

Sergeant Hector Macknight has Written the Most Thrilling War Chronicle of the Day in

Behind The Barrage

A Description of the Somme Offensive

The Story is Overpowering—Unbelievably Realistic

SOMEWHERE a bugle blew Reveille. It seemed as though this were the signal for a hundred other bugles to show their prowess. From all sides the dismal notes of "Get out of bed" sounded.

I lay in the closely-packed bivouac which we had thrown up the previous night and swore under my breath.

My comrades-in-arms were still sleeping—poor, tired, mud-encrusted chaps—their attitudes were anything but restful.

I lit the piece of candle stuck on the bowl of my shell helmet and drew on my sodden boots. I thought of a morgue and a number of bodies laid out for identification before burial.

Squawkingly, an artillery trumpeter in the distance rounded off the last of the warnings to waken.

A holiday I had once spent in a Kentish village came back to me. The buglers' notes were like so many of the village cocks crowing in defiance of each other.

The recollection has made me so homesick—or is it war-sick? that I have thrown my greatcoat aside, and crept out of the reeking bivvy.

Our camping ground is only one of many marked off by wooden fingerposts. This place is known as "the brickfields."

All around are tarpaulins spread "cottage roof" style. Each bivvy houses from fifteen to twenty men. It is a veritable Tarpaulin City, with an odd bell-tent here and there to break the monotony. Thousands on thousands of citizens it holds. Tired, reeking, muddy humans. Hoboes in appearance, Heroes in actuality are they.

The road which leads to Albert is alive with traffic even at this early hour. Has it ever been otherwise since the Great Push started?

An indescribable medley of vehicles, horses, and men, passes in procession. These are the necessities produced by the exigencies of modern warfare.

Most of the traffic is "going out," that is to say towards the rear.

A long string of empty ammunition limbers is followed by several London motor omnibuses, those ludicrous but welcome freighters of Tommydom.

A giant gun—a fifteen-incher, it looks to be—with its attendant train ponderously grinds by. It is occasionally overtaken and passed by motor-lorries and other quicker-moving vehicles.

A sadly battered aeroplane passes on a float, followed by a military policeman on horseback. The policeman's presence is explained by a handful of German prisoners plodding along in his rear. In the rear of the prisoners again is a "Tommy" with fixed bayonet. He is sauntering along, smoking a fag, as though he thoroughly relished his position.

Even though the Hun rabble bears the ear-marks of the Hell it has passed through, I envy them and everything else "going out."

AKILTED infantry battalion is next to pass. These men are "coming out" after taking an enemy trench. Warily plodding their painful, yet welcome way, they arouse both admiration and pity. There is a plentiful sprinkling of German helmets among them and some are even cheerful, but the prevailing impression they leave with me is mud and filth unspeakable, and eyes—hideously fixed, staring eyes. Eyes that have seen the Valley of the Shadow of Violent Death. The taste of the dregs of the Wine of Wanton destruction is still on their lips. To-morrow they will be smart and shining, laughing and playing football. But this morning—ugh!

Before I turn away from my survey of the Albert Road a convoy of Motor Ambulances, honk-honking for the right-of-way thrusts their straggling crowd to the side of the road. The Red Cross cargo of mutilated freight has precedence.

A golden gleam has caught my eye, for the rays of the sun have broken through the morning mist. It is the wonderful Basilica of Albert that I see—The Virgin with the Infant Jesus in her extended arms. A German shell has struck this massive gilt statuary, and Madonna and Child hang at right-angles from the Cathedral dome, as though the Mother would fain drop her Holy Child to those who pass below.

The French engineers have shoved up the leaning Basilica. Rumour has it that with the fall of these Sacred Ones will come the end of the war.

I can see a river threading its way through the town of Albert; it is lost in the valley to the westward.

And camps, camps, camps—there are thousands of camps all around. What a vast army is gathered here! A greater aggregation of men, machines, and animals than the world ever dreamed could come to pass.

UP and away, loam-coloured hills mark the westerly and south-westerly horizon. Beyond this horizon—the enemy!

Men are stirring around me now.

Poised in the air, a hawk waits for its prey. Like an arrow it swoops down, and a little field-mouse home becomes tenantless.

Cookhouse Call blows, summoning us to the travelling field kitchens—"Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow—"

I sit and eat my breakfast with my chum. We have nothing to do until noon, then there is kit to clean. So we arrange to borrow a pair of field-glasses and take a walk over the old French trenches that line the green of the hillside with zigzagging streaks of white.

Under the grass all is chalk on this part of the Somme Sector.

And so we take our stroll, glad of the sun and the birds and the green of the moor.

The trenches are now peopled only by rats. They have fallen into disuse since the advance. Chalk is new to us, for we are fresh from the Salient. (I say "fresh" perhaps unwisely, for six months of Ypres can scarcely be said to leave a man "fresh"!)

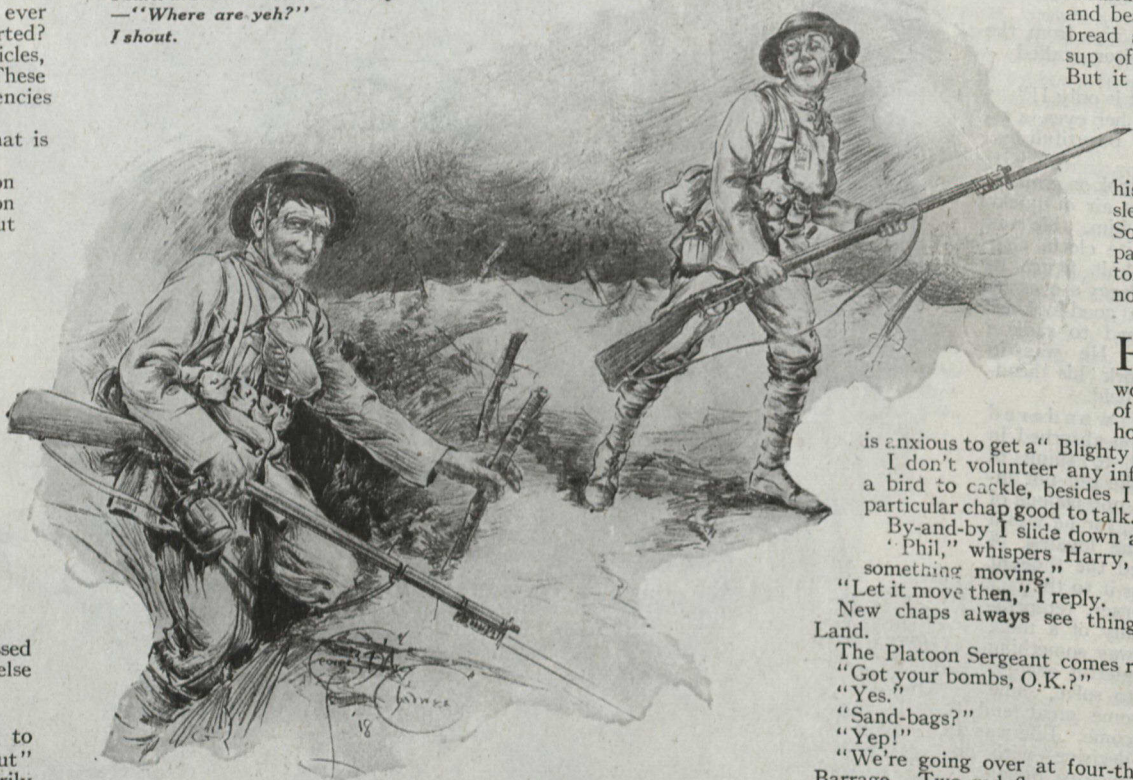
We decide we would rather have chalk than soil to dig trenches in. Chalk requires no sand-bagging and practically no riveting or shoring-up of parapet and parados. The dugouts are ideal as dugouts go. We dislodge a piece of the chalk in a dugout wall, a score of other pieces are loosened, ready to lift away. The dugouts, too, are comparatively dry, though frogs are numerous in the damper places.

Up, on, and over them we go, however, for we are anxious to gain the summit of the slope.

We startle game fowl and hares, and now and again stoop to pick some of the beautiful wild flowers that flourish in patches of colour. Heather grows here too.

The ground is literally honeycombed with field-mouse-

*I turn around to look for Harry
—"Where are yeh?"
I shout.*



holes and sentinel hawks hang poised, or dart arrow-infantrymen, with their earthy burrows and their scudding for safety—and their eventual fate.

We are now at the top of the slope, and wonderful is the panorama that discloses itself.

In the foreground little patches of woods with the inevitable church spire gleaming in the sun. Farther back, the woods are blasted and stricken with shell fire, the fields torn and scarred with holes, and trenches zigzag everywhere.

Beaumont Hamel—completely undermined and blown up by the British but not yet taken by them—is to the north.

Ahead of us, where the shells are falling on the reverse side of the next ridge, lies——. Our Canadians are within a few hundred yards of this town, we have been told.

The River——twists round picturesquely, passing through the peaceful and undamaged village of—— and thence through Albert on the south.

Back of Albert is Tara Hill, covered with canvas towns, and back of that again, trenches.

EVERYWHERE there is action—men and horses, carts and convoys, limbers and lorries.

On the moorland to our left, cavalry is out exercising. It is a gladdening, hopeful sight.

Above, our winged squadrons of the air are blinding the enemy, and playing peekaboo with enemy batteries.

This makes us feel hopeful too, for our planes are everywhere, but there are no Bosche planes to be seen. With the aid of our field-glasses we can see the Carnival of Death proceeding in the far distance.

The flash and smoke of our batteries, and the flash and smoke of enemy shells exploding are visible to the naked eye.

With the glasses, however, we can see the infantry silhouetted from time to time on the skyline.

I hand the glasses to my chum:

"Yes, I can see them," he says, "funny, isn't it?" We retrace our steps. To-morrow we shall be "going over" over there.

Funny, isn't it?

Every one is dog-tired and mud to the eyebrows. But we have arrived at last, and the troops we have relieved are half-way back to Death Valley by this time. My chum is resting in the Sunken Road, 'way back. He got "his" on the way in. Fritz's artillery certainly gave us Hell as we passed through Death Valley.

Suitable name, that, for the valley is strewn with corpses. Sometimes they lie in heaps at the sides of the road.

Who invented the phrase "Cannon-fodder"?

The trench we occupy was taken from the enemy less than twenty-four hours ago. Our job is to take the next trench in which the enemy confronts us. Then we will be relieved.

Step by step, trench by trench, this offensive is relentlessly carried on. When a trench is taken, it is consolidated against counter attack. The infantry that took and consolidated the position is relieved by fresh troops. The artillery moves up.

Repeat the process *ad infinitum*, but don't dare to count the cost in flesh and blood or weight of metal.

How the Devil must be enjoying it all!

I am busy making life livable with my new chum. He is tasting his first battle and is grateful to be beside an "Original." He has been drafted from a later battalion.

We are eating all we have except our emergency rations.

It may be our last meal, for we go "over the top" somewhere around daybreak. A tin of pork and beans between two, some bread and marmalade and a sup of water is our menu. But it is a banquet after the tiring march.

I have offered to do the first "relief," but my new chum—Harry his name is—says he can't sleep 'til it's over anyway. So we both look over the parapet, talking in low tones about various things not related to war.

HARRY has a farm "Out West." His wife worries that he will be one of the "missing,"—her pet horror he explains. So he is anxious to get a "Blighty" to ease her mind.

I don't volunteer any information. I am too old a bird to cackle, besides I know it will do this particular chap good to talk.

By-and-by I slide down and light a cigarette.

"Phil," whispers Harry, above me, "I can see something moving."

"Let it move then," I reply.

New chaps always see things moving in No Man's Land.

The Platoon Sergeant comes round with instructions. "Got your bombs, O.K.?"

"Yes."

"Sand-bags?"

"Yep!"

"We're going over at four-thirty. Stick behind the Barrage. Two red flares and our artillery opening up is the signal to go over. Don't go past the first trench, that's all we've got to take. A 'mopping-up' party will come along behind and we'll all be relieved at nine o'clock to-morrow night. *Comprez?*"

"Sure thing."

"Got a clean mess-tin?"

"Well, here's a tot-o'-rum apiece to warm you up before you start. Share it up fair, now. That's all. Good luck!"

"Thanks, 'Sarg.' Good-night!"

There's nothing unusual happening, so I cover up our "Warmer" and resume the enjoyment of my fag.

Suddenly I realise that Harry is in trouble, so I get up on the firing step and tell him to take a rest.

No Man's Land looks the same old Hell to me, in the light of Fritz's flares. But I can't help thinking about Harry's wife and the little kiddie he has never seen. Everything is misty somehow and my throat seems to be full of dry biscuit dust.

Harry is sobbing like a kid. He is saying "Oh! my God! Minnie!" I suppose Minnie is his wife. Poor devil, he will soon get hardened to it.

He has a luminous wrist-watch, and I ask him the time for the sake of something to say.

"Three o'clock," he answers after awhile.

"An hour and a half to go," he adds, kind of hopelessly.

"Have a fag," I suggest, "it'll do you good!"

"I never smoke," he answers.

"Well, take a snort of the rum."

"I never drink."

We are silent awhile.

Presently he breaks the silence—"Phil," he asks, "ain't you afraid?"

"Sure," I answer, "but I'm used to feeling that way."

Silence again.

"Say, Phil, you won't mind me saying a little prayer?"

"Don't do it, Harry; it's unlucky."

"But I've been in the habit of doing it, Phil!"

"Well, 'carry on' then."

Harry stands up beside me, a deep sigh breaking from his lips. His resolution is (Continued on page 40)