four months, British, French and Dominion (Canadian, Australian and New Zealand) troops

managed to advance about 2-4 km, leaving the Western Front essentially unchanged despite the casualties.

### *The Adjutant*

The letters in the china cabinet were not originals, but a photocopy of a typewritten transcript of the letters which my mother had transcribed about 30 years ago. The transcript did not include salutations so that the identity of the author and recipient do not appear in the china cabinet version. She had obtained the letters after my grandfather's death in 1985. He had served in World War 1, but the letters were not his. His letters were much more mundane though he later had an interesting and successful career as a lawyer and judge, later becoming Chief Justice of the Ontario trial courts and chairman of the Law Reform Commission.

My other grandfather (McIntyre) also served in World War I, serving as a doctor at all the major battles. After the war, he practiced as a surgeon in Toronto. He was a friend and golfing partner with Banting and Best, the discoverers of insulin, but died young.

<sup>1</sup> <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/newfoundland-beaumont-hamel>

By matching details in the letters to contemporary war records, I deduced that the adjutant author was Miles Langstaff, who was from a successful Ontario family, the name of which is attached to a major road to the north of Toronto. Langstaff, like my maternal grandfather, had graduated from Osgoode Law School shortly before the war, gold medalist in the year before my grandfather. My mother later confirmed this deduction.

His addressee, who Langstaff thanked for knitting him a sweater, was presumably my grandmother, Mary (Dow) McRuer, the daughter of a Toronto doctor who lived in the west end of the city near the Humber River (mentioned in a letter).

### *The 75<sup>th</sup> Canadian*

Langstaff was adjutant of the 75th Canadian Battalion<sup>2</sup>, which arrived at the Somme in early October 1916, relieving battalions depleted from previous fighting. The 75th had been recruited in 1915 in the Toronto and Hamilton area. After training in Ontario, it left for overseas on 29 March 1916 and arrived on 9 April 1916. On arrival in England they formed part of the newly created 11th Brigade of the 4th Canadian Division. After further training in England, they were mobilized to France on August 12, 1916, disembarking in Havre.<sup>3</sup> Within 4 days (August 16), the 75<sup>th</sup> was in combat at Voormezele, near Ypres in Belgium. They fought at this location until Sept 17, when relieved by the 13<sup>th</sup> Australian<sup>4</sup>. They then marched west via Locre (10.5 km), Hazebrouck (20.3 km) and Arques (18.5 km) to Nort-leulinghem (18.9 km) on September 22, where they appear to have bivouacked and trained for 10 days, before being sent to the Somme on October 3.

On the day before heading to the Somme, Langstaff, still very green, wrote home, anticipating a “very lively tour for a few weeks”, and also looking forward to the opportunity to improve his French. He was then glowing in praise from their General.

### *October 2, 1916 Letter 32*

*I've just time to write you a couple of pages as we are leaving our nice billets within a few hours and there is rather a rush. It is only a short time since I wrote you, but we are likely to have a very lively tour for a few weeks and it is better to get a letter off now when I have a chance as there will likely be very few opportunities for literary occupations where we are going.*

*This is a lovely country here where we have been staying and we have had beautiful weather - lots of riding over ideal springy open country. Also all kinds of fun talking French to the villagers. If I could remain here a few weeks, I think I might be able to get on pretty well with my French education. Some time I'm going to spend a couple of months in Paris and really learn*

---

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/75th\\_Battalion\\_\(Mississauga\),\\_CEF](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/75th_Battalion_(Mississauga),_CEF), 11th Brigade

<sup>3</sup> <http://data2.collectionscanada.ca/e/e045/e001119976.jpg>

<sup>4</sup> <http://data2.collectionscanada.ca/e/e045/e001120021.jpg>

*the language properly. I knew the grammar pretty thoroughly at one time, and if I could have a month or so to get my vocabulary working right I think it would come pretty easy. I have a little fat French dictionary about two inches square which I use, much to the amusement of the girls in the house here who giggle like forty when I produce it.*

*I'm getting my promotion sooner than I expected although I'm keeping my job as Adjutant for the time being at least. You can address me as "...r" if you like in the next letter. It is also being dated back to ...so that the extra money will be a nice little windfall.*

*I should like to show you my new Army boots - service boots drawn through Ordnance. They are very heavy and "number nines". I got them extra large so as to accommodate an extra pair of socks. I can remember you saying that my other army boots were "immense" or some such word, but these have the old ones beaten by several inches each way.*

*Our General told us yesterday that we were the best Brigade in the Division which I believe is true. (I can hear you smile at this). However, we were not the best Brigade when we left England, and I never made any claim for our Battalion as being the best Battalion after we were broken up by those drafts. In fact, we had a hard job for a good while - the men being all new, a good many of the N.C.O.'s new, and the whole lot very badly disciplined owing to poor training in the early stages in Canada. However, we went at them hard and they are now becoming a very smart and well-behaved lot of men; of which I'm very glad as I had many anxious moments in the early stages, knowing that we didn't have the Battalion properly in hand and that we were not exactly in the shape we would like to have boom before going to the front. I believe now, though that we have the best Battalion in the Division - if not the best, almost certainly the second best. You probably think I'm at my old occupation of bragging, but it's a fact all right.*

### *The Somme Front in October 1916*

Between October 3 and 12, the 75<sup>th</sup> traveled from Nort-leulinghem to Albert, a French town close to the Somme front located on the Ancre River, a tributary of the Somme. Their route took them first on foot to Audruicq (12.6 km), from which they were transported to Doullens (132.3 km) via Calais and Boulogne, arriving at 3 a.m. on the 4<sup>th</sup>. They then marched to the village of Gezaincourt where they were billeted, arriving at 4 am. The following morning, they paraded at 8:30 a.m.<sup>5</sup>, then marched via Beauval to Val de Maison; the next day, via Herissart to Vadencourt; then to Albert, a few miles to the southwest of the front, where they bivouacked<sup>6</sup> at

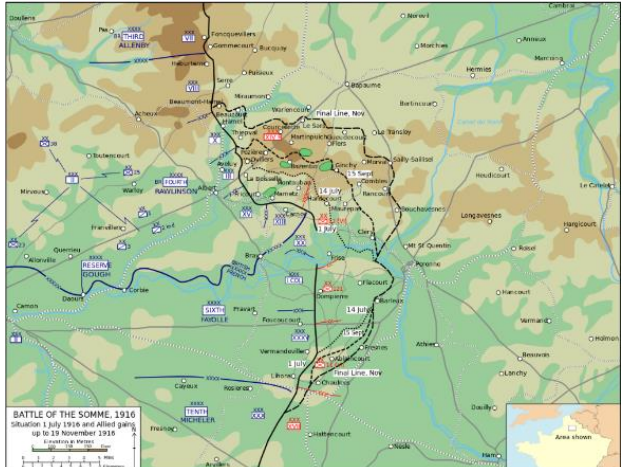
---

<sup>5</sup> An afternoon's march on October 3rd brought the battalion to Audruicq at 5.30 p.m., where train was taken for Doullens, which was reached twelve hours later; Doullens is a fair sized town with tempting out-door cafés, but we were not destined to gain any enjoyment therefrom, marching direct from the station through the town, to Gézaincourt, where were billeted for the night. Gézaincourt proved to be larger than the majority of villages, boasting an extensive hospital building.

<sup>6</sup> McLeod Gould: Hence we proceeded on Oct. 5th to Val de Maison where the night was spent under canvas. The following days march brought us to Vadencourt, an apology for a hamlet lying on the hill.. above Contay where

Tara Hill, a small hill Albert on the Bapaume Road to the west of the town<sup>7</sup>. Other Canadian battalions moved from Ypres to the Somme at the same time, including the 102<sup>nd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> battalions, for both of which there are near-contemporary chronicles.<sup>8</sup>

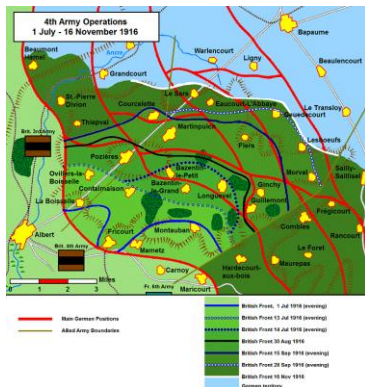
During the previous few months of 1916, the Allied front along the Somme front (which



was located between Beaumont-Hamel on the north and Chaulnes on the south) had advanced several km to the east (compare the 15 Sept front to the 1 July front). This resulted in the gain of a lens-shaped area with a strike length of about 37 km. During the next two months (up to November 18), the Allies would advance the front another km or so in the northern sector.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Brigade (including the 75<sup>th</sup> Canadian battalion) was stationed just to the west of Courcellette, not far from the original killing fields of Beaumont-Hamel. The 2<sup>nd</sup> British Corps was located to its west, with a sector including the village of Thiepval.

The German fortifications along this section of the front consisted of an elaborate network of trenches, with 4-5 main trenches running approximately NW-SE each about 1 km



from one another. The NW-SE trenches were, in turn, connected by cross-cutting trenches<sup>9</sup> so that the entire network was interconnected (see at left). During the summer of 1916, approximately two lines of German trenches had been taken by the Allies, with the front crossing and re-crossing the former German trenches in a complicated geometry. The Canadian brigades were responsible for the front to



the west of Courcellette.

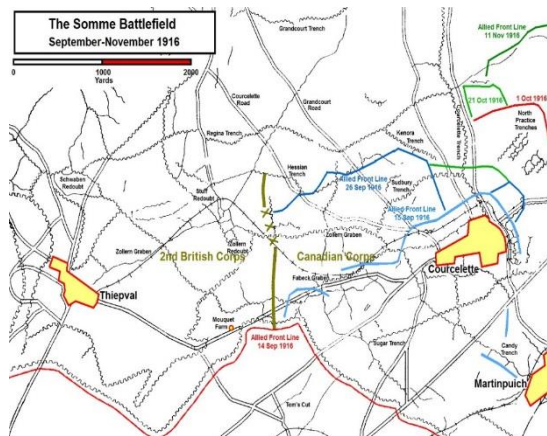
Canadian Corps Headquarters had been established. Vadincourt remains a damp and dismal memory of rain soaked shelters erected in a dripping wood on soggy soil. Here we stayed for three days during the course of which an attack scheme for later use was assiduously practised. On Oct. 10th we left Vadincourt and marched into Albert towards the end of the afternoon.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.102ndbattalioncefc.ca/warpages/102chap4.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.102ndbattalioncefc.ca/warpages/102chap4.htm>

<sup>9</sup> [http://ww1.canada.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/02X209\\_3347\\_9.jpg](http://ww1.canada.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/02X209_3347_9.jpg)

The Canadian front line in October 1916 was located in trenches that had originally been



constructed by the Germans – a topic that Langstaff discusses. Their targets lay to the north. The “Regina Trench” was taken in mid-October and the “Desire Trench”, another km further to the north, was taken in mid-November, just prior to the end of the Battle of the Somme – “end” in this sense denoting only the end of efforts by either party to advance.

The battalions worked “hockey” shifts on the front line. Each shift would be several days. Between shifts, each battalion would rest at bivouac at Tara Hill (slightly southwest of Albert), from which it would march to the front to relieve the battalion finishing its shift. The march would be about 8 miles, but through fearsome mud and difficult conditions.

On October 11 (immediately after arriving in Albert), the 75<sup>th</sup>, together with other companies, marched from the Tara Hill camp to the trenches, relieving the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Battalion. Battalion headquarters were located in a dugout in Courcellette. They stayed at the front for 3 days, being relieved<sup>10</sup> by 54<sup>th</sup> during night of October 13-14, returning to Chalk Pits, half a mile south of Pozières near Contalmaison, where it bivouacked in dugouts. On their first engagement on the front, 3 were killed and 41 wounded.<sup>i</sup> The 75<sup>th</sup> remained at the Chalk Pits for 9 days, before returning to the front on October 23. During this period, there was a German counter-attack resulting in 26 casualties (6 killed; 26 wounded).

On October 16, Langstaff wrote home. He started the letter from a former German dugout.

### October 16 Letter 33

*I didn't think I would be able to get a chance to write for a good while, but we have only had a short tour in the trenches (long enough for everybody, though, as it was red hot) and are back again in reserve. I am writing this in a very comfortable German dug-out evidently occupied at some time not long ago by a battery commander. The left wing is a neat little kitchen with a stove; the hallway is a winding stair and contains a pantry at the end; the right wing is a good sized dining-room; and on the bottom floor is a big bedroom with a wardrobe. I've seen some very fine German dug-outs. Most of them are twice as deep as ours, some of them four times as deep. We were using one big dug-out a short while ago for a dressing station, and it*

<sup>10</sup> 54<sup>th</sup> Battalion: “The following day we moved forward and took up our residence in the Chalk Pits (of evil memory), staying there for three days and going into the line in front of Courcellette on the 14th of October, relieving the 75th Battalion” [http://54thbattalioncef.ca/?page\\_id=149](http://54thbattalioncef.ca/?page_id=149)

*had galleries big enough to accommodate 60 men; others can hold several hundreds, but I've not seen any as big as that. I was in one the other day that had a brass bedstead and our Battalion Orderly Room while we were in the front line had chairs (one of them with a plush bottom), sleeping cubicles and a big hanging mirror with gilt frame. Another dug-out nearby was about*



*25 feet below ground, but at one side was a stairway leading still further down into the earth.*

*You would never find our men doing work enough to make dug-outs of this description. They would rather rush up a lean-to with a corrugated iron roof and lots of ventilation and take a chance on a whizz-bang coming through the roof.*

*The tours in the line are very short in this part of the country as the strain is too great for the men to stand it long and the casualties are pretty heavy. They keep putting battalions in the line for short stretches taking them out and giving them a rest or a march, and then back in the line again. Strange to say, marching is almost as good as a rest, because the very monotony of it is good for the men's nerves and the physical exercise makes them hard. The nerves appear to be the weak spot in so many of the men and often the great big husky lubbers are the ones that break down most easily. One of our fellows went clean off his head yesterday after getting back here and it was necessary to sit on him until Maj. Wilson could be got at and put an injection of morphine into him to quiet him down.*

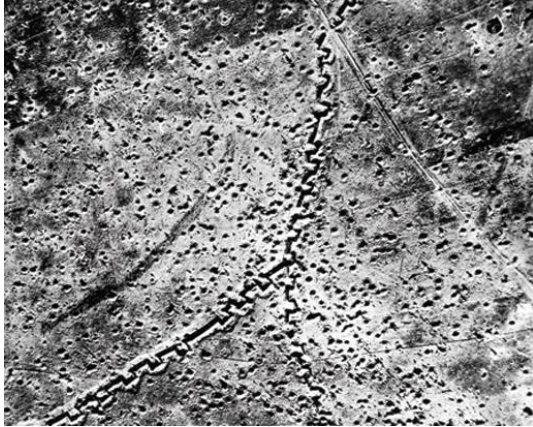
---

*Was interrupted here by a tremendous burst of artillery fire from the batteries all around us and went out to see what was up. We had an alarm earlier in the evening when the Huns apparently made a surprise attack on some portion of our front line and we were ordered to stand to in case of emergency (although we are several miles behind the line) while the batteries for miles around roared for an hour. They are at it again now and the row is terrific. We are quite near a number of battery positions, - although for that matter you are near them wherever you go for this country is crammed with them. The sight outside my door is magnificent. Wonderful clear chilly night with bright moon, the whole country as far as the eye can reach is lit up with bursts of flame from the guns - the nearer bright flashes being British and the more distant pale diffused gleams, the Huns artillery. Again, it is the poor old infantry that gets it - the massed artillery on both sides blazing away with shrapnel and high explosive against the infantry in the opposite line. Here, around the battery positions not a shell is falling although we are within comparatively easy reach of hundreds of the German guns. I used to read about "artillery duels" and picture these artillery coons hurling tons of metal at the guns of the opposing side; but the real up-to-date way of conducting an artillery duel is to fire at the other fellow's infantry. It reminds one of the three-cornered duel in Midshipman. Easy where*

*everybody fired at somebody else than the man who fired at him.*

*Things are quieting down a little again, and judging from indications the poor old Hum has been repulsed for the second time this evening.*

*This is the most interesting portion of the front at the present time and I wish I could tell you where we are or about a lot of things that we are doing. The concentration of guns on both*



*Figure 1. An aerial view of the shell-pocked landscape surrounding Regina and Kenora trenches on the Somme, fall 1916.  
<https://legionmagazine.com/en/2011/07/slaughter-on-the-somme/>*

*sides is terrific - I suppose beyond anything ever reached before - and as a result almost every foot of the ground has been shelled. You can dig a trench in pretty nearly any direction by simply linking up adjacent shell holes - some of them 20 or 25 feet wide and deep in proportion. There are scarcely any trees left anywhere, a few scarred scraggy trunks here and there indicate what was once a wood. As for villages, a good many of them have been so completely obliterated that it is sometimes difficult to find a*

*whole brick in the place and the streets are completely blotted off the map. The villages that have been most heavily shelled are so completely levelled that 200 yards away you can't distinguish them from the rest of the ground; and even those that have escaped most, lightly look like Pompeii transported above ground.*

*You can't imagine the desolation of the country. You say you think you can imagine what the trenches look like (although I doubt it), but certainly no person who hasn't seen this country could possibly picture it to himself. What impresses one is the tremendous wastage. In addition to the destruction of villages, etc. which involves a certain amount of loss there is the throwing away of millions and millions of dollars worth of ammunition daily (this isn't any exaggeration) and there is a tremendous inevitable waste of other material and equipment. Almost all the captured trenches are strewn with equipment of all kinds - rifles, bayonets, small arm ammunition, grenades, helmets, coats, rubber sheets, gas masks, and a hundred other varieties of expensive stuff - some of it smashed, some of it simply abandoned and rusting on the ground. Some of this is German, a good deal of it is British. Some effort is made to salvage this stuff, but with a thousand more important things to attend to and the danger attending every effort to wander around picking up stuff (on account of the shelling which generally commences when any movement is seen) there must be millions of dollars worth of stuff which simply goes to waste.*

While the 75<sup>th</sup> was on its shift at Chalk Pits, Regina Trench was taken by the 87<sup>th</sup> and 102<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Battalions on October 21. The events were summarized by a later historian as follows:



*The 11th Brigade was aimed at a 600-yard stretch of Regina Trench on 21 October, just east of the Courcelette Trench. The 87th and 102nd Battalions attacked just after noon and in fewer than 15 minutes both units had arrived at the objective, pleased to find the German wire had been shattered by a systematic bombardment. They made effective use of the barrage, which also had killed many Germans in their front line positions. Survivors had little fight remaining and were eager to surrender. By 1:00 p.m. 160 Germans were taken prisoner and two hours later the 87th Battalion, attacking on the right of the line, had established a block 200 yards east of the Courcelette-Pys road. The 200 Canadian casualties had mostly resulted from German shellfire after the objective had been reached.*

The events were memorialized in a contemporary account by a soldier in the 102<sup>nd</sup> as follows:

*On the evening of Oct. 18th the 102nd Bn. took over from the 87th Bn. the front line trenches on the left sector of the Brigade, situated on a line running from R. 18, c. 4, 0. to M. 13, d, 2, 2., this being a front of 500 yards extending from Courcelette Trench on the left flank to Ross Communication Trench on the right. The night, was very dark and it was raining hard, so that the ground was a sea of mud with quagmires on every side, making the trenches almost impassable. As the men were lining up in the Support Trench the enemy delivered a bombing attack on the left flank of the 87th Bn. Word was passed down that the Hun was attacking and that the 102nd was to come up on the double. This was done in absolute silence and as the men passed Headquarters, jumping over trenches and shell-holes, they looked like phantoms in the dark, illumined by the light of German flares and leaping to the crash of bursting shells. Here and there a man was seen to fall, the shelling being very heavy, but the bombers were driven off and the rest of the night spent in preparation for the morrow's work. Rain continued and throughout the night there was constant shelling.*

*Day broke with rain pouring down in torrents, making the ground absolutely impassable and the Higher Command decided to postpone operations until the 21st inst. "B", "C", and "D" Coys. therefore returned to camp at Tara Hill, leaving "A" Co. to hold the line. Never did the men of the 102nd better deserve their reputation for physique and tenacity of purpose than in their fight against the mud after their exhausting night in the trenches. The mud was hip-high between the trenches and the Bapaume Road and the men had to be literally dug out by their comrades as they sank exhausted in the liquid, glue-like substance. The weather cleared, the ground becoming somewhat more dry and on the evening of the 20th the three companies were again brought into the front line, relieving "A" Co. which went into Support. During the night of Oct. 20-21 the three companies worked hard at digging assembly trenches in which to mass and at forming battalion dumps; the men worked magnificently and at dawn all was ready.*

*Zero hour was fixed for 12-06 P.m. and at that hour the barrage opened and the men of the 102nd went "over the top"; following the barrage like a wall lying down until it again lifted and advancing as it moved, all in perfect uniformity. The first two waves consisted of "C" Co. under Maj. J. S. Matthews on the left and "B" Co. under Maj. H. E. H. Dixon on the right. The*

remaining two waves were furnished by "D" Co. under Major G. Rothnie. The moment that the barrage lifted over Regina Trench the men were over the parapet; the assault was carried out with such dash, vigour and impetuosity that the Germans were completely demoralized and immediately threw up their hands in surrender. The first wave passed 150 yards beyond the trench, forming a screen; the second rounded up the prisoners and consolidated the positions secured, in which they were assisted by men of the third wave, whilst the fourth wave was occupied in carrying up supplies from the old dumps to the new. For his magnificent services in this work of consolidation under heavy fire Lieut. R. P. Matheson received the Military Cross. The casualties sustained in the assault itself were very light, amounting to about five killed and ten wounded, as the enemy barrage did not come down until about six minutes after ours had started; the Germans, however, had suffered heavily and their trench was piled with dead and wounded.



Our casualties were to occur later, when within an hour and a half, three separate counter-attacks were launched; these were all successfully opposed, but during the remainder of the day and the ensuing night and day, when "A" Co. under Capt. J. F. Brandt arrived to relieve "D" Co., a constant barrage of shell fire was poured into our positions, with the result that the total casualty list showed six officers and 46 Other Ranks killed with eight and seventy wounded.

On the night of the 23rd the [102<sup>nd</sup>] battalion was relieved by the 54th and the men marched to the Chalk Pits, half a mile south of Pozières, where they went into dug-outs for rest and reorganization.

On October 23, as the 102<sup>nd</sup> was being relieved, the 75<sup>th</sup> marched from the Chalk Pits to the trenches, relieving the 87<sup>th</sup>. B and C Companies occupied the front line (now Regina Trench), with A Company in support and D Company in reserve at Sugar Trench. Front line was now in Regina Trench. In the middle of the first night of this tour, Langstaff wrote home, describing the march to the front.

#### *24th Oct 2.10 A.M. Letter 34*

*You evidently object to my writing letters in the wee sma' hours but it is something I have to do quite frequently. The Col. is taking a snooze and I have to sit up till it is my turn for a nap.*

*I had to bring the Battalion in to the front line as the Colonel and Maj. Keith had already gone up the line, and the guides led us all wrong and the dark came on and the whole column was halted a dozen times in the most dangerous part of the passage but in spite of everything we got them in without a single casualty.*

*It is astonishing how hard it is here to find the way after nightfall. The country is swept so*

*absolutely bare that there are very few landmarks left, the nights are dark and rainy, guides have very little chance to reconnoitre their territory in advance, and consequently there are many battalions that go astray in coming up to relieve their section of the line. The roads have to be avoided as far as possible, because they are so constantly shelled and as for trenches - most places there are none, and many of those that might be used are too muddy to be passable. You can try to imagine, but I don't think you will succeed, a long column of men, a mile nearly in length, crawling (that is the only word that expresses it because the men are loaded to the ears with picks, shovels, rifles, three or more days' rations, water cans, rifle and machine gun ammunition, bombs and other junk) along a faint path in the dark, falling into shell-holes, tripping on wire, etc. Every time a man stumbles, he halts the whole column behind him and by the time he is picked up and set on his feet and loaded up again with all his junk the part of the column ahead of him has likely disappeared in the darkness. Then, if you are walking at the head of the Battalion, you get a message passed up that part of the Battalion has dropped behind. Then you halt the procession and send back some one to pick up the severed Company or Platoon. A couple of shells come along and the men start to fidget. Then after about a month of waiting you get a report from the rear "Line closed up, Sir" and the men (who have been all sitting down in the mud resting) climb up again, sling on their paraphernalia, and toddle along again. This may sound like an exaggeration of the difficulties, but as a matter of fact it isn't. In fact, once or twice, whole Companies of some Battalions have got lost and gone wandering about until daylight; and very likely we would have shed several platoons on our way up the line tonight if I had not taken the lessons learned from other Battalions to heart, and steadfastly refused to proceed at any stage of the journey until I was sure that the whole Battalion was joined up behind.*

*You may wonder why it is necessary to load the men up like pack-mules. The rations and water are necessary, because in some positions it is very hard to get supplies up from outside; the tools are needed for entrenching, and the bombs and ammunition are perhaps the most necessary of all, because many positions have been lost through ammunition running out.*

*There was a goat that followed us in to-night, and when last seen he was running along the parapets of the front line trench. The men are expectantly waiting for a whizz-bang to get him, when they hope to be able to find the fragments and have some fresh meat.*

*You would laugh to see the quarters in which I'm writing this - an old German dugout about 10 feet square and seven feet high with 11 men in it - viz. the C.O., myself, signalling officer, a liaison officer from the artillery, a signaller on our phone, one on the artillery phone, our Battalion Sergt. Major (the old chap you heard recite - rather too old for this game, but as full of courage as can be), a batman or two, etc. You can imagine what the atmosphere is like with the dirty old dugout reeking of mud and tinned beef and wet clothes and candles and (I regret to state) rum, with the Col. and the gentleman from the artillery snoring on the ramshackle bed and a blanket over the door to prevent the glow of the candles from attracting playful offerings from the Hun artillery. The last dugout we occupied was evidently spotted by the enemy as we had a*

*shell across the opening half a dozen times a day, blowing out all the candles every time and knocking down stairs the bunch of runners who insisted on sitting there. The battalion which succeeded us there had the entrance completely blocked by a shell and they had to telephone to people at another station to come and dig them out.*

*I keep wishing all the time that I could have a kodak over here. You see things every hour that will never be seen in peace time and which would make wonderful snaps. I wish I could give you a photo of the Col. Adjutant, etc. of the Battalion we relieved to-night. They belong to a very "swell" battalion, but their appearance when we relieved them was cream. Some of them were plastered with mud, all of them were dirty as tramps, none of them had shaved for nearly a week and had about ½ inch of whisker all over them, and they were so absurdly tired that they would talk a little and doze off, talk a little more and doze again. I notice you say Lewis Duncan is reported as immaculate as ever. Well, he probably has better opportunities for keeping neat - in fact I've seen shower baths in some of the artillery establishments - but the infantry in the line certainly don't get much chance to polish up their faces.*

The 75<sup>th</sup> remained on the front for three days of intense fighting, during which they incurred 52 casualties (11 killed; 41 wounded). On October 26, still in the trenches, Langstaff continued his letter home:

#### *24th Oct Letter 34 continued*

*Have been working for about 2 hours on a German rifle which I picked up yesterday in the front line trench. It was covered with mud and looked no use for anything but I got at it to-night and took it to pieces and cleaned it thoroughly so that now it is as good as new and works like a charm. I'm going to take it home and put it over the mantelpiece in my den, along with all the other curios that I'm amassing. The chief difficulty is to carry it about here. I think the best solution is to arm Langford with it and let him carry it about with him instead of a Lee Enfield rifle. I have a little German ammunition and this rifle is just as good as you could want.*

*We have had a hard and exciting time of it during the last 2 ... .... and the weather has been awful. I have long boots up to my knees and in places the mud is over my boots and runs into the tops of them. Quite often a man gets stuck and has to be pulled out by his comrades and sometimes even dug out with a spade. There is no road that I ever saw before like this stuff. It looks like chocolate pudding but doesn't smell as nice. Almost everybody is caked with it, just like the buffalos you see at the Zoo. The trenches become simply troughs for it and get churned up by the traffic until they become practically impassable and everybody walks right overland in spite of the bullets rather than struggle through it. A walk of 2 or 3 miles around the front area is enough to exhaust anybody. You probably think these are some more exaggerations but they aren't.*

*I regret to report that the socks you knit for me are in a shocking condition - their own*

*author wouldn't recognize them.*

*We have had very hard luck to-day, especially about noon when a shell came through the next dugout and killed three of my signallers and wounded six others. I feel worse about them than about almost anything that has happened to us because the so were such splendid intelligent fellows and nearly the most valuable men in the Battalion. I've always kept a kind of partial eye on the signallers, even since Dunlop took over the job of Signalling Officer.*

*We are likely going out of the line for a short rest to-morrow night as the men are all in and we have had pretty heavy casualties. There was an attack on our flank to-day in which the adjoining battalion got badly out of it and although our share in the actual fighting was comparatively small we had to stand the artillery strafing that always attends these things. I had to go over the frontage of the adjoining battalion to find out what the situation was as the Brigadier wanted a report and saw some rotten sights.*

*We have a fine Brigadier General. I don't think I have said much about him before although he has been with us since the Brigade left Bramshott and for some time before that. His name is Odium, comes from Victoria, B.C., and was Colonel of the 7th Battalion which is recognized as probably the best Battalion in the first Division, doesn't smoke or drink, is a tremendous driver (I mean he works men and officers unmercifully) but for brains and energy and courage I don't believe there is a Brigadier General in the British Army that can touch him. Not that I imply a wide and intimate acquaintance with Brigadier Generals but anyhow I'd back him against all the others no matter who they are and whether I know them or not. He's quite young - not much over 40 I should say, perhaps not 40.*

*He's an unusually good speaker for a man who is not a professional talker, and the last time the Brigade was at its training area he gave a splendid address to the officers of the Brigade - the gist of which was that there was one weakness and one only in the British Army - and that was the officers. He meant that the men make ideal soldiers and will do anything that it is physically possible for men to do, but the officers are not relatively as good as the men. There is no doubt he is quite right, although the reason likely is that the training of an officer takes years and one could hardly expect us with a war chucked at us so suddenly to develop a whole array of uniformly proficient officers in a couple of years. That is the advantage the Germans and French have, and I realise it more and more. They had at the commencement of the war thousands of highly trained officers and especially officers capable of the higher staff work, who naturally require the longest training. I have no doubt this war would end a lot sooner if we had better staff work - it seems to me since I got over here the biggest weakness in our army - although probably it is not so bad when one considers how short a time we have been at it.*

*I must quit now as it is 2 A.M. and I'm very sleepy - although I'm not altogether clear where I'm to sleep as the Col. and the Scout Officer are sleeping on the old bed and all the chairs and ammunition boxes in the place have somebody sitting or sprawling on them - all sound asleep. Things generally are quiet at nights and even the everlasting shelling slows down to some extent; but somebody always has to be on duty because if anything happens various things have to be*

*done and done quick.*

*On looking over the situation carefully, I've decided that the most comfortable place is where the Col. is sleeping, so I'm going to wake him up, using as a pretext a despatch which has just come in - then while he sets up and reads it I'll nobble his side of the bed and go to sleep before he grasps the fact that he has been outmanoeuvred. At least, that's the plan of attack I'm going to try, although this scheme (like the plans of all great strategists) may have to be modified according to circumstances. If he engages me in talk while he reads the message I may have to sit on the bed and pretend to listen for a few moments, but on the whole I think I can beat him out if I once get sitting on the bed with him at the table*

On October 26, the 75<sup>th</sup> returned to Tara Hill on the other side of Albert. Langstaff described the trip of about 10 km in a letter home.

### *Oct 29 Letter 35*

*We've had two days very welcome rest in a new camp. About a mile away we can see the tower of a famous old church, surmounted by a huge statue of the Virgin which has been struck by a shell and hangs, suspended by a bit of iron railing, head downwards. We have had two very fine sunsets since we got here and when you see this shattered tower standing out clear and distinct in the light of the descending sun with a mass of angry, lowering lurid clouds piled up against it as a background - and then look away from it to the surrounding country, dotted on every side as far as the eye can reach with camps and shelters, transport lines, guns and piles of ammunition - with the roads deep in mud and covered with long unbroken lines of toiling transport - it's the best and most typical picture of WAR that I've ever looked upon.*

*Our weather here has been very bad for a good while back - rainy and cold and awful mud. Everybody will be very glad when we get a chance for a decent rest again. You have no idea what conditions are like in wet weather in the trenches - mud everywhere scarcely any shelter and constant shelling (they say in the Toronto papers that the Huns are running short of ammunition but the editors must have inside information to which we have not access - we see no indications of it here) and after 3 or 4 days everybody is all in. When we came out two nights ago, we pushed the men as fast as possible (which was fully 2 miles per hour) till they got past the worst of the shelled area and then halted them for a rest. You would have laughed to see that line collapse - they just flopped down like seals in the mud and water. We had to move then on again in a very short time for fear some of them would go to sleep there. (As a matter of fact, when we were being relieved one night a couple of weeks ago and halted on the way out for a short rest, the Colonel was so tired that he went fast asleep and had to be waked up again and told it was time to move on). The roads are getting awful and have, in addition, been badly smashed by shell fire. To make matters worse, the nights are black as pitch, there being no moon, and every few yards you are precipitated down to the bottom of a shell hole in the road*

and have to scabble up the other side. We were relieved that night at 12.30 A.M. and it took me till nearly 5 o'clock hard walking with only about 10 minutes halt to get home. Some groups of the Battalion didn't get in till 7 o'clock....

On October 30, the 75<sup>th</sup> moved from Tara Hill to billets in Albert, where they stayed for three days. While in camp at Tara Hill, two soldiers intentionally wounded themselves, laconically recorded in the War Diaries as follows:

Tara Hill	Oct 29	Casualties :-	678518 Pte Baker, J. R.	Wounded (self-inflicted)
			139586 " Gardner, W.	do

Self-inflicted wounds were treated harshly: soldiers were court martialed and could be shot for cowardice or sentenced to up to seven years of jail. Langstaff was required to prosecute a case and found it impossible to rationalize punishing a soldier who had broken under the extreme stress against the easy lot of those who had stayed at home or took secure and safe office jobs in the overseas army, as discussed in the following letter (not in sequence in sheaf) but apparently from early November.

~November 1, 1916.

*We have been having quite a crop of Court Martials lately which are a nuisance. I had the unpleasant job recently of having to prosecute one of our men charged with cowardice, and was afraid the Court would shoot him, but he got off with 7 years Penal Servitude. There are not many Canadians shot, but occasionally one sees in orders that some chap has been given the extreme punishment. It is necessary for the sake of discipline, although it seems a little incongruous that a man who has come over here and whose nerve has failed through some constitutional weakness or other should be shot, while other men at home who may not be any braver get off.*

*Most of our Court Martial cases are "self-inflicted wounds". Sometimes these are cases of men who have shot themselves in the foot or hand or some other safe place so as to get out of the game and into the hospital where they are safe and well cared for. More usually, though, they are the result of pure carelessness. We must have had 10 or 20 cases of men injuring themselves or others by carelessness with bombs or rifles or rockets or torpedoes, etc. The first three casualties we had were caused by men using two Bangalore torpedoes to rest a dixie on while they cooked their dinner. These torpedoes look for all the world like lengths of gas pipe, and these chaps simply laid them parallel, put on the pot and lit the fire. The result may be imagined. We have had one officer killed and one wounded and I don't know how many men put out of business by tinkering with bombs. As for rifles! It is simply impossible to make the men use proper care in cleaning and handling rifles. One of our brightest Sergeants was killed at the Somme by a man who was cleaning his rifle with the charge in the breech. The only way to our tail the thing is to Court-Martial everybody who accidentally wounds himself.*

*I think I told you that we are in a Section of the line which once upon a time was French. More or less all the present British line was at one time French, of course, but this bit seems to me more characteristically French than anything else I've seen. The trenches, many of them, are still called by the French names - "Boyan"- "boyau" being the French word for a trench, although I'm not sure whether it is in the dictionary. The French made a big advance here at one time apparently one of the first of the relatively big pushes and gained a lot of ground part of which, I regret to say, was afterwards lost by the British (the last episode was probably not in the papers). There are French and German graves all over the place - sometimes a large number of men buried together. In one place there is a very large grave with an inscription "Fifty-eight soldiers of France, dead on the field of honour" and just beside it another mound "Sixty Germans".*

*I feel very sorry for a lot of people at home who have lost sons or husbands, etc. and whose letters I'm constantly getting asking for information. They always want to know where the soldier was buried. In most cases at the Somme, it's impossible to answer the question. Bodies had to be buried mostly at night, on the spot, and hundreds of them couldn't be buried at all. Personally, it wouldn't make any difference to me where I was buried or whether at all, but I know how some people feel about it, and if it gives them any satisfaction to know about this point I'd like to be able to give them the information. We are thinking of having a tablet erected in Albert Cemetery with the names of our men who were killed or missing at the Somme. We could then have a photograph taken of it and that would constitute something which would be sent to these people who inquire.*

*We have had a couple of Majors attached to us for instruction during the past week. One of them is all right but the other seems to have little relish for this kind of work. I understand that they*

The following out-of-sequence page in the transcript appears to be from early November.

*...in the affair ourselves if the weather had permitted the attack being pulled off during our tour. So far our Brigade has done the best work of any Brigade in the Division and has had nearly all the difficult jobs assigned to it in the attacks. I see by a paper of some days ago that Haig has specially mentioned the Canadians' work i.e. 4th Division.*

*A parson from one of the other Battalions dropped in to-night and told us about the show. He was standing the whole time at an advanced dressing station near our old Battalion Headquarters. I don't know anything about him except that he had a broad Scotch accent and refused a drink (which few of the chaplains here are accustomed to do) but I know the place where he stood and there is no doubt he is the right kind of a parson. I'm certainly glad to be a Presbyterian for the two or three Presbyterian chaplains who I've met have been head and shoulders above the others. There is a great deal of good the chaplains can do here if they are the right kind of men, but many of them ought to be kept at home. Nobody respects a man who*



*shirks his work and grows fat and sleek while the fellows in the ranks grow thin and who skulks around the back areas which the worst wounded men never live to reach.*

*This Scotch clergyman was telling us about a German officer who was brought in slightly wounded, while he was there, to our old dressing station. Somebody yelled to him as he went down the steps of the dugout to mind his head - the door was low. "O shut up", he said. "I knew this place before you did". - (The dressing station is in an old dugout which the Germans held some time ago).*

*I think I wrote you that while at Bramshott, the A.D.M.S. had our medical officer, Major Wilson, side-tracked on to a hospital job, because he said Maj. W. was too old and slow for work at the front (and most of us rather agreed with it). We got a young fellow, McKillop, in his place, who was a dandy - he had been at the front with the first Division and had done splendid work and right up-to-date, besides being a most likeable little fellow personally. He was too good to keep though and the Division stole him from us. So we got Maj. Wilson back again. However, since we got over here, he has surprised everybody. He always was very popular with the officers but I used to think he rather neglected the men and didn't take their sicknesses seriously enough. But here he is right on the job. I can see now what his ideas at Niagara and Toronto and Bramshott were. He refused to "baby" the men or to encourage their little minor complaints. Now that they are up against the real thing, he is Fine. He works all hours, gives the men all kinds of attention, isn't afraid of ANYTHING and can stand the racket better than most [of] the young officers. He certainly is a fine loyal likeable old chap. A regimental Medical officer is entitled to all the Credit in the world. He has a terrible job to handle, even out of the line. Think of a whole battalion of anywhere from 500 to 1000 men (depending on its casualties and reinforcements), a large proportion of these fagged out, sick from exposure, with rheumatism, colds, cramps, trench feet, etc. He often has a sick parade of 100 men to attend to. Then when in the trenches, he has all the casualties to attend to, which is terribly heavy work, sometimes besides dangerous in many cases I think these regimental doctors ought to get special pay or some other reward to compensate him - especially in view of the fact that most of the decorations (easily  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them) go to the fancy "specialists" in base hospitals, who draw big money, have regular hours, comfortable meals and lodging and no more danger than at home - probably less. But these chaps in the hospitals have the pull - the very fact that they get the hospital jobs proves they have it - and that gets them the medals as well.*

*You probably think this is exaggerated but it isn't and I could tell you a lot more about it if this letter were not setting too long already. You meet a lot of people who have made tremendous sacrifices in coming here - lots of them with families at home and businesses going to ruin -*

On November 4, they returned to the Chalk Pits near Contalmaison, incurring two wounds (one on duty and one self-inflicted). In early November, Langstaff wrote Letter 34 (the beginning of which is missing) from a dug-out, presumably in the Chalk Pits before going to the front.

*~November 4, 1916 Letter 34*

*... of the Canadian Divisions. In fact, the more I read of newspaper accounts - some of them of operations in which our own Brigade has been engaged - the less value I attach to their accuracy. Most of them are obviously written by correspondents who never got nearer the front than some half-way artillery "O Pip" (Observation Post) and are very largely tinged with imagination or misinformation.*

*The Canadians have done very well over here - better, as far as I can see than many of the most famous British regiments. The "Guards" have probably had more advertising than anybody else (naturally so, because all the aristocracy of England have got some relative in the Guards and newspaper correspondents realize that when they write their articles) but the Canadians have had harder tasks and won much more ground than the Guards - in fact they've made the most spectacular advances of anybody go far. This isn't any disparagement of the Guards who are certainly GOOD and have us beaten all hollow for discipline and probably organization; but I think our fellows have better physique as our men and more initiative. The Australians have just as good physique as our men, probably a little better, but their discipline is rotten. We have probably just as good discipline as most of the British regiments - a lot better than the Australians and a lot worse than the Guards.*

*Our poor old band has been having a hard time - on carrying parties nearly every night, which is hard work and very risky. The big drummer was killed a couple of weeks ago and a good many others have been killed or put out of business for the time being. These casualties are the worst side of this business. It makes one feel rotten to lose officers and men that you have got attached to. We have had very hard luck in Officers, and the 9th Mississauga bunch are dwindling down to a comparatively small minority. On the whole we have been very lucky in the officers sent to as on drafts - we have landed some very fine fellows and very few dubs. We are also promoting a number of our NCO's (but I think I told you about that in a former letter - but I imagine one or more of my despatches have gone astray in the English Channel. In future I'm going to number my envelopes so that you can tell if there's a letter missing. This one we'll call 10, next one 11, etc.).*

*You ask if it's possible to get out of the front line for riding etc. Ordinarily it's not possible to do so, but occasionally something calls me out to the Brigade or Division or somewhere else (for instance when we were preparing for our raid where we were a month or so ago, I was acting as O.C. Raid and had to go back several times to the Camp 4 or 5 miles in rear where our raiding party was training) and when that happens I can have my groom bring my horse up as far as is reasonably safe, and I ride him back from there.*

*You ask whether it was nerves with Maj. Povah. No, he had a slight shrapnel wound, but came back to duty. He can't stand the pace, however and will likely be out of the game before many weeks. He may get a job as Officer in Command of a German Prisoners' Company; i.e. guarding them, superintending their work, etc.*

*We see lots of prisoners here - all kinds: old and young, good physique and poor, Prussians, Saxons, Bavarians, Westphalians and Jews. They had a naval division (marines) opposing us a short time ago commanded by an Admiral!*

*There are all kinds of trophies if a fellow could only cart them away. I have a German helmet, gas mask, couple of water bottles, badges, rifle, bomb, etc. The big difficulty is to carry them around. I have solved the rifle problem by arming Langford with it.*

*I was talking to someone of the prisoners captured by our Brigade and they are beginning to doubt the result all right. I asked them if they thought Germany was going to win and they nearly all said "No". I asked them who would win then, and they said "Neither" and added something about both sides being too strong to beat or something to that effect which I couldn't exactly make out.*

*I must quit here as it is getting late and I must get a good sleep to-night. I find it is advisable to grab a little sleep extra whenever a chance offers because you get very little in the line. I have got now so that I can sleep at any time of day, in any place, in any position, and under any circumstances. Nearly everybody else is the same way and the favourite amusement when not employed is to go to sleep. You ask about Punch. I haven't seen him very often and if you see a good number sometimes AND ARE NOT KEEPING them for binding, I'd be awfully glad to get one occasionally, but don't please go to any trouble about it, or send me any of them if you are keeping them yourself. We sometimes get a good deal of time to read - when in billets, or even in the line when things are quiet enough and there is nothing on we can get a good deal of reading in by candlelight in dugouts - other times we don't get a chance to read anything on account of things moving too fast.*

*Must stop here as already observed. These letters are very badly scrawled but I'm lying full length on my stomach on the floor of the dugout with an old candle spluttering away and the water dripping on to the paper. I used to try to write neat letters but it's impossible here.*

### *November 4 Letter 36*

*We did not go into the line - to-day as we expected, so we have 3 days more of glorious rest. The Battalion is moved away from its comfortable (though crowded) billets, however, and shoved up a little closer to the line, in among the guns which keep pounding away night and day.*

*Forbes Keith and I paid a visit a couple of days ago to the French lines and came back much impressed by their organization. We rode for 15 or 20 miles and saw a good deal of their territory. I can quite believe that they are as so often asserted, the finest soldiers in the world. Splendid discipline, healthy good physique, cheerful, very intelligent keen looking fellows; and everywhere a thousand indications of a wonderfully oiled smooth-working military machine. They have the advantage of course of having had a big army, highly trained staff and a running machine before the war began; but even allowing for all that, there is no doubt they are naturally magnificent soldiers. We came across a French officer who spoke remarkably good*

*English and had a most interesting talk with him, comparing details of equipment, etc.*

*It's fine to get an afternoon off like that, with nothing to worry about. The worst of my present job is that one must always be on duty, night and day and every day, with scarcely any exceptions. I wish you could see things over here - see the tremendous traffic on any of these main roads which makes you think of London; see the guns, light, medium, heavy; see the quaint devices for concealing ammunition, huts, etc. from hostile aircraft; see the thousands of German prisoners working on the roads; see the big observation balloons and the aircraft constantly shelling overhead. The aircraft, especially, are a great sight. If there is one single department where we have Fritz outclassed it is in the air service. On clear days you can see 10, 20, 30 - sometimes 40 of our big observation balloons up and not a single Hun aircraft of any description - or sometimes 3 or 4 balloons away behind their lines which keep very low down and ready for immediate descent when attacked. As for aeroplanes, often you can count 30 or...*

On November 7, they marched from the Chalk Pits to the front line at Regina Trench, with battalion headquarters "in a large dugout at the edge of Death Valley near the intersection of 10<sup>th</sup> Street"<sup>11</sup>. Their shift was three days long, being relieved by the 102<sup>nd</sup> on November 10. This tour was relatively uneventful, with only three casualties (3 wounded). Langstaff's letter home on November 8 explained why: they were located in a deep dugout, where they were perfectly safe:

### *November 8 Letter 37*

*At my old favorite occupation - writing letters in the middle of the night, or rather a couple of hours past the middle of the night. Am also located as usual in a Bosche dug-out - the deepest one I was ever in, with long galleries dug in the chalk, where I am as safe as though walking with you in the Humber valley<sup>12</sup>. It is very satisfying to feel that you have 20 feet of earth and*

---

<sup>11</sup> The chronicler of the 102<sup>nd</sup> battalion describes the location thus: "It was a busy scene on which the men looked down from their camp on the top of Tara Hill. The Albert-Bapaume Road was literally alive by day and night with a never-ending stream of vehicles of all kinds travelling east or west; lorries laden with ammunition going east, or crowded with weary soldiers coming west, ambulances, ration waggons, motor-cycles, all the traffic of an army actively engaged poured ceaselessly back and forth along this main highway which miraculously escaped complete destruction by the enemy's artillery. About four miles east of Albert the road forks into a "Y", here at the apex once stood the village of La Boisselle of which one stone did not remain upon another; close by were, two enormous craters worthy of notice. The left fork carried on past Pozières, a mere geographical expression of which no trace remained, to the Sunken Road and thence to the German positions astride Bapaume; at the Sunken Road Tenth Street afforded a safe passage-way to the ill-omened but well-named Death Valley, on the eastern side of which lay the then front line. The right fork at La Boisselle ran up to Contelmaison, of which but a few cellar stones remained, and here a track diverged to Sausage Valley past the Chalk Pits which we were to know so well before we left the Somme. From Sausage Valley, a trail followed later by a light railway, ran across the ghastly Plain of Courcelette, reeking with the debris, human and otherwise of battle. Doré could have found no finer inspiration for his illustrations of the 'Inferno' than the scene presented on a wet November evening by the Plain of Courcelette". <http://www.102ndbattalioncefc.ca/warpages/102chap4.htm>

<sup>12</sup> The Humber valley refers here to a river in the west end of Toronto, near the Dow home.

*beams over your head - the last place I occupied had only enough roof to keep the rain off and we lived in hourly anticipation of welcoming a whizz-bang through the ceiling.*

*We have had pretty nearly daily rain for a long time and the trenches are simply water channels and the shell-holes are ponds. The men all wear long rubber "waders", which reach right up to the hips but even at that they often go in over their boot tops as the water in lots of the trenches are over your waist. The officers are not supposed to wear the long rubber boots (I have never discovered why) but most of us have long heavy leather boots which are practically waterproof. My huge number nines, with long hob-nails (they would make some lovely dints in your hall floor) kept me perfectly dry nearly all the way up to the trenches, but in the last couple of miles, I struck some deep water and it came in over the top. I feel very sorry for the men in weather like this - I have a snap compared to them, as I can spend at least part of my time in a good dry dugout and get my duds gradually free of moisture. But most of our fellows, after marching 7 or 8 miles and getting soaked from head to foot, have to spend several days in the trenches, flooded with water, and with the rain beating down on them most of the time. There is a good deal of minor sickness among them, but on the whole it is surprising how healthy they are.*

*If we stay in this part of the line all winter, as it seems possible we may, there will be a good many improvements made which will make the life more bearable, more shelters can be built and most of the trenches can be drained to a much greater extent than at present. Also the trenches can be floored with "bath-mats" or "Duck-boards" i.e. a kind of slat walk which is laid down in the bottom of the trench in sections.*

*We should also get some more amusements for the men when out of the trenches, such as a couple of gramophones, magazines, etc. I think that one reason why the officers seem to stand the racket better than the rank and file is that they have rather broader interests than the men and are able to keep their minds off things.*

*Last night we saw a Zepp raid on a French town some miles behind us. We could not see the Zepp but could hear the drumming of its big engines and the booming of the bombs it was dropping and could see the great red glow that rose across the sky every time it dropped a load of its incendiary materials. We could see the flash and sparkle of the shrapnel from our anti-aircraft guns exploding overhead, and a little later hear the drone of our own airships as they climbed in pursuit of the invader. We heard this morning that a number of men had been killed, outside the billets our Battalion was occupying three or four days ago. We also had a laugh on Capt. Donald, Capt. Boddy and the parson who are living all the time in comfortable billets in the town in question. The messenger, who arrived this morning from there, reported that there were 17 of them squeezed into a cellar during the bombardment and evidently some of these peaceful gentlemen nearly had shell-shock from the experience.*

*I will quit here, partly in order to comply with your warnings against bulky letters and partly in order to get some sleep in order to be ready for what may turn up to-morrow. I've had to leave Langford out of the line, since we came to this District, as the old fellow could hardly stand the racket and would be more in the way than anything else - He is a very good servant*

*when one is out of the trenches and when I'm in the line, he mounts guard on my stuff and prevents the other batmen from stealing it. There is very little a servant can do for you in the trenches, as we never shave, seldom wash, have no beds, and do no cooking (except perhaps to heat up some tea in a jam tin with a mixture of sandbag shreds and candle grease for luck).*

*The Col. is also doing without a batman in the trenches, as his regular batman was blown downstairs by a shell a couple of weeks ago and is undergoing repairs. Forbes Keith has a pretty good batman but if he finds an unguarded jar of rum anywhere, he becomes a raging madman. So, on the whole I think old Langford wears as well as any of them.*

In the night of November 9-10, they were relieved by the 102<sup>nd</sup>, marching to the Chalk Pits, where they stayed for one night, before marching to billets in the village of Bouzincourt, where they stayed for three days. Meanwhile, other Canadian forces took the remaining portion of Regina Trench on the night of November 10-11, described as follows:

*After two months of attacks and constant shelling, the remaining part of Regina Trench to the east of the Courcelette–Pys road, was taken by a night attack on 10/11 November, by the 4th Canadian Division. The trench was attacked by the 46th (S. Saskatchewan) and 47th (British Columbia) battalions of the 10th Canadian Brigade, with a company of the 102nd Battalion of the 11th Canadian Brigade on the right flank. The Canadians crept close to the German line before the barrage began; after eight minutes the barrage suddenly lifted, the Canadians rushed the trench and surprised the German garrison. Advanced posts were pushed forward in the centre and in trenches leading north-east, towards the line between Le Sars and Pys. The Canadians took 87 prisoners mainly from Infantry Regiment 107 of the 58th Division, with some troops from Guard Reserve Regiment 2 of the 1st Guard Reserve Division and four machine-guns, for a loss of c. 200 casualties; several German counter-attacks were defeated.[11]*

The raid of November 10-11 was described by a chronicler of 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion<sup>13</sup> as follows:

*At 1.00 p.m. on the latter date [Nov 9] the battalion fell in under the command of Major C. B. Worsnop and marched to Brigade Headquarters, where the men were issued with gum boots for use in the slime, of the front line. It was a glorious day; a bright sun blazing in a cloudless sky showed up in sharp relief the horrors of the devastated plain round Courcelette, pocked-marked with shell-holes, dotted with fragments of discarded equipment, with here and there a mouldering corpse of man or horse, but it was dusk when the battalion finally marched off from Brigade Headquarters and darkness had fallen before the men had relieved the 75th Bn., and taken up their appointed stations, "A" and "C" Cos. in Regina Trench; "B" Co. in the old front line trench, "D" Co. in Sugar Trench. The weather continued to improve and the Higher*

---

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.102ndbattalioncef.ca/warpages/102chap4.htm>

*Command decided that the time was ripe for seizing the hitherto unoccupied portion of Regina Trench which was still in German hands and was separated from our men by an extensive block. The 102nd Bn. was on the spot and, with the 47th co-operating on the right, was ordered to assault the position and also to storm a new trench running north from Regina, recently constructed by the Hun and known as New German Trench.*

*The ranks of the 102nd Bn. were woefully thin; death, wounds and sickness had claimed many; a large number were in Brigade employ, serving in the Tump-line "or Pack-train - including Headquarters Staff, Medical Details, Runners and Signallers, who, though essential, cannot be included in the effective fighting strength of a battalion, only 375 men had marched out and the task set was no light one. To "C" Co. under Lieut. R. P. Matheson, numbering 50 men, to whom were added 20 men from "A" Co., was assigned the offensive on Regina; "D" Co., under Lieut. Mackenzie numbering 76, was to attack the new trench. The balance of "A" Co. was appointed as a carrying party, and "B" Co was held in reserve. Midnight of Nov. 10-11 was the hour when the barrage would start, lasting eight minutes and then lifting 150 yards, when the two assaults were to be delivered. During the course of the evening Capt. A. C. Trousdale, commanding our Scouts, who was later severely wounded, reported that the enemy was effecting a strong relief and that New German Trench was being held in strength.*

*It was a brilliant night; a full moon was shining in a cloudless sky, and everything was as easily visible as in the day-time. This was in favor of the attacking force, who possessed all the psychological advantages offered by a night attack undiminished by the handicaps imposed by darkness. At midnight the barrage started and at 12.30 a.m. a runner, reached Headquarters with the news that "C" Co. had gained their objective, but had had to extend considerably to the right to keep in touch with the 47th. In the end it was found that this company was occupying and holding 350 yards more than its allotted portion. At 12.35 the news came in that "D" Co. had been similarly successful and an hour later the first batch of prisoners arrived, to be closely interrogated by the Brigadier who spent the night in Battalion Headquarters. The objectives had been gained, but the enemy was not disposed to part with them without a final struggle. Fierce counter-attacks were launched and Lieuts. Matheson and Sturgeon were badly wounded. At 2.30 a.m. Lieut. Lister was ordered to take up reinforcements from "A" Co. and assume command of operations in Regina Trench, which he did with success. Such alarmist reports, however, continued to come in through the medium of casualties that at 4.15 General Odlum took charge of the operation himself and eased the situation by directing a well-sustained artillery fire against the massing Huns. It was during these counter attacks that the majority of our casualties were incurred, the Hun maintaining a hail of shells on all our positions. The Regimental Aid Post, or Dressing Station, in the Red Chateau at the north end of Death Valley became the centre of a particularly, fierce bombardment and a report reached Headquarters that all the occupants had been buried. A rescue party under Lieut. J. B. Bailey was hastily organized and went out armed with shovels, only to find that the report was luckily false. By morning positions had been consolidated and once more the 102nd Bn. had a fine achievement to its credit, as is shown by the following letter which was read out aloud on parade in Albert on the 13th.*

Meanwhile, Langstaff wrote home from billets in Bouzincourt.

### *November 11 Letter 38*

*I got your letter of 18th October yesterday which was awfully nice, only it made me rather ashamed of having written you regarding that M.C.[Military Cross] recommendation as it has not borne any fruit yet and likely won't. There were several of our fellows recommended at the same time, only one of whom has yet come through in orders as receiving the M.C. and it doesn't appear probable that the others will come through after this lapse of time, although one or two of them certainly deserved the Military Cross or more. Most people who have been over here for some time say that Canadians don't get their fair share of these things and that it is much easier to get them in English battalions, and there are several things that make me think the charge is probably true. This isn't sour grapes, however, as I never expected even to be recommended and most of our fellows took a good deal bigger risks than I did. So the only thing I'm sorry about is that I ever referred to the thing and I wouldn't have done so if I had imagined that you would be crediting me with any reckless exploits. As a matter of fact it is only on a raid or something in the nature of a larger attack that anybody gets a chance of winning anything as the ordinary routine of the trenches exposes nearly everybody to nearly equal risks and gives very few chances for individual distinction.*

*We are out of the trenches again and back in a village for a rest. This is a different place from that in which we expected to be located and we are going to be very comfortable while here. The men will get a chance to get a little mud off their clothes and make themselves half respectable again. I never in my life saw anything to compare with the mud which we had the last trip in the trenches. Over and over again we had men stuck in mud over the tops of their long thigh boots and had to dig them out with pick and shovel. Sometimes it is easier to pull the man out of his boots and then excavate till you find the boots. In one case this was done, but when the rescuers turned around to find the boots they had disappeared in the road and couldn't be located - they are still missing. One picture of Bairnsfather's (I think I sent it to you) is very appropriate here. It shows a new arrival in the trenches wading around to an old timer who is sitting in the mud with an inquiry about the location of a certain trench to which the old-timer replies "'Ow do I know? I ain't the blinkin' 'arbourmaster".*

*However, everything has its bright aside and we noticed that the shells had far less effect than usual. Unless they scored a direct hit on a man, they simply disappeared in the mud and threw dirt all over the landscape.*

*We came out on a lovely moonlight night - so bright you could see a man's hand nearly a quarter of a mile away. We had great luck getting out and hadn't a single man hit although we were followed by tear gas shells for about 2 miles and some of the men had some rather trying experiences. They plunked their shells all around - left, right, in front and behind, but never hit*



*anybody though they had many of us weeping freely.*

*The more one sees of this business the more one gets to believe in Fate or Providence. I believe I remember saying that to you once before, but it's emphasized more and more strongly every day. You find one or two men in a group hit by a shell which splinters in every direction and misses everybody else. Or a man who has just joined is hit on his first tour in the trenches or another old timer is hit just before he goes on leave. Or a fellow who has a safety-first job in the A.S.C. or on the Brigade Staff is laid out by a chance shot.*

*I saw a rotten accident yesterday in an Australian Battery of "heavies", which are generally supposed to be about as safe as anything can be next to a job in the Army Pay Corps or the Record office. One of the bit guns was just firing as I passed on my horse and the shell proved to be defective, i.e. had a premature or too-short fuse, and burst just in front of the muzzle. It killed four men and wounded a number of others while the explosion made the huge gun rock like a baby's cradle.*

*There is great activity in the air these days - the Huns are showing more ginger and there is a scrap every day and sometimes there are several. I like to see the big war planes which look for all the world like huge, black, menacing wasps. There is something vicious and business-like in their whole demeanour. When you see a little squadron of these big hornets soaring majestically over your head, with their powerful angry drone filling the whole air, and see them swoop and turn and climb it's enough to make a fellow want to transfer at once to the Air Service,*

*These craft are also very active these moonlight nights. I fancy the science of night-flying has been developed very rapidly the last few months, for we hear them overhead every night now, whereas three months ago, we never heard one buzz at night. One of our fellows saw one brought down flaming last night, but I missed the sight.*

*A large proportion of these craft fly so high (20,000 feet or so) that one never sees them, even in day-time.*

*We are in very nice billets here with a real stove in the room where I sleep. We have just had dinner off a very fine rooster that I bought this morning from the old lady who runs the place. I tried to buy a "dindon" of which there are several nice specimens strutting about, but she wouldn't sell them - saving them for Noel, I suppose. However, she was willing to sell the rooster and caught him by the leg in the neatest possible manner. The two old ladies here do all the work so far as I can see, and the old man sits by the fire and smokes.*

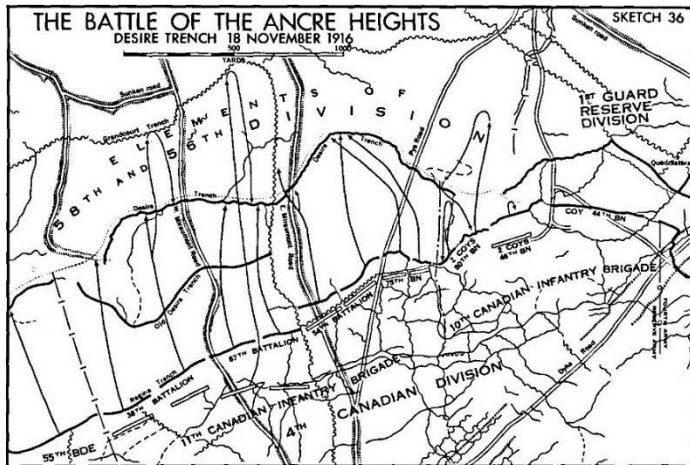
*You can't imagine how fine it is to have a rest after being in the line and chased all over with shells and other things. The night we came out we went back to our old camp of dug-outs and shelters which we had occupied several times before and I found that old Langford had stolen a stretcher from some place or other and put ray sleeping bag on it. It was the nearest approach to a bed that I had had for many weeks and I crawled right in and slept 11 hours without a break although we were surrounded by batteries on every side and they told me next*

*morning there had been a terrific bombardment during the night.*

*Much the heaviest artillery work that I ever heard, however, was last night when a "show" was on upon our own front and our Division captured a big slice of trenches apposite them. We should have been...*

*and, you also meet others who have gone into it in the same calculating way that they tackle everything and therefore you find them here in safe Staff jobs or tucked away here and there in snug corners of the Pay Office or A.S.O. or Canadian Records, etc., and some of them as I know making more money than they ever did in their lives before.*

On November 13, the 75<sup>th</sup> returned from Bouzincourt to the trenches, relieving the 72<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, with battalion headquarters located "on the west side of 10<sup>th</sup> Street about 200 yards



north of the intersection of Dyke Road".

There were 21 casualties over the next four days (6 killed; 15 wounded). On November 18, there was a major attack, the last of the Battle of the Somme. In the Canadian sector, both the 11<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Brigades were involved. The 75<sup>th</sup> was located just to the east of Pye Road, between the 54<sup>th</sup> on the left and 50<sup>th</sup> on the right. They captured their target (Desire Trench) about 1 km north of Regina Trench. It suffered heavy losses (240 casualties: 97 killed and 143 wounded). The War Diaries state that the 75<sup>th</sup> was "exposed to heavy enfilade fire and continuous sniping from enemy trench" on their right, because the 50<sup>th</sup> had been unsuccessful in capturing their objective. It was relieved on November 20 by the 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion.

There were 21 casualties over the next four days (6 killed; 15 wounded). On November 18, there was a major attack, the last of the Battle of the Somme. In the Canadian sector, both the 11<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Brigades were involved. The 75<sup>th</sup> was located just to the east of Pye Road, between the 54<sup>th</sup> on the left and 50<sup>th</sup> on the right. They captured their target (Desire Trench) about 1 km north of Regina Trench. It suffered heavy losses

On November 21, fresh from the horrors of the November 18 attack, Langstaff wrote home, laconically reporting that casualties "amounted to over 50% of the entire forces that they took into the trenches", with many dying from sickness and/or exposure.

### *Nov. 21/16 Letter 39*

*We will likely be away from this District before this letter reaches you. We have been here nearly 7 weeks now which is over the average time that troops are kept here. We are hoping that we will be given a couple of weeks' rest before being moved into the line again. We have had 5 tours in the front line since getting here and we need a bit of a holiday to reorganize and get reinforcements. The last tour, especially, was a perfect nightmare as we lost a good many men from sickness, due to the exposure, while casualties from other causes amounted to over 50% of*

*the entire forces we took into the trenches. The losses in our other tours have not been nearly so heavy although they amount to a pretty respectable figure in the aggregate. They would have been much smaller this last trip, if the Battalion on our right had not failed in its objective, and by its bungling left our flank up in the air and exposed to enfilade fire.*

*My pen won't work - owing to long disuse and I have to betake myself to my lead pencil again.*

*I got your nice letter of the 26th October, just to-day. It takes a long time for the mail to be delivered here as there is a good deal of congestion at this part of the front - and also there have been no English mail for some days back - probably some more "funny work" on the part of the German submarines.*

*Things are settling down here for another winter. The mud is so bad that man and guns can no longer be moved rapidly enough for considerable advances. I have often read about General Mud and the way he has interfered with so any of the big military projects in history, but I never realized before so clearly what a tremendous factor weather conditions are. To take a very small illustration of it - in a recent tour we had part of the battalion in a rather exposed position during about 24 hours and under normal conditions would have had a very anxious time. But there was a sea of raid between us and the Huns, and if they had tried a counter-attack we know they would be mired hopelessly, so we did very little worrying. The same conditions affect the other branches of the service similarly - the artillery can move their guns only with the greatest difficulty, supplies of food and ammunition are delayed or prevented etc.*

*I would give about \$1,547,328 for a kodak here. You would laugh to see the men with their steel helmets (on top of balaclava caps), long rubber boots, sheepskin jerkins, etc. The officers are just about as picturesque as the men. The Col. was at one time a great stickler for uniformity in dress and insisted on all the officers wearing the same kind of uniforms, trench-coats, etc. But we have had so many changes by reinforcements, and everybody has got his clothes into such an absolutely disreputable condition that he has at last given up the attempt in despair.*

*A good many of the officers wear private's uniforms, especially if going into an attack. In some brigades. It is compulsory for the officers to do so, but our Brigadier disapproves of it although he leaves it optional whether the officers do so or not.*

*One of the Divisional Staff who has just looked in for is visit, says that our Division has the record for length of stay here, so you see that, though we may be green in comparison with some of the Divisions, they consider us good enough evidently to take our full share. Our Brigade especially has had more than its proportion as it has taken part in every attack in which the Division has been engaged and incidentally has never once failed to get its objective. I think I told you a month or so ago that we were going to have the best Brigade in the Division and the best proof of it is the fact that it has always been given the hardest nuts to crack. Our fellows are pretty much veterans now and I don't think they need to take a back seat for any one.*

*You should see the Somme pictures. I have heard from a good many people that they are*

very interesting. I saw a copy of the *Globe* the other day which had an excellent photograph of a tank. It's absurd to keep us from taking photographs, when the newspapers are allowed to print photographs of the very things they prohibit us from even describing.

*This is a strange, abnormal kind of a life - millions of men on both sides of the line living like a lot of troglodytes in caves of the earth. It's awfully fascinating in a way - the constant movement, - the great arteries of traffic, the rush and ceaseless pressure that goes on night and day (probably more by night), the mystery as to what the enemy is doing or planning.*



Figure 2. German prisoners taken by Canadians on the Somme being escorted to the prisoner's cages by Canadian Military Police, 1916.  
[http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/mould/big/big\\_25\\_german\\_prisoners.aspx](http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/explore/online/mould/big/big_25_german_prisoners.aspx)

*The prisoners are a mixed crowd – some of them kids, some of them old men, some of them fine looking soldiers. Our intelligence reports seem to indicate that they try to stiffen up the weak battalions by an intermixture of hard fighters. Certainly some of them need stiffening. Our Division took nearly 750 prisoners in half an hour during the recent scrap and most of them were very glad to be captured. A good deal of amusement was caused by a threatened counter-attack by the Huns which advanced against the captured trenches and then surrendered without fighting. You would laugh to see our fellows shepherding these prisoners down the line - one man guarding about 50 Huns. In fact, one officer saw a stretcher party, composed of two Huns and two Canadians acting as stretcher-bearers, while a third Hun walked behind carrying the rifle of one of our men!*

*Our fellows are simply fine when a fight is on. They may grumble at working parties, or marching or guard duty. But when there is any fighting to be done, the Hun doesn't have the shadow of a chance.*

While November 18 is recorded as the “last day” of the Battle of the Somme, there was no armistice or actual interruption of hostilities. The 102<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which had relieved the 7<sup>th</sup>, worked for 4 days on the construction of a trench connecting Desire Trench back to Regina Trench, before being relieved in turn.

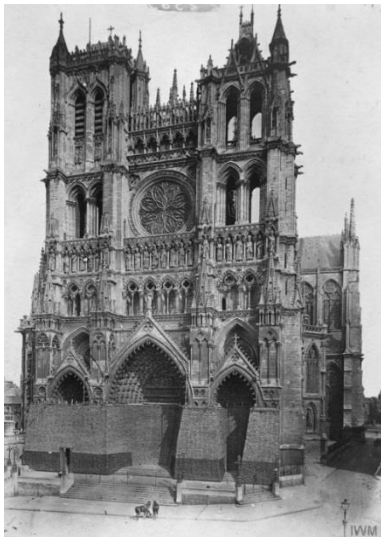
*For 96 hours the battalion remained in the trenches, working by night at the construction of a long communication trench running north-west from Regina to a trench known as Desire which had been captured on, the 18<sup>th</sup> by units of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, and withstanding by day very heavy shelling and persistent sniping. It was originally intended that this digging was to be but the prelude to another offensive which the 102<sup>nd</sup> would undertake, but it was found that the total length of the trench would have to be much greater than at first contemplated and that it would be impossible to get the work finished within the scheduled time. So the offensive was*

*abandoned, but the battalion found that the work of digging was 'to tax its strength severely. For two nights work was maintained under heavy fire by the companies assisted by parties from the 67th Bn. and the Engineers, the men digging towards each other from either end and covered from surprise attacks by a screen of Scouts who on the first night with the co-operation of a carrying-party of the 67th succeeded in enclosing an enemy patrol which had wandered through their outposts and was successfully accounted for. Before dawn on the 22nd the trench was completed and on the evening of the 23rd the last tour on the Somme came to an end, the 102nd being relieved by the 47th Bn. and returning to billets in Albert with another fine piece of work to its credit. Our casualties numbered Major K. G. Mackenzie, O.C. "D" Co and four O. R. killed; Major A. B. Carey, who had recently joined us from the 67th, and, 40 O. R. wounded.*

The 75<sup>th</sup> recuperated in billets in Albert from November 20 to 26. On November 23, Langstaff and his C.O., Colonel Beckett, undertook a quixotic sightseeing tour to Amiens Cathedral, a famous cathedral located about 30 km to the west and untouched by the war. In civilian life, Beckett was an architect and was enthralled by the cathedral. (Beckett would die on March 1, 1917 at Vimy Ridge in a gas attack at the same time as Langstaff). Langstaff wrote home about this adventure.

#### *24/11/16 Letter 40*

*Paid a visit day before yesterday to Amiens, in company with Col. Beckett. We started in the afternoon, taking along M. Du Fer, our Battalion interpreter who is a very nice little fellow, and the best interpreter I ever came across. We beat our way to Amiens in the recognized fashion - that is, you wait on the side of the road till a motor lorry or motor car comes along which has some empty space in it, signal violently to make it stop, and then climb in. You go as far as your conveyance will take you along your route, and if it turns off along some other road you simply step down and wait for another lift. You can easily do 150 miles a day here in this way - just picking up lifts along the road. There is a steady stream of traffic both ways and you seldom have to wait very long for a ride. There are no private cars for hire as the Government controls everything of the kind.*



*Amiens is a very nice city with fascinating shops and a lovely cathedral. Now that Rheims is destroyed, I suppose it is the finest in France, as it formerly ranked second in the list. It is remarkably similar in many respects to Cologne Cathedral. The Col., as an architect, is of course crazy about cathedrals - I should probably strike out "crazy" and substitute "dippy", "dotty", "cracked", "bughouse", or some stronger term. We got to Amiens about an hour before dark and I wanted to get in some shopping before it became dark, but we happened to come across the Cathedral and my plans went all to pot. After walking several*

*parasangs around the Cathedral viewing it from every possible angle and nearly being spotted as Hun spies, we went inside. It was dark by this time but we wandered around the aisles and chapels and apses and flying arches and chancels and naves and other things till Du Fer and I were ready to sit down and weep in each other's arms. However, we finally got the Col. out and safely confined in the hotel dining room and had a bang-up dinner of about 11 courses until 10 p.m., when we thought we were going to bed - but the O.C. insisted on seeing the Cathedral by starlight!!! So back we went, marched around the place again rubbering up at the planets and (myself at any rate) grinning from ear to ear in the dark. After that the Col. permitted us to take him home and put him to bed where he remained till after 9 o'clock the next morning. This made us so late that he was reluctantly obliged to abandon his announced project of climbing the tower.*

*However, Du Fer and I got in a couple of hours shopping before he got up.*

*Seriously, the Cathedral is a wonderful thing and the Col. is a very good companion to have for explaining everything.*

*Amiens has been raided by air craft a number of times lately as you have probably noticed by the papers, so all kinds of precautions are taken in the way of darkening the streets, shading lights, etc. Most of the towns within reach of the lines get an occasional raid, I guess. At any rate, the place where we are now staying has 2 or 3 nearly every week. We could hear them last night actively dropping their big bombs into the town some hundreds of yards away, but it has got to be such a usual thing that nobody even got up to look - it wouldn't be any use anyway. The most astonishing thing is the small amount of damage done compared with the weight of explosives dropped.*

On November 26, the 75<sup>th</sup> left the Somme theatre, marching first to Bouzincourt, where they were joined by 150 reinforcements, then proceeding to Doullens on the 30<sup>th</sup>. Langstaff wrote home on November 27.

### *Nov. 27/16 Letter 41*

*We have been on the march all day - awful weather, rain and mud and cold. But I haven't heard one grumble out of the men, as they know they are going back for a rest and they don't care what the weather is, in comparison to that. It has been extra slow going, as we have had to proceed largely along the main roads, jammed with artillery, ambulances, motor vans, and all kinds of transport. Our own transport had to go around by another road and has just come in (11 P.M.) nearly 6 hours late. The field kitchens and rations were with the transport so that the men have had to go to bed without any supper. The officers' baggage wagons are still missing and as I have no blankets I'm going to sit up till they arrive.*

*Maj. Keith, Maj. Wilson and I filled in the interval of waiting by making a trip in a motor lorry to a nearby village where we got diner at a little estaminet and had a lot of fun. They didn't*

want to serve dinner at first, as they sell wines chiefly, but I introduced Maj. Wilson as a "General" and after jollyng them a lot they finally brought on a kind of a dinner. They had a little boy waiting on the table - about 13 years old dressed in soldier's uniform and sharp as a needle. I met a chap in the room - Captain in a First Division battery - who was an S.P.S. student and in one of my classes 3 or 4 years ago.

Have not come across Lewis Duncan yet although he has written me several official letters, without apparently remembering the battalion I was with. His Brigade is just ahead of us on the line of march but I haven't seen any of his battery and as they can move rather faster than we can, it isn't likely we'll see them again till we reach our destination.

We have been here over 3 1/2 months now, and leave is commencing. Ten days is the time allowed, and a few officers and men are sent off at a time. Major Wilson and I are thinking of going down to the South of France - Marseilles or the French Riviera - for our holidays, but so far nothing is decided. Most of the officers and men of course head for London. It's a quick transition - only a few hours from the mud of the trenches for the roads to Charing Cross and the Strand. Our fellows are keen on getting their leave and it is pretty hard to decide which ones are entitled to go first.

Our men are certainly a hardy tough looking lot of veterans now. Those that remain are I think probably the hardest and strongest of the original Battalion. We got a good sized reinforcement draft just before we commenced our march. It was great to get the band back at the head of the column again. The band had been used largely for guides and carrying parties and had had a good many casualties, but the majority of them are still available. You should have seen us swinging out on the road with the band playing away and our fellows with their heads up and stepping out their very best. Especially when we passed a new Battalion coming up towards the front, we put on a little extra steam - or when marching through a town. Most people around here have not heard a band for months and especially a band as good as ours is. You have no idea the way it affects you after not having heard a note of music for so long to get the really good band ahead of you on your way OUT. I'm crazy about a brass band any way, but there's no place where you get the chance to bear it to such good advantage as riding behind it at the head of a battalion with the tramp, tramp, tramp coming steadily behind you and the "swing" of the column carrying you along and your horse trying to keep time and the men with great big broad smiles all over their honest good-natured weather-beaten businesslike looking physiognomies. The old marching tunes like Men of Harlech, Bonnie Dundee, Pack All your Troubles in your old Kit Bag, Hieland Laddie, John Peel, etc. are the best of them all and they have a swing to them that none of the new-fangled ones have. I wish you could hear the band on the march. You never saw the Battalion when we were in Toronto. A brass band inside is nothing like as fine as one outside, and I think a band always does its best when it's setting the time for a column of troops for there is something about the steady swing and "lift" of a moving column which seems to carry the music along.

In the first four days of December, the 75<sup>th</sup> marched from Doullens to Bajus, about 42 km to the north, where they stayed for 14 days to rest, recuperate and receive reinforcements. On December 1, the Battalion arrived in Buire au Bois, where they were placed in billets. Langstaff wrote home.

### *1/12/16 Letter 42*

*Have just got into billets after long all-day march and am waiting for the batman to get dinner ready. We are in another of those funny little characteristic French villages, huddled together in a valley - the people all farmers who till the adjacent farms. Instead of each farmer having a house on his own land at some distance from his neighbor's house, as we do the farmers here form a little village where everybody in the countryside lives, and each morning they go out to their work a mile or so away.*

*This part of the country does not appear quite so prosperous as that through which we marched a month or so ago. The buildings are not so well kept in repair and the children look a bit peaked. I saw to-day what I had not seen before in France, two old crones gathering faggots, each with an enormous bundle of them, twice as big as herself, on her back.*

*We have been billeted in four different places since we hit the trail this time. The first place we had visited several times before and knew pretty well. The next place was also quite near our old stamping ground and the only thing special was that one of the men unfortunately discharged his rifle which fortunately killed 3 chickens which I confiscated for our mess. The third place we reached last night - a good sized city where we had lots of fun shopping and gorging ourselves with fruit, nuts, raisins, dates and all sorts of things which we had not tasted for months.*

*We get a good deal of amusement still in talking French to the people. Some of our fellows are fairly good at it, others know only a few words, but it is surprising how much it is possible for some of our men to accomplish with a vocabulary of about one page. It is funny to hear old Langford who can only say "bon" and "non bon" conduct a conversation.*

*I was in a store yesterday when one of our officers came in and asked "Avez-vous de l'encre pour fountain-pen?"*

*Our Chaplain made a bad mistake to-night - he is lodged with the curé and was telling us a few minutes ago about the queer way in which the curé acted when he asked Maj. Reed if he would have a drink. Major Reed said "Thanks", but the curé didn't give him one after all. We asked him what he said and found it was \*Merci\* which, used in that connection means "No, thanks!" The parson was greatly chagrined when he learned that he had unintentionally declined a drink, and we roasted him about it badly.*

*The weather here has been very cold and raw. I don't suppose the thermometer is down very low but one feels the cold. This afternoon the road took us up over a pretty high ridge of hills and there was a driving Scotch mist which covered all the trees and bushes with a kind of hoar-frost and gave a beautiful effect.*



*The roads we have been marching over take us through a beautiful country. It is beautiful, even now, and in summer time would be much more so. The hedges and shrubs are somewhat neglected, just as they are in England, for want of labour. We see a good many chateaux, some of them very fine - most of them occupied as headquarters of some corps, or Army. We passed one very fine mansion to-day, with an avenue of trees and imposing gateway and a fine piece of statuary representing a conflict between two wild boars.*

....

*You ask about the German dug-outs and say that you think that they would have to be built by engineers or other specially trained people. They are as a matter of fact, built by specially trained companies, "dug-out companies", as they are called. The Huns are much better at this kind of work than we are - or at any rate their dug-outs are better than ours. I fancy part of the difference is due to the fact that we don't go in for this digging-in business so much as the Boches - they are regular earth-worms.*

*You ask about the hours of sleep in the trenches. It depends altogether on circumstances. In the last area where we were stationed it was very hard to get any sleep at all. The normal length of the tour there was 48 hours, and sometimes you didn't get more than 2 or 3 hours sleep in the tour. The last time we were in for a week and I didn't have even my boots off except to put on a dry pair of socks. But in other parts of the line, for example where we were stationed during our very first tour, you can have more or less of a routine and I used to get in 5 or 6 hours a day regular or pretty regular sleep.*

*The men as a rule sleep in the daytime, as a larger proportion of them must act as sentries at nights; and also most of the work, e.g. digging, new trenches, wiring, draining, revetting, etc. is done at night because you can't get it done by daylight on account of the danger of observation.*

*Major Wilson and I are still going to take our holidays together, although we are veering around now in favour of a walking tour in Scotland.*

On December 2, the Battalion marched further north to Oeuf (via Rougefay, Conchy, Fillievres, Linzeux) and on December 3 to Monchy Cayeux (via Humiers, Bernicourt, Fleury). Langstaff wrote home from Monchy Cayeux, full of interest in their travel through rural France.

*Sunday, Dec. 3rd.*

*Have been marching steadily for some days. Wonderful frosty weather which covers all the trees and bushes with very heavy hoar frost and makes every avenue of trees glisten like silver. This doesn't last merely in the early morning as it usually does at home, but the frost stays on the trees all day. It is wonderful weather for marching and I find I can do 15 miles a day regularly and have lots of energy left at the end of it - no more tired than if I had walked home from the*

office. The Col. and I usually walk, as it is cold work riding, and besides there are always a certain number of "crocks" in the Battalion who have bad feet or something else and appreciate a lift on a horse.

We are seeing the rural part of France in a wonderful way - marching straight ahead, avoiding the main roads where traffic is the heaviest and billeting the Battalion each night in the little villages. Last night I was lodged in a little cottage where they had wonderful chrysanthemums growing in the kitchen - all kinds of colours and as large as any hot-house flowers. The French women seem very fond of flowers and like to show them and discuss the different varieties. I think I told you about the pansies one old lady was showing me - "pensees" she called them.

To-night, about a dozen of the officers are quartered in an old Chateau in the village. The interpreter put up a game on the village Maire and made him believe the General was coming with his Staff, and so got the Chateau which otherwise we should not have had. We have done our best to keep up the bluff by calling the Col. "General" when any of the people are within earshot; but after the row we have been kicking up this evening, in the venerated chateau. I'm afraid the old chatelaine has doubts about the "General business".

...

Are very comfortable, with plenty to eat, lots of sleep, dry clothes again and away from the guns - although we get a certain amount of shelling in as the Huns have a lone-range naval gun that pumps a few shells into the town every little while. Oddly, there are very few people hit; absurdly few when one considers how the whole place is jammed with soldiers. In fact, that is one of the curious things wherever you go in the shelled area - how few of the shots ever hit anything. No doubt it is pretty much the same with our own shooting.

One reason for this, up in the trenches, is that the men get fairly expert at detecting the direction of shells and are able to dodge them to some extent. This is particularly the case with some of the trench mortar shells, "rum-jars" as they are called, which not only can be heard coming but can actually be seen in the air. They have a very high trajectory and are a long time in the air relatively to the distance they have to go. On the other hand some other shells are impossible to dodge - "whizz-bangs" for instance, which have a very low trajectory and at certain ranges outstrip the sound of the explosion, so that a man struck by one never hears the shell that hit him. It is a very interesting study, comparing the time which is taken by the sound of a shell and the shell itself to traverse various ranges. Sound travels at a constant speed of 1100 feet per second whereas a gun starts off with a certain muzzle velocity (much greater than 1100 feet per second in the case of most field guns) and gradually decreases its rate of progress (due to air friction and the force of gravity) until the sound of the explosion gradually overtakes the shell and eventually precedes it if the range is long enough. Thus, at certain short ranges or with very fast guns, the shell beats the sound; at longer ranges, the shell passes you at the same instant that you hear it "whirr", and at still longer ranges, you hear the shell before it arrives. It takes one some time to get on to all these phenomena - I can remember I used often to be puzzled

*at hearing the sharp bark of our own field guns apparently from just behind my back, at the very moment the shell was heard scrunching overhead. The reason was of course that I happened to be at just the exact range where the sound of the shell was overtaking the shell itself.*

*This is probably enough to tire you on statics and other physical phenomena of whizz-bangs or I often wish though that I had time to work out some of these interesting problems in physics and resurrect the old mathematical formulae that I used to have at my fingers' ends. Forbes Keith is an awful chap to theorize and argue about things of this kind. He is an Engineer and has of course gone a great deal further than I ever did into chemistry, physics, etc. while I probably know more mathematics and we have some great discussions.*

*We put over a great piece of strategy on the Colonel a couple of nights ago - the night we arrived here. On arriving in billets, he usually grabs the most comfortable quarters in sight and leaves everybody else to shift as they can. The evening we came here, Forbes and I did a little preliminary scouting and learned that the house which the staff was to occupy had a very small upstairs room where the staff batmen of the previous battalion had been quartered. We made up our minds to palm this off on the O.C. (by strategy, of course, as we could not compel him to take it). So we sent on ahead a runner with instructions to chalk "O.C." on the door of the batmen's room to suggest in a delicate kind of way that it had probably been occupied by the O.C. of the outgoing Battalion). We then followed after as fast as possible but when we saw the place almost gave up hope of success as the room in question (although a front room) had a window out and was so small and cold and bare that the chance of the Col. being induced to select it seemed negligible - moreover there was an adjoining room three times as large, with a fireplace (there was none in the little room).*

*However, we decided to do our best. I found an old arm chair with beautiful plush bottom, very large and comfortable looking, but without any legs and wet through by water dropping through the roof. We propped this up with two petrol tins underneath the seat and found a rather pretty little foot-stool which we set in front of the chair. Then we discovered an old bric-a-brac stand and a fancy candle-stick and an old picture with a gilt frame. We put the picture on one side of the little strip of bare wall and near it the bric-a-brac with the candle throwing the light on the picture, and the place began to assume a home-like appearance already. The broken window was covered over with an old rubber sheet, a table brought in and put beside the big arm chair, also a big white and red wash-basin - the kind they use in boarding-houses, but here a piece of paramount luxury. We discovered a few more odds and ends, dusted up the old picture, and closed the door so that the chalk would be clearly visible on the outside of it, and so that any person opening the door would get the "tout ensemble" effect at a glance before he had time to analyze it.*

*Then we went into the other room which we had selected for ourselves if everything went well - found an old disreputable bathtub half-full of dirty water which we put in the middle of the floor - pulled down the tarpaper, etc. covering the broken window and let it flutter forlornly in tatters from the bare window-sash - put a valuable table which we wanted for ourselves behind*

*the door where it wouldn't be seen - upset a child's chair in the foreground to make things look a little more disordered - spilled some water on the floor to show the roof was leaking and some more on the grate-fire to make it smoke, set the candle where the draft would make it gutter and flicker sadly, and in order to add to the forlorn appearance of things, sat down on the floor in the most uncomfortable and discontented attitudes we could assume and waited for the O.C.*

*He came along in about 5 minutes and we thought for a horrible moment that he was going to stay in OUR room, as he took off his trench-coat and hung up his gas-helmet. I couldn't think of anything in particular to do, so I just looked unhappy and dissatisfied with the ROOM, but Forbes slipped out into the hall and in a minute called to me to come and see something he had found. It was only an old steel-helmet but the C.O. followed me out to see what it was, and Forbes lit a match (so as to examine the helmet for some supposed peculiarity) in the most skilful way so that it threw the light quite accidentally and clearly on the "O.C." chalked on the door of the cubby-hole. The Col. immediately lost interest in the steel helmet and so did we. "What's this?" he asked, with his hand on the door knob. We murmured something about the mark having been there before we arrived (so it was!). The Col. opened the door and the "tout ensemble" - big art chair, foot stool, beautiful picture, antique bric-a-brac, lovely washbowl and everything else burst on him like a flash. He stepped inside and sat down on the big comfortable chair and put his feet up on the stool (the old petrol tins creaked but didn't collapse as I was afraid they would). Then he sent for his batman, had his sleeping bag, trench-coat and other belongings carried in, and took formal possession.*

*Then Forbes and I got our batmen busy, cleaned up our floor, brought out the table, lit the fire and piled on wood till we had a glorious blaze and covered up the broken window. In about 10 minutes, we were as snug and comfortable as heart could wish.*

*The C.O. realized about an hour later, when he looked in and saw the roaring fire, that he had made a bad tactical error but he never suspected the trick we had played. He came into our room for supper and hung around most of the evening in front of the fire, but finally had to toddle off to his cold little cubicle while Forbes and I lay down on the floor and went nearly into fits trying to control our laughter. This no doubt doesn't sound funny in narration, but if you know the circumstances and the characters involved it's as funny as anything in Pickwick.*

...

*It is really a very ancient old place - formerly owned by a Mare'chal of France - the Marquis of Mirepoix - who belonged to the same family as the Laval and Montmorency's and was in Canada for a time himself. There is an engraving of the Bishop of Tirepoix (fl. 1705) in the room where I am writing, another engraving of Archbishop Laval in the hall, one of Quebec City Hall in the Salon. It's odd that we should run up against a place with so many Canadian associations. The Montcalms were a related family.*

*The old furniture and pictures in this place would make Jenkins the antiquarian on Yonge Street green with envy. Some of the bedsteads must weigh at least a ton, and there are tables, bureaux, desks, chairs, etc. that look as if they were 200 or 300 years old. There is a river which runs within 50 yards of the chateau and fine big grounds around it. Gen. Joffre had dinner here some time ago and I have a picture showing him reviewing troops on the grounds.*

*We have had a bang-up supper to-night. You would have laughed to see Maj. Baynes Reed and Maj. Povah coming across the venerated lawn with three chickens carried by the legs, a bundle of celery and several dozen eggs. Every time they tried to return a salute the chickens squawked.*

On December 4, they marched to Bajus via Valhoun and La Thieuloye, where they remained for rest and training for 16 days (Dec 20). The much depleted battalion received 9 officers and another 115 soldiers as reinforcements. Langstaff wrote home at the beginning of their stay at Bajus.

*Dec. 4th.*

*Have just time to get a note off to you before our transport limbers go to the Field Post Office for mail. We have been so constantly on the march that there has been very little time for anything else except eating and sleeping. It has been a great relaxation and rest - right out in the quiet country districts, with not a sound at night except the occasional bark of a dog and the snores of the sleeping soldiers. There is no necessity for having the regimental police on duty at night - our fellows are too tired to make any disturbances, even if they were disposed to do so. As a matter of fact, I think our Division has the record for good behaviour and discipline. I heard the A.P.M. (Provost Marshall) say the other day that the record of the Division in that respect was "wonderful". There is a total absence of serious crime and scarcely any drunkenness.*

*We are getting within ear-shot of the guns again and during to-day's march have been hearing the "heavies" grumbling away again in the distance. We will likely be kept at this place (in billets) for a short time, as we are badly in need of a chance to reorganize and train some more specialists, i.e. machine-gunners, bombers, signallers, stretcher bearers, scouts, snipers, etc., to replace casualties. Also we have to work our reinforcements into our organisation, try out N.C.O.'s, etc. We have a very comfortable billet here, although not quite so pretentious as the Chateau where we spent last night. I must tell you of a comical thing that occurred last night.*

*After I finished jotting down the notes to my mother which I'm sending you a carbon copy of. Major Wilson had a room assigned him on the third story, and after leaving his haversack there, came down to dinner. Afterwards he tried to find his room but wandered all over the place and couldn't locate it. I finally found it for him after some trouble and said "Good Night" and went off. A little later I found him out in this corridors, lost again. It seems he thought he ought to tell Maj. Keith that he had found his room so that Maj. Keith would not be put to any more trouble in keeping on hunting for it. So he came downstairs to tell Maj. Keith that it was all right and that he had found his room - then when he went back, he got lost again!*

*I like the marching by night as you come across all kinds of traffic that never emerges by day. (I was interrupted here by getting the information that Capt. Donald was short the 48 hours' rations which the men have to carry with them tomorrow into the trenches. So I had to start off to Divisional Headquarters to see about it. I didn't take a compass and managed to get lost in about 16 minutes; inquired of several well-meaning ignoramuses who put me still farther wrong and finally blundered in on the place from the rear after having gone clean around it by a route about 4 times as long as the direct path. Coming back, I took a good clear bearing from the stars before I started and made the return trip without much trouble. This is what is constantly happening in this country where the whole place is a maze of holes and trenches and all the original land-marks have been obliterated.*

*After this experience, I retract what I said about being fond of travelling after dark. What I started out to say was that a great deal of movement goes on at night which cannot safely go on by day - guns, transport, man and prehistoric animals with crocodile skins.*

*I had a bath yesterday and feel very respectable and virtuous in consequence. Water here is very scarce. When the men go into the line, they have their water-bottles filled, which lasts them 24 hours. The next night, they have to get another supply - and the usual procedure is to bring the water up on wagon limbers in petrol tins to some point on the road arranged as a rendezvous - usually as far up as the transport can safely go (this is at night of course) and the next day's rations are brought up at the same time in sandbags. The wagons are met by ration parties who come out of the trenches for the purpose (usually about 5 men per platoon) and these carry back the rations and water to the trenches. The next night, the rations party carries out the empty petrol tins and meets the wagons again. They get a new lot of petrol tins (filled with water) and their rations, candles, whale oil (for greasing feet and preventing trench feet), etc. and the wagons take away the empty petrol tins*

*That is the way it is done in theory, but as a matter of fact the men are very wasteful in their use of the petrol tins - (e.g. cut the tops off them to make kettles for heating water use them for stepping stones in the trenches, etc.) so that in spite of all precautions, you never bring out of the trenches as many petrol tins as you took in. We were threatened with a famine of petrol tins ourselves yesterday, when we were warned for duty in the trenches and found our stock almost exhausted. However, we spotted a neat pile of petrol tins which some industrious batter of Canadians had collected near the road about 2 miles sway and I got an officer and 10 men up*

*before daylight this morning to go over and steal some. They came back with 102, so we are on easy street again. The artillery have more time for collecting tins than we have and anyway it will teach them not to be so late in getting up in the morning.*

*You would be amused if you could see the way the men are loaded up before they go into the trenches. Each man, in addition to his rifle, pack and other equipment, is supposed to carry 5 sandbags (empty - very useful for entrenching), a Mills Bomb in each pocket, a pick or a shovel, a port light (a kind of smoke flare, used by the infantry after an attack to show the aircraft where they have located their new front line), some of the new petrol tins, some of them drums of machine gun ammunition, and some of them with S.O.S. rockets (used when the enemy spring an attack at night as a quick mode of communicating with our artillery and getting their barrage put on).*

*I wish I could answer some of your questions on things that I have not referred to. I've been quite near Lewis very often but have not yet seen him - the Toronto papers have been absurdly wrong about the movements...*

*He is an awfully fine loyal, good-hearted old fellow and I like him more all the time. We shall likely take our holidays together, some time in December or January.*

*Looking at this I see that my writing is getting worse all the time. Partly the reason is that I have to write in small Army Books, in all sorts of positions. Also, I have to jam my letters in during spare moments*

A few days later, Langstaff wrote again from their training exercise at Bajus, his attention now turning to more mundane matters like horses and politics.

### *6/12/16 Letter 43*

*Still in billets where we are likely to have a 10 days' rest or at any rate an interval for training and reorganization. The Col. is away for a week on a course and I have been riding his charger the last couple of days for a change. It is a great thing to get on a ... decent horse again - he isn't nearly as fast or powerful as Fonbar but he's a very smooth-paced good-mannered animal with fair speed and away ahead of my own little "grizzly bear". My fellow has hair about 2 inches long all over him and is as hard to steer as a canoe going up stream. He must have a strong tinge of donkey in his composition - at any rate he has all the obstinacy of one - and when you want his to turn out for a motor-lorry or some other vehicle he is quite likely to turn his front quarters around so as to jam my leg against the lorry. I am gradually getting him out of that habit by watching for the moment when he begins to veer and then kick him with the spur on the recalcitrant end. This generally results in him swinging his hind quarters out in the ditch. He is very cute in some ways - goes extremely slowly when he is being ridden AWAY from home, but develops great speed when being headed back to the oat-bin. A few weeks ago, he thought he had a new scheme worked out to beat me, and developed a very painful limp which worried me very*

*considerably till I discovered that it disappeared when I headed him for home. So now when doubtful whether he is lame or not, I have only to turn him around and ride about 100 yards back in order to discover that he is no more lame than I am.*

*The Col. is very particular about his horse and thinks nobody but himself knows how to ride him. I fancy he would have had rather a shock yesterday if he had seen Forbes Keith and me (on HIS horse) racing along the road with both horses going their very hardest. I just beat Forbes by about a yard.*

*I see a very good letter by old Geo. Wilkie in the Globe in which he slaughters W.K. McNaught in fine style. By the time Wilkie gets through, McNaught will be sorry he let his tongue run away with him. These arrogant Tory bigots make me sick, even at this distance. The Tory party is the only loyal party, no matter whether they are burning the Upper Canada Parliament Buildings or opposing reciprocity in 1911, or supporting it in 1881, or making shells at 100% profit in 1914 - it's all for the purest patriotic motives. McNaught says that most of the fighting men are Conservatives. I never took a census out here but I'm very certain that you will find a tremendous majority of loyal fighting Tories on every Brigade staff, or tasked away in armour-plated safety-first jobs, at the Record office or Pay office.*

*I don't know how our Battalion staff compares with others, but judging from the following list the Grits are not in a minority over here:*

*Col. - No politics - "above them"  
Senior Major - Grit  
Adjutant - Grit  
Paymaster - Tory  
Medical Officer - Grit  
Chaplain - Tory  
Bombing Officer - Grit  
Machine Gun Officer - Grit  
Signalling Officer - Doubtful, likely Grit  
Quartermaster - Grit*

*I rode about 5 miles and had a BATH to-day. These come few and far between, and are correspondingly prized.*

*Leave has been cancelled for our Division and consequently I shall likely have to postpone my plans for a walking trip in Scotland or a tour of the South of France. Meanwhile I'm getting a good holiday here for a few days. Have got a new Ass't Adj't appointed and hope the work will now ease up a bit.*

---

9/12/16

*I am trying to take advantage of the Xmas rush, when the Censor is likely to be less vigilant to get some of my trophies shipped out of the country, Have just done up a German waterbottle*



*and other junk in a neat parcel tied with baby ribbon like a Xmas parcel. Am also trying to get my German Bayonet and a collection of other bayonets through the mail - am considering how to label the parcel - "carving set" seems the most appropriate superscription that I can think of. I have my eye on an old French blunderbuss, beautifully engraved on the barrel, which an old farmer in the village has. He wants 300 francs, though, and I think I shall wait till his price comes down very considerably.*

*It looks as though we would likely be in the line for Xmas. However, it won't matter particularly and we have been having a very comfortable time here. Had a splendid long ride to-day with Major Wilson, came back in the rain and got soaked to the skin, but it was great fun. My little grizzly bear was in fine fettle. We stopped at a little French city for lunch, looked through the shops, and I got a comical little Japanese tea set for my mother which I'm going to try to ship through. I don't know much about China - this was of course not any expensive make, but I think it is real china - but I like it especially for the comical little designs.*

*You seem puzzled by some statement I made about the Canadian newspapers being nearly always wrong in regard to their statements relating to the location of Canadian troops. As a matter of fact, they nearly always get the different divisions mixed up and put them down at the wrong positions in the line. After this lapse of time, it won't be any harm to say that we were at the Somme for nearly a couple of months but I guess I shouldn't go any farther than that, although I should like to tell you a lot about it. I'm probably a little too scrupulous about observing these censorship regulations - I know a good many officers write pretty freely about nearly everything - but we make the men cut down their letters in accordance with the regulations - and the only fair way is to do the same with one's own letters. I'll tell you everything when I get back.*

*You seem a little discouraged about the war to judge from your remark that you are "glad we have a definite superiority in something" (aircraft). I think we are superior to the other fellows in nearly everything- our artillery is superior in numbers, in shooting and I believe in judgment. The Germans waste an awful quantity of ammunition, firing at places where nobody ever goes; and are constantly surprising us by their failure to shell places which would cause us a great deal of bother.*

*Our ammunition supply, I believe, is more plentiful (although Fritz has lots of it) and I don't believe we fire as many duds as he does.*

*Most of our weapons are decidedly superior to the Germans - e.g. the rifle (Lee Enfield is much better on the whole than the Mauser), Mills Bomb (50 miles ahead of the Hun's grenades), our trench mortars (just as good and probably better), our gas helmets (much superior although a little bulky).*

*Especially our infantry (the French) have the Bosches beaten in every respect (except one). They have better physique, more intelligence, more endurance, better morale, and a great deal higher order of courage.*

*The German infantry is undoubtedly much inferior to what it was in the first year of the war. The older regiments have been decimated over and over again, filled up each time with new drafts, but each time with a diminution in morale. The new men they have been adding recently are very often too young or too old for the work, or inferior specimens physically. One isn't surprised that even the hardened veterans in their regiments are pretty well fed up with things, after having watched their regiments depleted over and over again by casualties and filled up again with inferior stuff. The prisoners we took were nearly all delighted to be out of it - a good many of them surrendered without striking a blow; in fact, lots of them would undoubtedly have come over voluntarily if they had not been afraid of their own artillery.*

*There's one respect in which the Bosche infantry beats ours - in its industry. Their men must be driven night and day, for they accomplish the most wonderful achievements in digging new trenches and dugouts, in putting out mazes of barbed wire, etc. Our fellows rather despise this kind of protective warfare and it is hard to get them to take an interest in it. They know they are going forward and can't see the sense of spending hours in the night laying wire in front of their trenches when they know in a few days they are likely to be in a new front line half a mile further ahead.*

*On the whole, I think everything is as encouraging as any reasonable person could hope for. It's going to be a real "war of attrition" and a good many more Germans have to be killed off, but there are a good many indications that the Huns are beginning to feel the shortage of men. Also a large proportion of their army is pretty badly disillusioned and discouraged, although doubtless this Roumanian business will cheer them up somewhat, and may raise their morale for a time.*

*Our weakest point, I think, is our Staff Work. The German General Staff is marvellous, there is no doubt about that, and I think its efficiency must extend right down to the Divisional and Brigade staffs as well. Our own "higher-up" leaders are probably good (so far as I am qualified to express an opinion -the general policy of Joffre's and Haig's plans, seem to have been exactly right so far as I can see) but in the Brigade, Divisional, Corps, etc. staffs, there has been undoubtedly lots of bad deplorable bungling which has cost many lives and thrown away splendid opportunities. I've seen several examples of this and the sickening results. Partly (probably largely) this was to have been expected and was almost inevitable, in view of the fact that the men who are now doing responsible staff work were formerly civilians and could hardly be expected to take hold of difficult, complicated, technical work, such as they are now struggling with, without making mistakes. But even taking due allowance for all that, I can't help feeling that much of our Staff bungling is due to pure stupidity and inefficiency, and that many of the men holding staff appointments would never have had them except by reason of political or family pull.*

*No doubt a good many people would say that it is presumptuous of me to make criticisms like these (I keep them to myself) but I've been studying military matters for as long as a good many of the Staff officers I see and unless one lets his brains run to seed through disuse, it's*

*impossible to avoid having some opinions. (True military discipline of course consists in either having no opinions or else concealing them).*

*I don't like this war and yet I wouldn't have missed it for anything; and I can't help believing (I know) that I can learn all kinds of lessons out of the experiences here if I take them in the right way and I know that I ought to be a better man and better equipped to be useful when I come back and wiser and humbler and more in earnest.*

During the interval at Bajus, the reinforcements were trained and worked into the battalion.

### *13/12/16 Letter 44*

*Still at the same comfortable billets with nothing more exciting than the usual routine of training. We have received a number of drafts and are working them into their place in our regimental establishment, completing their training in gas, musketry, bombing, etc. and giving lectures to the N.C.O.'s in the little French School house.*

*Leave has been stopped so that I shall have to give up thoughts of a walking trip in Scotland, or a visit to the South of France – for the time being at least. The life here is a complete rest in many ways, although one gets awfully sick of the routine at times. I've been at it continuously (except a couple of days last New Year) for nearly a year and a half, and sometimes I feel as though I'd like to assassinate the bugler and stop for ever his eternal round of reveille, sick parade, breakfast, fall in for parade, dismiss, dinner, etc.*

*... except for the monotony of the life, it is first rate. Certain, [...]s away ahead of some of the places we have been in [dur]ing the last three months.*

*Affairs in Canadian military circles, both at home and at Bramshott, appear to be in a glorious mess at the present time, judging by the accounts that come through. There is nobody that has any regrets at Sam Hughes disappearance. It is possible that somebody else might have bungled the Militia Department job worse than he did, but hardly probable. Within a few days after Sam's resignation, another Hughes disappeared from the scene - a near relative of his who was in command of one of the Canadian brigades. He didn't last long after Sam's influence had waned.*

*One of the most difficult problems' at present engaging my attention is how to ship out of the country my Hun gas helmet, whizz-bang shell, belt and tassel, bayonet and sheathe, saw-bayonet, waterbottle, nose cap, rifle grenade, Mauser rifle, etc. I have several brilliant schemes on tap, but have not yet decided which to adopt. This trophy-hunting is very engrossing, but a fellow is apt to load himself up with so much junk that it proves a nuisance, especially as the Division are always getting after us to cut down our baggage. According to the Manual, an officer's luggage must weigh not exceeding 35 lbs. Luckily I have a stand-in with the Transport*

*Officer, and am carrying around a good deal more than that.*

*Another very difficult problem is the disciplining of the cook. I used to think that all this talk about the difficulty of getting a good cook and keeping her, etc., was tommy-rot but since coming over here, I've altered all my views. If female cooks are any harder to manage than male cooks, they must be beyond all control. We started off with a chap who was a fair cook, but so dirty we had to chase him. We then "appropriated" for the H.Q. mess the man who was "B" Company's star cook, but we didn't get any good of our high-handed methods. He proved nearly as dirty as the first man and twice as exasperating; we abused him so much that he finally got himself hit by a piece of shrapnel and disappeared to Field Ambulance. Next man was reputed to be the leading culinary artist of "C" Company, but we found out within a few weeks that he had been over-rated and one morning when he slept-in in his dugout till 7 A.M. and we had no breakfast ready, I ordered him back to the ranks - he, also, got a Blighty within a couple of days to emphasize the punishment.*

*We next selected a Sergeant Cook who had been sent us from Bramshott. He came to us with a great reputation, but it speedily vanished. He had no control over the batmen (who act as waiters) and his dishes were always dirty. We didn't mind that so much at the Somme, where we had other things to take our minds off dirty dishes (water was scarce there, and the approved way to clean dishes was to rub than dry with a bread crust or piece of newspaper). But here, where there is plenty of water, there is no reason why dishes should not be washed at least once every 3 days. Also, it is annoying to be handed at breakfast the fork which obviously somebody else used last night to eat his jam with and find after you have rubbed off the jam on the Colonel's trenchcoat, that there is a lower layer that looks like bully beef.*

*We have this chap yet because we can't find anybody any better. We had the satisfaction, though a day or so ago, of throwing a good scare into him. The spoons were particularly obnoxious that morning, so I col- ... the worst of them as evidence and laid a charge against... [] Duty". He came up before Forbes Keith, and we both ... for him. When one of us ran out of breath, the other .... Finally, when we had him sufficiently impressed, we... warning that we would have him reduced next time.*

*... tell you, with regard to my war souvenirs that I've got ... out already that I shall fix up after the war - with my stirrup... and bit nicely nickel-plated, my Mauser rifle that I got in the road of Regina Trench, all the various types of bayonets in a design on the wall (the way they have them at the Military Institute on University Avenue) with gas helmets and steel helmets of the German, French and English, shell cases of different guns, and a regular arsenal of bombs, different kinds of ammunition, etc.*

*I've got several interesting proofs of the Germans' use of expanding bullets - one big cartridge which evidently fitted into an old elephant gun or something of the kind; another cartridge which has had the bullet reversed with its blunt end out - the sort of thing that would blow a terrific hole in a man, of course, this kind of thing is forbidden by International Law, but personally I find it hard to work up very much excitement about the Germans using them, in view*

*of the fact that gunshot wounds are trifling compared to shrapnel or high explosive shell-wounds, and I can't see why the Hague experts should stipulate so carefully what kind of bullet fully what kind of a rifle bullet is allowed when anything passes*

*Our Battalion has been selected for an inspection by Sir Julian Byng, commanding the Canadian Corps, which is pretty fair evidence that we are the best Battalion in the Division, as our own General would naturally trot out the Battalion that would do him most credit. I always told you that our Battalion was the best - although there is a mere fragment of the original 75th left, and even those who came over to France with the Battalion will soon be in the minority.*

*It was not a surprise to us to hear that Haley Howard was dead, and I'm afraid Harry Devlin was very badly wounded.*

*Nearly all the original Ninth Horse officers are gone. Maj. Poupore is wounded, Maj Miln killed, Maj Bull going back to Canada and Maj Povah suffering from rheumatism and nerves so that he has been recommended for an easy job as Town Major. This will leave me the third officer in the Battalion in seniority, although I was about 20th when we commenced.*

*Alex Miln is the officer I miss most as he was a wonderfully fine, lovable fellow, always cheerful and doing his best. Our Machine Gun officer, Benny Wright, will also be hard to replace. He was the most reckless fellow I ever saw and simply took a delight in getting into danger. I know that he slept a number of times in an old Hun dugout about 300 yards ahead of our front line in No Man's Land - he was dead tired, wanted a quiet sheltered place to sleep at night and simply strolled out to this deep dugout which our patrols had discovered - the fact that there was a German down at the bottom (deceased for a week or ten days) didn't disturb his slumbers in the least.*

*We have had a good any new officers sent out to us since we got here – about 20 new ones since we came to France. Some of them are from Toronto, and others from all over the earth. We have tried in vain to get permission to draw our reinforcements exclusively from Toronto regiments. It would mean a tremendous lot to the esprit de corps of a Battalion, to have all its officers and been from the same town or district.*

On December 20, the 75<sup>th</sup> left the relative tranquility of Bajus, marching first to Estree Cauchie. Then, on December 21, they returned to the trenches for the first time in a month, relieving the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion. They stayed in the trenches for a short tour, with Langstaff spending Christmas 1916 in a dugout. Compared to the Somme, the new sector seemed like a “convalescent home”.

### *December 25. Letter 46*

*[...] have been in the line since the 21st. This particular part is ....to spend Xmas in as the dugout accommodation is not good [as every]body is too crowded. However, we got a big Xmas*

*mail up to [...] this afternoon and everybody is happy. I had a magnificent dinner of McConaghy ration and then a long tour of inspection through the trenches, which was much healthier than eating one's head off as one is obliged to do at home.*

*This is a pretty quiet sector at present, and after the Somme seems like a convalescent home. There is not much artillery fire, most of the damage being done by trench mortars. As a matter of fact, a trench mortar is a pretty formidable weapon as some of them throw as big a shell as a large howitzer. These trench mortars, as the name implies, are brought right up into the trenches, and fired from there. They fire with a very high trajectory going away up in the air in a slow curve so that you can see them coming for 10 or 15 seconds before they reach the ground. Most of them have a kind of tail or handle on them and they look comical sailing through the air, like an enormous dipper. The men get pretty expert at dodging them, as they can be seen coming, but sometimes they get a direct hit or a trench and cause casualties. There is so much explosive in them that they have a big local effect, and a trench mortar bombardment will blow in a line of trenches or shatter the enemy's wire very effectively, and (being so close up) they are very accurate. They are not popular with the men, though, as they provoke retaliation against the trenches from which they are fired.*

*We have had a little entertainment to-night up the first real activity since we moved in. Some Battalion on our left was evidently making a raid or was being raided, and for an hour the guns got going quite hard, while the show of fire-works up and down the line for miles was grand. The real show was on our left, but the artillery all up and down the front joined in the strafe. We had nobody hurt, although the Huns got a direct hit with a light gun on our signallers' dugout next door. You would love to see the fire-works in a show like this. You know, of course, that both sides use flares for lighting up their front when they want to guard against the enemy coming over unawares. These are fired from what are called "Very Pistols" - both sides use the same apparatus with a little difference in make. They are wide-barrel pocket pistols, and when you want to send up a flare you put a cartridge in the breech, just as though it was a revolver, and then fire up in the air, which describes a long curve in the air illuminating the ground very brightly for a radius of probably 100-200 yards with a coloured light. Within that radius you could pick out any movement, while the flare is up. The safest way to avoid detection is to stand stock still, and as the ground is pretty wild and rugged a man who doesn't move is generally mistaken for a post or tree stump, unless he is very close. The effective radius of these flares for giving a really bright light is about what I have said, but they give a certain amount of light much farther away than that and I have often picked my way along a road or path 2 or 5 miles behind the front line and avoided shell-holes, artillery wires, etc. solely by the light of the flares thrown up at the front. In fact, I have seen the flares plainly when I have been at least 15 miles behind the front. In the St Eloi salient, that was one of the weirdest things to see at night - flares lighting up the horizon on three sides of you, for of course the salient extended in a kind of bulging curve right into the enemy's front.*

*The Huns are very fond of flares, use them for signals very largely and carry a very varied*

*stock of colours - green, white, yellow, red, golden, etc. other go up in a single rocket, red or white or green, etc., and when at the top of their curve, break into a shower of different coloured stars, or golden rain, etc. The fireworks at Toronto Exhibition are crude compared to the shows the Germans put on. Our fellows rather despise the use of flares, claim it indicates nervousness, etc., but I rather think they overdo it and a judicious use of flares is a good thing when you want to find out what is going on in front of you. At most times, it is not necessary for us to put up many flares as the Bosches furnish the light. They have one beautiful parachute rocket which stays up probably half a minute and illuminates everything for a quarter of a mile.*

*This sector was originally built by the French and most of the trenches and dugouts were built by them. The more I see of their work, the more I admire them. The trenches are beautiful wide, deep affairs most of them well bath-matted (i.e. a slat walk put down to cover up the mud), well revetted and well designed. . The French take their business very seriously and have a good healthy, deep-rooted hate for the Bosche which our soldiers don't seem to be able to acquire. Our fellows are fine fighters but they hate working on trenches, or carrying parties, or anything like that. The labor side of soldiering is about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of it, and just as important as the fighting. Those fine deep French trenches save a lot of casualties, and moreover they keep the enemy guessing as to our movements. You could mass a whole army corps on this frontage and the Huns would never suspect it.*

*I wish I could tell you a lot about what is going on or about things that you would be interested in, but I'll have to keep them till I come back. I makes me a little mad not be able to tell, when I strongly suspect that some officers are not equally careful and in fact I have seen letters in Canadian papers, telling all sorts of things with a frankness which is certainly not in accordance with the Censorship regulations and might conceivably be dangerous. Some of the Censor's restrictions are rather absurd and one chafes at them, but can't help feeling at heart that there is a good reason for keeping very close about these things, when absolute secrecy means so much for the success of any kind of an operation.*

*You were "hot" all right about the old Cathedral. It was one of the most remarkable shell-freaks I ever came across - the statue hit, knocked at right angles to the tower, and still remaining intact and securely fastened to its base. I saw another queer freak at Ypres Cathedral - one solitary fleche tower standing at an angle of the building and all supports gone.*

*We are near a coal-mine here - on the German side of the line. It is only about a mile behind the line, and within rifle shot and of course easy shelling distance and yet it is working away full blast. The reason is that it is operated by British prisoners, and they can be made out with field glasses from our lines. We don't shell the place, naturally, and the Huns rely on that. Some day we will locally get at it by a different process.*

*I'll try to get some of the official Canadian Photo publications and send them to you. Many of them are really fine I've seen a lot of the places shown in these photos*

On December 27, the 75<sup>th</sup> was relieved and went to Brigade Reserve at Berthonval Wood and Maistre Line. It received 100 more reinforcements on December 31. The 75<sup>th</sup> was sent back into the trenches on January 1, remaining there until January 8. It incurred 23 casualties (5 killed; 18 wounded) on this tour. Langstaff wrote home from the trenches.

### *January 1. Letter 48.*

*We were expecting to be sent out for 6 days in Divisional Reserve (which means billets and more or less of a rest) but have orders to go into the line again. There has been a spell of generally rotten weather, although all the weather here in the winter is rotten. We have hardly seen the sun for two months - Christmas Day as a notable exception. The last 3 or 4 days, however, we have had a tremendous lot of rain (2 inches in a single night) with the result that dugouts are flooded or caved in trenches full of water or with sides fallen down, and in every way as much damage done as the enemy could do in 2 months' bombardment.*

### *Jan. 4 - Continuation*

*I see quite clearly that if they continue to shove so much work at me I'll have to revert to lay old scheme of writing your letters by scraps, as I get a chance. Things have been very busy this tour and I must get the Assistant Adjutant up from the Transport lines. He is a little fellow who seems to have lost his nerve somehow, and ordinarily I would prefer to carry on up here myself and let him look after the work at the transport Lines. However, things are pretty quiet just now (we had quite a special bombardment nearly all day yesterday, so the Huns will likely give us a rest for a four days) and I think he can get along all right and carry on with some of the inside work so that I can get about through the trenches more.*

On January 8, the 75<sup>th</sup> were relieved in the trenches and moved to reserve at Camblain L'Abbe.

### *~Jan 10, 1917 Letter 48*

*[missing]....*

*Are cleaning out the unemployed officers in England and giving them the option of either going back to Canada or coming over as Lieuts.*

*These two chaps joined under rather unattractive conditions as the weather had been wet for some days, and that night they had a regular deluge with the result that one of them (the one who wants to go back) woke up lying under water and with the dugout threatening to collapse. We have, as I think I told you at the beginning, an awful struggle in wet weather with dugouts and trenches. Some of the dugouts fall right in and the trenches slide inwards towards the centre*



*till you can hardly get through them. In order to keep them from sliding inwards they ought to be "revetted" (i.e. the sides supported with hoarding or wire mesh, or walls of sandbags). But with the maze of trenches that we have here it is impossible torevet them all.*

*The Col. has been away for 10 days' leave and has come back with a cold. On the whole, I think the healthiest place is in the trenches. Fuel is very scarce or otherwise we could make some of the dugouts pretty cosy. So much wood is required for engineering work and other purposes that pretty serious inroads have been made, I believe, on many English forests. Even when we were at Bramshott, some of our fellows who were away on motor tours, reported that the foresters were cutting right and left in the splendid forests at Windsor and Epsom.*

*We have been trying hard for a long time to get matters regulated so that we would draw our reinforcements from Toronto and finally succeeded in getting a draft of 100 from the 170th (Mississaugas) Battalion - brought over by Ross Gooderham who has reverted to Lieut. He is not coming to our Battalion himself - just came across as conducting officer for the draft.*

*In the sector where we now are, it is not possible to use the telephone very much, owing to the danger of being overheard by the Huns who have listening apparatus which is effective over a wide radius. Consequently we have either to resort to an elaborate code when speaking over the phone, or else messages must be buzzed in Morse, while the operator at the same time turns on an apparatus which sends a dull droning sound over the wire and prevents the Hun from picking up the Morse signals.*

*January 11, 1917 Letter 49.*

*Have just time to write you a few lines. I got another roll of very welcome papers, including a World Wide and a Punch. I agree with you in thinking the Punch one of the most amusing and original that has been published or at least that I have seen for a long time; but the one I liked best is the one you didn't mark - showing the German family at home with Hindenburg plastered all over the place.*

*We have been back in Reserve for several days and are going up the line again on the 14th. We get 6 to 7 days per month out of the trenches under the present system, but there is not much rest about it as we have to keep the men polished up in bayonet work, gas instructions shooting, bombing, machine gun practice, etc., as otherwise they would go back as regards efficiency in these various things. It is a never-ending process of taking the men into the line, going through the requirements there, then coming out for a breathing spell which has to be utilized in brushing up the men's training, getting them into better physical condition again after the exposure of the trenches, and generally smartening them up.*

*We had an accident to our baggage when the Battalion was relieved the last time. A shell struck a pile of staff which was waiting to be removed by the batmen and removed it so effectively that large portions of it couldn't be found again. Our Headquarters less Box disappeared and not a plate, knife, fork or spoon could be discovered. Maj. Wilson's sleeping*

*bag went up in the air and the only trace remaining consisted of scraps of red blanket which decorated the landscape in all directions. I wouldn't have minded these catastrophes so much, for it is easy to sympathize with the calamities of others, but the confounded shell struck the end of my sleeping-bag too and riddled it like a sieve. My revolver, holster, field-glasses, prismatic compass, one boot and various other articles were never seen again. Langford retrieved one boot, pieces of my leggings, some fragments of blanket, etc.*

*The weather here is the rottenest I ever saw and nearly everybody has a bark. A great many of the men can't speak above a whisper. There is not much cold weather - only a day now and again which is pretty chilly - but it is incessantly wet or damp*

*You would be amused at the poem which some French rhymaster had commenced on the wall of the dugout I occupied last tour:*

*"C'est ainsi que le petit rat  
Montre tour a tour...  
..... chat" -*

*He was evidently contemplating a quatrain with "chat" as a rhyme whom he got stuck.*

*Here is a poem which Baynes Reed gave me to-day and which I think is pretty clever. It should appeal to you :-*

*"The time I've spent on these here socks  
Is like a thousand years to me  
Old Top, how do they look to thee?  
Thy hosiery! Thy hosiery!*

*Oh maddening stitches, plain and purl  
How oft they've made my poor head whirl  
For men must fight, but I'm a girl  
And so I'm knitting socks for thee  
My mother taught me how to knit,  
I hope with all my heart they fit  
If not as sooks, then as a mitt.  
Or pass them on! Thy hosiery!*

*I have something to tell you which will probably surprise you, although not half as much as it surprised me. There has been a good deal of trouble connected with the administration of the Battalion for a good while past at any rate, I've been thoroughly disgusted with a good many things, although I've never said much about them. The Col. is a very good-hearted, clannish, chap - terribly, absurdly loyal to all his friends (especially anybody who ever had the remotest connection with the 9th Horse), but an absolutely rotten judge of men. We had in the Battalion when we started a very large proportion of young, irresponsible chaps, who were brilliant in spots but lacked stability and lost enthusiasm quickly and soon got weary of the unutterable routine and drudgery. They were fine as subalterns so long as they had a good strong Company Commander or other officer over them who would see that they stayed on the job and looked after their men. But without some firm control they were no good, had no idea of discipline or their responsibilities or anything else.*

*These chaps soon "got on to" the Col. and his weak side ; i.e. learned that though he has a terrific temper, he is very easily appeased, and never does any of the terrible things he threatens no matter how an officer neglects his duty. Result has been for a long time, a general slackening of discipline among the officers and in attention to their proper jobs - leaving everything to the N.C.O.'s, etc. I've fought the thing with all my might; but as you can understand, I had no power to bounce them as they deserved, and the most I've been able to do was to try my best by extra hard work myself to prevent the general efficiency of the Battalion from suffering.*

*Things have been worse lately on account of the fact that, owing to casualties, these young junior officers whom I speak of were rapidly becoming pretty well up on the seniority list, so that their slackness was worse in its effects than when they were only junior subs.*

*However, the climax came a few days ago when the Col. practically broke down under the work and the dugout life and everything else. Major Wilson said he wanted a rest and reported it to General Odlum.*

*By the way I don't want you to get the idea from this that the Battalion has been going to the dogs. As a matter of fact it has been doing very well and at the end of its very last tour, 3 days ago, both the Brigadier General and General Watson, commanding the Division wrote quite long letters of appreciation on the work we did during the tour, and Gene Watson sent copies of a training syllabus I had drawn up to every Battalion in the Division. All I'm trying to explain to you is that, although the Battalion has kept on going, it has been not because of the efficient condition of the internal machine , but rather in spite of its unsatisfactory state.*

*At any rate, Gen. Odlum, who is a pretty shrewd observer, had evidently been suspecting the state of affairs for some time. He rode over yesterday morning, had a long talk with the Col and then called me in to state his diagnosis. He said he knew what the situation was and had seen for some time that the Col. and I had been doing all the work without any backing and that he had made up his mind to change things. He also said he was going to put me in as Second in Command and wanted the Col. to take a rest for a short time, leaving me in command. I kicked at this and pointed out that the very fact of our having had no backing from the Company Commanders, etc. would make it extra hard for me to carry on alone; and that if he removed both Forbes (permanently) and the Col. (temporarily) that would give me an impossible job to handle, even for a short time. So he finally agreed that when Forbes comes back (he is away on leave now) he should take command until the General had time to make the special arrangements he spoke of; but in the meantime the Col. is to take a rest. This is rather better, but it will leave me to take the Battalion into the line on Sunday without either Forbes or the Col. and I shall have to carry on by myself for a few days till Forbes returns. I suppose I can do it somehow, but I don't relish the job.*

*I'm not trying to shirk responsibility but I am afraid of being pushed ahead too fast. In addition, the thing will be more difficult for me on account of my being put over the head of a number of officers, who are now senior to me, and I shall need all the tact I can dig up to handle the situation. I never had many ambitions in this military game - it is true I got a bit sick of being*

*a Lieut. - but to be shot up inside of a year from one of the junior Lieutenants to Senior Major of the Battalion is rather too rapid going even for the vaulting ambition which you are so accustomed to attribute to me. It would be different if I had had even the slightest militia experience before the war. I'm afraid of having too much work and responsibility crowded upon me before I have had time to absorb everything in the way of knowledge and experience that I require. The responsibilities are so terrible in this game that they can't be overlooked.*

*However, I'm going to try to do my best and if the General persists in sticking me in as Senior Major I'm willing to have a whirl at it. In the meantime he has gone off to England for 10 days and I'll have to carry on as O.C. of the Battalion for a while at least. Fortunately, we are going first into the Support position where the strain is not so great.*

*I must quit now - there is so much work of one kind or another to do that I must toe the mark closely for a while. I'm afraid this puts an end to my "leave" prospects. However, if it results in setting the Battalion running right I won't mind. I told Gen. Odlum plainly what was the matter with things, in my opinion. I told him that only 2 out of 4 of our Company Commanders were worth their salt, to which he replied that he was surprised I said 2 as he only made it one.*

On January 14, the 75<sup>th</sup> returned to the trenches, where they remained for 6 days.

### *January 18, 1917 Letter 50*

*We're in the trenches again and I've been in command of the Battalion during the last five days. Things have been very quiet and the only problem of any consequence has been how to find men for the numerous working parties that the Engineers and others have been clamoring for every day.*

*We had a fall of 4-5 inches of snow night before last and everything is still covered with white, just like a Canadian landscape. It will likely all be gone by to-morrow and then everything will be mud again.*

*Have been experiencing a great deal of difficulty in getting rid of a cat which we found, together with some kittens, in this dugout when we moved in. You find cats everywhere you go. I suppose they are attracted to the trenches by the multitudes of rats that infest them. There must be literally millions of rats in every trench. All day and night, you can hear then squealing and chirping behind the walls of the dugout; and at night they are everywhere - so bold that they will hardly take the trouble to get out of your way.*

*Our Battalion Sergeant-Major (you remember the big old Irishman who recited at the band concert) has been away on leave and on his return brought me a set of "Maundy Money" nicely done up in a leather case. I don't know whether you have ever heard the history of it - it is apparently an old custom connected with the Royal Mint. On Maundy Thursday in each year, the*

*Mint strikes off a set of silver pennies, i.e. one, two, three and fourpence, - one set for each year of the King's age. This year for example there would be 51 sets struck off, next year 52, last year 50. The old B.S.R. has a couple of relatives with positions in the Mint who got him this set.*

*Our cat has disappeared to-day and we have a small black and white fox-terrier puppy which has bobbed up from nobody knows where. He is a very friendly little fellow and wants to sleep all the time on our...*

Thus ends the letters in china cabinet.

## *Vimy Ridge*

The 75<sup>th</sup> Canadian battalion was subsequently deployed to Vimy Ridge, where Langstaff and Colonel Beckett were killed in an ill-conceived raid on March 1, about five weeks before the later successful Battle of Vimy Ridge. Cook (1999)<sup>14</sup> gives a fascinating account of the ill-fated raid. The plan for the raid, as drawn up by the central staff, had been vigorously opposed by Colonels Beckett and Kemball, other experienced commanders. Their raiding technique depended on heavy artillery support to provide cover. The planners had instead proposed that cover be provided by a gas attack. The field commanders' protests were ultimately ignored by the most senior officer, General Edmund Ironside, a British veteran of the Boer War. Cook:

In the end, two experienced battalion commanders, who had scouted the area and seen the formidable defences their men were up against, were ignored by staff officers willing to rely on a super-weapon to overcome defenders who had spent two years fortifying their position.

Garnett (2011) wrote:

the planners chose to forego artillery support for the raiders in favour of a poison gas cloud, an experiment that had never been tried before. To date, artillery, mortar, and rifle grenades had been essential in any large-scale attack, and the use of poison gas was completely different. When the divisional planners presented their strategy, they overrode the objections from their experienced veteran junior commanders, who predicted all manner of problems with the reliance on gas, with which the infantry had almost no training

Although the colonels would normally direct a raid from headquarters, Beckett and Kemball, worried about the prospects of the orders, chivalrously led their battalions into the raid:

Despite the fact that commanders never accompanied raiders, both Kemball and Beckett refused to send their men into the questionable battle without leading them from the front.

Word of the pending attack had leaked to the Germans, who were well prepared for the gas attack. Despite their experience and past success in trench raiding, the Canadians were mowed down. Garnett (2011) quoted a humble poem by Private Bert Cooke of the 75<sup>th</sup> in remembrance of the tragedy:

There was nothing much done till away in March,  
then a raid was pulled off one night in the dark.  
Old Fritz seemed to know we were coming just then.  
He outnumbered our boys again and again.

---

<sup>14</sup> <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1076&context=cmh>

Some gas was put over, but turned with the wind,  
the Huns they all knew it and just simply grinned.  
But the boys they went over and tackled them right,  
we got in their trenches and made them all fight.  
On this occasion we will never forget,  
all the boys in the outfit will tell you that yet.  
We lost our Colonel and Major Langstaff,  
they died like heroes, they fought till the last.  
They lay in the graveyard not far from the Ridge,  
with others beside them that fell as they did.  
They did their duty that terrible night,  
we will never forget that month or fight.

A month later, the Canadian Corps carried out a successful assault on Vimy Ridge, which has been characterized<sup>15</sup> as “the greatest Allied victory up to that time” and a “a profound turning-point for the Allies” in which fortune now leading to the armistice eighteen months later. For Canada, the success at Vimy Ridge had special significance. Brigadier-General Alexander Ross, who proposed the first Veterans' post-war pilgrimage to the new Vimy Memorial in 1936, said of the battle:

It was Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific on parade. I thought then... that in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation."

Stephen McIntyre, based on notes by Katherine McIntyre  
November 18, 2016

---

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/first-world-war/road-to-vimy-ridge/vimy5>

## *References:*

- Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group. Nicholson Sketches.  
<http://cefresearch.ca/matrix/Nicholson/index.html>. See also  
<http://laughton.ca/mirror/military/ww1/gvlaughton/nicholson/sketches>.
- Canadian War Museum. Canada and the First World War – Courcellette.*  
<http://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/battles-and-fighting/land-battles/courcellette/>
- CanadianSoldiers.com, Ancre, 1916.  
<http://www.canadiansoldiers.com/history/battlehonours/westernfront/ancre1916.htm>
- Cook, Tim (1999) "'A Proper Slaughter': The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge," *Canadian Military History: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 2*. Available at:  
<http://scholars.wlu.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1076&context=cmh>
- Gould, Sgt Leonard McLeod. *The Story of the 102nd Canadian Infantry Battalion From BC to Baisieux*. <http://www.102ndbattalioncef.ca/warpages/102chap4.htm>
- Simon. *Visiting the Battlefields of World War 1*. <http://www.webmatters.net/txtpat/>
- The 54th Canadian Infantry Battalion, 1915 – 1919, [http://54thbattalioncef.ca/?page\\_id=149](http://54thbattalioncef.ca/?page_id=149)
- War Diaries of the 75th Canadian Battalion, 75th [http://data4.collectionscanada.ca/netacgi/nph-brs?s1=75TH+CANADIAN+INFANTRY+BATTALION&s13=&s12=&l=20&s9=RG9&s7=9-52&Sect1=IMAGE&Sect2=THESOFF&Sect4=AND&Sect5=WARDPEN&Sect6=HITOFF&d=FIN&p=1&u=http://www.collectionscanada.ca/archivianet/02015202\\_e.html&r=1&f=G](http://data4.collectionscanada.ca/netacgi/nph-brs?s1=75TH+CANADIAN+INFANTRY+BATTALION&s13=&s12=&l=20&s9=RG9&s7=9-52&Sect1=IMAGE&Sect2=THESOFF&Sect4=AND&Sect5=WARDPEN&Sect6=HITOFF&d=FIN&p=1&u=http://www.collectionscanada.ca/archivianet/02015202_e.html&r=1&f=G)
- Wikipedia. *Battle of the Ancre*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Ancre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Ancre)
- Garnett, Colin D, 2011. *Butcher and Bolt: Canadian Trench Raiding during the Great War, 1915-1918*, [https://curve.carleton.ca/system/files/etd/c5406e66-1327-45d3-9f8c-0e9745a65a6a/etd\\_pdf/2d25ffa7a8309029dc763673fba8635f/garnett-butcherandboltcanadiantrenchraidingduring.pdf](https://curve.carleton.ca/system/files/etd/c5406e66-1327-45d3-9f8c-0e9745a65a6a/etd_pdf/2d25ffa7a8309029dc763673fba8635f/garnett-butcherandboltcanadiantrenchraidingduring.pdf)
-