

'We needed refreshing and were sent to a fishing village near Boulogne'

A break from the war then back to the front

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The eighth instalment of the special GLEANER serialization of the Notes for a Biography by the late Rt. Excellent Norman Washington Manley.

WHEN I GOT MARRIED in 1921 I went to Paris for a fortnight after spending my honeymoon in a tent I erected in the New Forest. I visited Ypres and took a car over the desolate plain that led to Pashendale Ridge. The desolation of war was still there, but the roads had been restored and I could guide the driver of the car from memory to that old brick kiln. I still have a picture I took with my camera, or rather a picture Edna, my wife, took of me sitting in that hole in the wall that was the entrance to the brick kiln and its round roof. The only picture I have of what the battle front looked like.

After those months we needed refreshing and were sent to a fishing village near Boulogne. It had hard sands when the tide was out, at least a quarter of a mile broad, good for galloping horses and guns and doing all sorts of manoeuvres while you thought of what the trenches and dugouts were like. But we had a wonderful time. I practiced my French on the fisher girls and mostly on one I took a great fancy to as she to me. She was a remarkable person, at least 6'2" tall, the tallest girl I have ever seen. She was handsome and slim with an infectious smile and a most happy laugh. A few of us won dered around the village late at night and when the Military Police came rounding us up she would take me to her room in the cottage and hide me under the bed and woe betide the Policeman, who, searching the cottage, would dare to enter to ask if any soldiers were there. I think my three week there was the only happy, truly happy time I ever had in all my years in France and Belgium.

Eventually we were back in the Line and our Division held the last bit of front where the French took over South of our position. In short, it was at the junction of the French and British Armies.

It was quiet and deceptively peaceful. Early spring and hardly a sign of war. I turned to frivolous things and decided to paint a canvas and make myself a Crown & Anchor. The job was done and with a bare 300 francs capital I ventured out with my partner and when the game closed we had held our own and made 11 francs.

Our battery and comfortable huts were about 10 miles from the front line trenches and I will always remember blowing out my candle when the last thing I saw was the Ace of Spades of the Crown & Anchor board lying at the foot of the wire bed and idly wondering if this was an omen of luck.

So it proved. Around 3.00 a.m. we were all awake listening to the rolling noise of a distant barrage, the heaviest artillery we had heard since the year before Ypres.

Technique

BY 5 THAT morning we had the order — prepare to move forward into battle. The enemy had launched a terrific attack and the rumour was that they were doing very well indeed. And so they were. They had worked out a technique of infiltration and in two days they broke through completely and

advanced in five days 45 miles in all — about far enough to begin to talk about Paris a bare 20 miles away. Happily they had not worked at the technique of how to keep on rolling forward and not allow an attack to lose completely its own momentum.

I was to spend the ten toughest days of the whole war from that morning — we moved up — and to see our division, artillery and all, completely broken and crushed.

Editor's Note: There is a break in Mr. Manley's manuscript at this point, then the story resumes

.....)

We took up position late that

evening with our six guns in line along a sunken road and beside the guns was an old farm house hardly damaged at all. Actually, we were about ten miles from where the front had been just before dawn and where it had been stationary, more or less, for over two years. The Germans had advanced at least five miles in one day and if they could have repeated this for another day they would indeed have broken through. The Germans did not know that the rush of the first day had completely smashed the light structure of defence for a length of some seven to ten miles. The division holding our sector, and thinly spread out, had literally disappeared. Guns were lost and half the survivors taken prisoner. There was an onimous quiet everywhere. Very little sign of retreat and little forward movement except for ourselves.

We slept lightly that night and early in the morning, how I remember the dense fog everywhere and the cold rawness of it all, for this was March and morning temperatures dropped to 32 or 33. But there was more to remember.

It suddenly struck us with a chill of surprise that shells from the other side were going high overhead and near at hand we could hear the rat tat tat of machine gun fire and a rifle shot everynow and then.

Safety

THE ENEMY WERE on us, coming slowly but inexorably through the fog. We rushed to

our guns, and turned them down the road we had come and angled so they faced where we came from. They were safe where they were for the sunken road had banks at least ten feet high; but would the horses six per gun, come in time. The guns had taken a forward position but ammunition and horses

and wagons, and all the paraphernalia of a battery of 6 guns were, as was usual, about three miles behind.

I loaded my rifle, the rifle I had thought never to use, with care and prepared to sell my life dearly, not in the cliché sense, but for the practical reason that I was half-negro and the stories of what happened to coloured men taken prisoner of war were very grim and of course believed by all of us implicitly. The Germans came nearer and nearer, I was expecting to see them any minute and wondering how any officer in charge of teams of horses would think it still possible with rifle fire passing over his head as he came along that sunken road, to reach the guns in time. Then a great cheer arose. The youngest of our officers, a tall lad of twenty, was seen coming along, striding at a fast trot down the road, and followed by the guns teams for each gun.

Never was a series of hoop-ups done more smartly and away down the road we galloped in turn. We were very proud of that young man and of the fact that we at any rate had saved all our guns. As it turned out, we were the only battery in the Division that saved our guns as the Germans advanced a solid seven miles that day and broke clean through our defences into open country where villages had still been occupied precariously, and evicting mostly women and children and elderly men fled leaving most of what little they had behind.

Where were we going? We had no idea and from then for the next six days chaos prevailed. We lost touch with our own headquarters. We lived off the land as best as we could or made use of food in stray wagons looking for their own units in vain.

I WILL NEVER forget on about the fourth day we ran into the whole army on that front in retreat. As far as the eye could see every road was blocked with wagons, supply vehicles. Red Cross ambulances and a vast array of men — some go-

13

ing up to meet the enemy and some going where most of us were going — going West away from the advancing Germans. We avoided these traffic jams and travelled slowly by day straight cross country, constantly harassed by low flying enemy planes firing machine guns at us as we hid behind trees and fired back, and dropping small bombs — neither side damaging the other

We were travelling light. We had two wagons with shells, about fifty per gun, very little food, no water at all; and as for the men — I had a waterproof sheet and a spring overcoat and that was any of us had. We slept each night till about 3.00 a.m. and then woke nearly frozen and walked about till dawn. Nearly every evening an English plane would fly over and drop messages telling us

where to move the next day. This did not prevent awkward incidents happening. It was hard to tell where the enemy was and there was a night when we lost a gun because we walked straight into a village already captured by the Germans and by the time we could turn our guns and put back the horses to carry them, in most cases going down side lanes, it was touch and go for safe exit and one team failed to find a safe way out

We only lost one other gun after 48 miles travelling to where we managed to stop. It happened this way. We were firing, lined up close, gun beside gun, firing at a range of two miles at a bridge the enemy had to cross, when the gun next to mine was blown up by one of its own shells which exploded in the barrel as it was fired. I and my gun had a lucky escape. The breech block of the exploding gun blew out to the left where I stood acting as loader for my own gun, passed through my open legs and crashed into the trailer of my gun which could still be used but was badly damaged and had to be replaced.

TOMORROW: Amusing moments in war.



RELAXING . . . N. W. Manley enjoys his pipe. A picture from the family collection.