

'Two incidents stand out in my mind...'

Three weeks of misery and then to Pashendale Ridge

I WILL NEVER forget 4.00 a.m. on D-day, when all the thousands of guns we had laboriously assembled opened fire at a precisely timed second of time. How can I describe it. It has to be imagined to realise how the world can dissolve into one vast sound, so that nothing exists except the continuous unbroken rhythm of sound, like a great wave drowning every feeling and every emotion — sound broken every minute by the vast roar of

THE SEVENTH instalment of the special *GLEANER* serialization of the Notes for a Biography by the late Rt. Excellent Norman Washington Manley.

our 18-inch guns, and punctuated constantly by the staccato tattoo of a couple dozen seventy-eight pounders sounding a practised roll like super-machine gun fire—but mostly just sound — that you could feel that it enveloped you and bore you up.

The attack was doomed from the start. About the first half-mile of enemy held territory was lightly protected, but then came a highly fortified line with enormously strong machine gun emplacements built on the surface, since the land was totally flat and the least bit of rain would make it like a swamp. And before dawn a heavy rain began. One of the worst rains I have ever known. For eleven days it rained steadily, almost constantly. I do not recall that it ever let up for more than three hours at a time. I would say, eighteen hours rain and six hours none.

Picture our plight: we had no dugouts, no shelter at all. It was all right when you were working. I did not mind the first two days when I fired my gun without break for forty-six hours, firing a round a minute for the last twelve hours.

And the state of mud in that flat country. I found a spare sheet of zinc and put it on about six sandbags of mud, leaving a slanting shelter say 20" high. When night came, if I was not on duty, I took off my muddy boots and puttees and socks, washed them carefully in a shell hole filled with water, put them back on and rolled under my shelter where my waterproof sheet and two blankets were prepared to receive me. Till we moved forward, which was not to be till eight weeks had passed, these were the conditions under which we lived. I am certain no one caught a cold or left us sick from natural causes. None the less our casualty list was heavy. Very few gunners survived.

Close shave

I BORE A charmed life. Two incidents stand out. Once we were being shelled — it was about a daily occurrence — and a great run for safety ensued. I was running North at top speed when I heard the roar of a coming shell — they came with an awesome sound as their velocity was just a little less than sound. I knew from the increasing horror of the noise that I was in for a near shave and at the last split second

dived for the ground and felt the shake of the air as it passed so near to me.

As I fell I heard a shout from a runner behind me. "Bill is gone — they've got him!" Then I felt myself showered with earth and the noise of an exploding shell and came to realise that I was actually at the bottom of the crater made by the shell — say six feet deep by 10 feet wide. My escape was miraculous.

But the very next night I had an equally miraculous escape. It happened that I was on guard for the night. We found it better and were allowed to abolish guard duty with four men on — one N.C.O. and three men, each doing four hours duty. We took a chance with one man for twelve hours, well understanding that if the single man on duty was ever caught sleeping we would be forced to undertake the proper

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there and not on duty. I would have been as riddled as my blankets were.

AFTER THREE MORE weeks of this misery we were ordered to move forward about three miles to just under the famous Pashendale Ridge.

system. It never happened in three years, although there was always an officer doing the rounds and himself on duty for the full twelve hours.

Well, I was on duty that night and a sudden shower of gas shells fell on us. Those were high velocity. You did not hear them coming. The shell casing was light as they exploded on

It was an interesting move. It had been a very wet late summer and it was to be a wet autumn. Months of intense shell fire had obliterated everything. No tree stood, nor wall, nor fence. Roads were pulverized but still firmer than the surrounding mud. You laid long lanes of duckboards on

platforms made of board. Where did the gun crew stay? It happened that they chose a site hard by a brick kiln, whose enormously thick rounded roof and strong walls had survived all the shells that had struck it. Lying heel to head we could just squeeze twenty-four people into this hole, but it was indeed a very tight squeeze.

One remarkable feature about all this was the fact that Pashendale Ridge, a mile away, was still in German hands and every time we fired our guns they could spot us doing it and they had a battery trained on us; so within five minutes we could be certain we in turn would be under shell fire. Usually you fired about ten rounds from each gun, then discreetly moved away to the brick kiln to see what would happen and to avoid being knocked out.

We had three guns destroyed and after a week or two were moved out by the authorities to be re-equipped. But we stayed in that battle and in that forest till it was all over somewhere in November.

Five months of it. As a battle it was the great failure of the War. It is estimated it cost the British 750,000 men killed and wounded. The cream of the British Army and of the men who volunteered in 1914 to 1916 when conscription was introduced.

I have dwelt on this battle since it gives at its worst a vivid idea of what World War I was like — what the Infantry suffered in those five months I can only imagine, I cannot describe.

Tomorrow: A break



N. W. MANLEY "at ease"

touching the ground, with an instantaneous fuse, and you knew you were under gas attack because the noise of the explosion was different from that of a high explosive shell. My duty was to wake up everyone and see that they ran out of danger and this was easily done. But next morning I found my little lean-to upset and my rolled up blankets and things riddled with fragments of a shell which exploded right beside the shelter. If I had been

these roads and just managed to crawl along slowly. You could only walk on a duckboard. To leave it was to run the risk of sinking in mud unless someone came to your rescue. So you travelled never alone, but always two by two, or better still, three by three. You saw a lot of dead people, three parts buried by mud — you spotted them by an emerging hand or foot, or even a head. It was indescribable and you placed your guns on flat