

FEBRUARY 13, 1915

# Dug In

*The spirit of the British soldier could be no better shown than in the following vivid record of day-to-day trench warfare by a private of one of the Scottish territorial regiments. The young fighter in this letter written to his family at Waybridge, England, tells of his experiences in the trenches. He was in the thick of the fighting that came as a result of the Kaiser's desperate attempts to take Ypres, yet he indulges in no heroics. He writes as casually as though reporting a cricket game or a boat race.*

**N**OW that I have a table to write on, and a chair to sit on, I will give you all the news since leaving Paris.

"As I have already told you, we had 24 hours' notice to join our battalion. I rushed round having photos taken, and saying farewells. Reveille on that day was sounded at 4 a. m. so we could catch a train at 6:15 to St. Omer in northern France. Arriving at our destination at midnight on the following day, our battalion gradually gathered together from all quarters. That was the first time I had seen Wattie and Bobbie since leaving Le Mans. We stayed on the spot for two days polishing our musketry, and training, and then moved off to Ypres, and billeted there for four hours, after the 12-hour journey in the cold and wet on top of the motor bus. The grand old town has since been shelled.

"It was in Ypres that we first heard the sound of the guns. Next morning we marched off to the reserve trenches some five miles out of the town, and stayed there for seven hours in case we should be needed, but we were afterwards told that we were not required. Away we marched back to Ypres to find 40 motor buses awaiting us in the square. We were hurried on board, and rushed to a small village near Messines; Whytecheate, I think they call it. There we stayed until an hour before dawn. We then marched off through Whytecheate where we had our really first baptism of fire.

"A shell burst above a cottage in the street while we were passing. All the windows in the house were broken. Tile fell from the roof on us. Two of our fellows were knocked over by the force of the air from the explosion. This was quite near enough to be comfortable, but it was surprising how cool our chaps remained. This was about 10 a. m. We were led by our commander round woods, and under cover as much as possible. Aeroplanes passed over us continuously.

"We reached the place where we were to advance in the open about 11:15 a. m., as far as I can remember. F company was about the fifth company to advance. The idea, it seems, was that we were to occupy some trenches already taken up by a cavalry regiment. Our first company arrived more or less complete after a terrible shelling which was directed upon us, as we were perfectly visible to aeroplanes and to a captive balloon which the Germans had in the town of Messines, the place we were to attack, only to find that there was room only for about 200 men in the trenches already prepared.

"This of course, meant that we had to dig trenches as best we could with our entrenching tools, in broad daylight under shell fire: Well, we started to do this, as you can imagine, for our very lives, but what we could do was small protection against 'Jack Johnsons.' The safest, and practically the only thing to do was to lie perfectly still, and flat, and dig in that position.

"Wattie was next to me, and we had one very narrow escape from a 'Jack Johnson' which burst about 15 yards behind us, making a hole in the ground about 10 feet deep, and throwing up a cloud of earth-covered pieces of shell. One of these pieces hit me on the back of the neck. Luckily, I had my coat collar turned up, and the piece of shell was imbedded in a clod of earth about four inches in diameter. I suppose the clod of earth farthest from the metal hit me. At any rate, the lump of earth fell into my trench, and I picked it up and took out the piece which I am saving for a souvenir. Don't laugh; I was never very keen on rings, but it strikes me as interesting.

"Well, to proceed. We remained lying on our 'Little Marys' until about 6 p. m. I had read a tale of Conan Doyle's which I had put in my overcoat. I had taken it in case of a slow movement. I can tell you it was anything but slow, but the story tended to take your mind off the 'Jack Johnsons' for the time being. We next moved to a position which our adjutant had been told to hold at all costs. This position, which included a farmhouse, was quite near our last one. We again commenced to dig trenches. It was dark, although there was a bright harvest moon.

"We had just finished our trenches when there was a terrible noise between us and Messines, our point of attack. This was evidently the Germans attacking our advanced trenches.

"Reinforcements were called for, and we advanced with fixed bayonets past the barbed wire entanglements. Of course you must understand that these accounts vary according to the part of the firing line we were in. By the time we arrived at the advance trenches the enemy had been driven back. Our work was to hold these trenches against further attacks. More trenches had been dug by this time, so this made our work easier. The enemy made fierce attacks, but we managed to hold the trenches.

"Suddenly there was a comparative calm, which meant that the Germans were again rallying. Of course we were on the alert for any more artful attacks. There were repeated assaults of the enemy under cover of the English language and commands, such as "Don't Fire, we are Indians and Scottish rifles." Commands in perfect English as "Round on the left flank," were often given. I could distinctly hear these from the trench I was in. Luckily we were put on guard against such tricks while at Garston, so the Germans got only

English rifle fire in reply to their English language.

"About 7 o'clock next morning we had news that the Germans were on three sides of us. The only thing we could do was to retire. It was quite a slow movement at first, for I had time to go up hill to the last trench I had dug to get my pack I had used as headcover in the trench I was in. When I arrived there I had evidently been seen by the enemy, for a hail of bullets came whizzing over my head.

"I looked around and saw a crowd of Germans advancing over a far crest. By thing we could do was to retire. It was quite a slow movement at first, for I had time to go up hill to the last trench I had dug to get my pack I had used as headcover in the trench I was in. When I arrived there I had evidently been seen by the enemy, for a hail of bullets came whizzing over my head.

"I looked around and saw a crowd of Germans advancing over a far crest. By this time we had a quiet contempt for German rifle fire, so

I secured my pack, and another fellow's entrenching tool, and joined the rest of my company at the foot of the slope. There I reported the advance of the Germans. It was thought best that we retire, considering the small number left of our company.

"It was well that we did, for we afterwards learnt that the order to retire had been given about two hours previously.

"We eventually arrived back at La Clyde, which was the point of retrenchment. On the road we met three battalions of regulars on the way to relieve us. We learned afterward that we had done well and effectually all that had been required of us; viz, to hold back the advance of something like 45,000 Germans said to be led in person by the Kaiser himself. We had heard the Imperial band playing the Austrian national anthem the night before when the Germans were attacking. They say the anthem is played whenever a general attack is ordered; until reinforcements are brought up, and preparations to charge made.

"I shall never forget the scene of the

previous night. Try and imagine it; a glorious harvest moon, a perfect night, a blazing convent in the rear (the result of the afternoon shelling), a burning farm on the right, a barn well alight immediately in front, shells shrieking and bursting overhead, the whizzing and snapping of a kind of explosive bullet believed to be used by German snipers, Germans singing in the distance to the accompaniment of their bands; British cheers and shouting as our lads charged time and again, and now and then an awful silence, and again broken by a strong attack. What a picture for an artist! Considering what was done that night and afterwards, the Scottish lost a marvelously small number of men, which speaks volumes for the system of attack ordered by the British army.

"We went back afterwards to the field, where there was a roll call, and as near as possible a list of casualties made. Official post cards were made out and sent to relations. Later we marched to Baillene, where we were in billet six days for a good rest. Then the order came for the Scottish to move off, and a march of about 12 miles over slippery cobblestones, one of the hardest marches I have ever had. Then we arrived at the trenches in a wooded part of the defending line of Ypres. We were relieving a regular regiment; our work being to hold the wood against all possible attacks of the enemy, as it was a most important position.

"We stayed in those trenches; not very good ones, by the way, for six days, two of which were pouring with rain. I was put on a flanking trench where later our machine gun was mounted. This seemed to give our position away, for on the fourth day we suffered a terrible bombardment, when the Germans made a terrific, and determined attack.

"Most of our casualties this day were on this flank. They had evidently found the position of our machine gun, which was four trenches to my right; and directed their heavy guns on it. One poor fellow, four trenches on my left, had his head blown off by one 'Jack Johnson.' Another shell burst practically in the same place later on, and mangled both legs of one fellow, and cut the leg through of a companion in the same trench.

"Naturally there was a shout for help by these unfortunate chaps, so we went to help. I took the fellow with the last wound to a place for safety from the shell fire, and was returning to find a stretcher for him with another fellow when I was told to take ammunition to a point that was being hard pressed. One man was thought sufficient to see about the stretcher. I heard afterward that my wounded companion got safely to a hospital. When I returned to my original trench on the right flank to get my equipment, I found it buried. A shell had apparently struck the trench; so no doubt I owe my life to the fact that I went to help the wounded man. I heard afterwards that Wattie had taken the other fellow with the mangled legs all the way to the dressing station, carrying him on two rifles and a blanket.

"When I first got into the trench there was no body covering portion. I had to dig

that myself; and it probably saved my life when those 'Jack Johnsons' exploded near me. During the six days we stayed in those trenches we had one very bad storm. One night there was thunder, lightning, sleet, and hail; accompanied by the flashes of the attacking rifle fire, and also our defending fire. To crown all; I had a nasty bilious attack, which I traced to some mouldy biscuits which I had in reserve when

there was no bread issued. No warm food of any kind passed through our lips during those six days; and this had a very bad effect on our fellows. Rheumatism and dyspepsia are general.

"Well, as I have said; we were relieved; which consisted in marching about 10 miles in the inky blackness of night to reserve trenches in a wood in another part of the firing line, through mud six inches deep in places. Not a very enjoyable walk, I can tell you. We arrived at these trenches about 5 a. m., just as day was breaking. We set to work improving our dugouts. While we were doing so one of our officers was wounded in the temple by a piece of shrapnel. You may see by this that our rest was not all to be desired. We stayed in the place about two days; and were then really relieved, and marched for two days to our present resting place. I can tell you we did look filthy. Mud up to our necks. You may imagine that the first thing my companions and I did was to remove all dirt.

"Yesterday we had a grand church parade of the regiment. I am sure you would like to have been present. The air of sincerity was fine. We have a topping chaplain. He has been in Canada; a man loved by every one in the battalion, although we have known him only a short time. There was a voluntary communion service today at 9 a. m.; a unique service, as our chaplain evidently said the first Scotch communion service ever held in a foreign Catholic church. It was marvelous, well attended; a real grand forceful manly service.

"We have been thoroughly well-equipped with warm underclothing. So please believe me when I say: 'Do Not Send Me Any More Clothing at Present.' Eatables, such as chocolate, etc., in small quantities now and again will be acceptable, as it is very hard to buy here. Well, Goodbye."