

(CAPTAIN ROBERT CUTHBERT GRIEVE, V.C.,
37TH BATTALION, A.I.F.)

M E S S I N E S.

While events are fresh in my memory and after allowing for the excitement of the moment to wear off, I just want to jot down a few of the impressions made on my mind both before and during this great and well organised battle.

For weeks before the great day, tremendous preparations were continuously in progress. Working parties were on the job each night preparing assembly trenches, digging new communication trenches, putting in fresh dug-outs and generally doing everything that proved on the final day that nothing had been left undone to achieve the best results.

Slowly but surely, so as not to give any impression of it to the enemy, our men, guns and material were gradually massed - our aircraft carefully collected photographs of the enemy territory, and each night huge dumps were established at points of vantage behind the lines that would give supplies - feeding the main arteries for the day of attack. These materials were brought up in all manner of ways. By light railways, motor wagons, horse and mule wagons and by men. From all directions a steady flow gradually built up these heart centres, and elaborate precautions were taken to disguise them from enemy aircraft.

While all this was going on, our units with the usual grim determination, quietly held the system of trenches allotted to us - and quite a busy time fell to our lot when our preliminary bombardments commenced. Shells screamed overhead sometimes only a few at a time - nearly always in great numbers. Our trench mortars day after day with admirable pluck and persistence, coughed over their terrific barsting shells into the hostile wire - each day causing greater gaps to be made until in despair the Hunns gave up any attempt to repair the damage done, as is his usual custom each night, till finally his wire was no opposition at all -

simply broken threads. To all this tremendous hammering which he received each day - he replied heavily, but in nothing like the volume and intensity of ours with the happy results that our casualties were very few. We constantly worried him at night with raiding parties big and small - gaining information - finding out his strength - identifying his units, sapping his morale, and on our side increasing the wonderful confidence of our men. He, in his turn, endeavoured to find out what our movements were. On three occasions he, after tremendous bombardments, endeavoured to raid us, but on each occasion was repulsed with very heavy losses - tremendously heavy during the second raid. Constant flights by his aircraft well behind our lines seeking information were costly to him because on numerous occasions his machines never returned after encounters with ours. At about this time we were taken out of the line for a spell and occupied Regina Camp. This was a collection of huts about a mile or so behind the line and in a very exposed position. Batteries of guns were all around us and the noise was terrific. Counter battery work by the enemy was a daily occurrence and groups would collect to watch the result of his shelling - which in numerous instances was not effective and in one particular instance I remember he fired 1500 shells of heavy calibre into a dummy position. So this war of exhaustion goes on - we of course do the same thing but I believe on the whole our counter battery work is wonderful. I think while mentioning this camp I will refer to our spell at the Catacombs. This was a wonderfully tunnelled home - dug out on the side of a hill. Here we had accommodation for a thousand men and a great many facilities not available elsewhere. The system of draining and airing these tunnels wants greatly improving - safety and electric lighting were their only advantages. Altogether we had a very happy time here and it was from this point that all our working parties started off. We also had another good spell in the

Ploegsteert Wood where we heard both the nightingale and the cuckoo for the first time.

From Regina Camp we moved to Rue de Sac about another $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles back. From this camp we made all our preparations for the attack. The work of our aeroplanes at this stage was never ceasing and their great daring and wonderful evolutions were a source of constant amazement to all ranks. Behind us were our observation balloons - the eyes of our guns. Shaped like a huge sausage and anchored to a motor windlass by a steel hawser, these invaluable assets are carried on motor lorries and are put up behind our various battle fronts. In this instance they continued about 600 yards apart behind the whole of our battle front. From daylight till dark they search the enemy's territory and anything that offers a target gets an unmerciful time. These balloons greatly worry the Hun. He makes constant and very daring efforts to destroy our eyes. His aeroplanes fly over very high above the clouds and then dive from space - firing when in a favourable position - sometimes with good results - often unsuccessful - finally to be driven off by the fire from our anti-aircraft guns which burst in woolly puffs all round the hostile machine. It is a very spectacular sight to see one of these balloons brought down in flames. The observers leap for their lives and land safely by means of their parachutes when the hostile machine approaches - then when the tracer bullets do their work the balloon bursts into flames and burns fiercely. All is over almost as soon as it takes to describe it - a thin column of black smoke drifts away - a few ashes reach the ground - all that remains of one of our eyes. The balloon at Point Nieppe used to suffer most - the main reason, I think, is because it was our most forward one and was a point of great observation towards Lille. Next day a new balloon would come up - quite unconcerned, ready to be the means of scanning the enemy territory anew. Several times the enemy tried for our balloons with a long range gun,

but never with any good results.

It was while at this camp that we put all the final touches to our plans of attack. Close up to Brigade Headquarters we had put down a splendid contour ground plan of the country we were to attack and pass over. It was a splendid job showing everything - trenches, wire, trees, trench railways - any points we had suspicion of - roads and everything of importance. All this was worked up from aeroplane photographs and observation post intelligence reports. By means of this plan every man had the whole plan of attack explained to him, all questions were thrashed out and settled so that finally all ranks were familiar with the expected surroundings. A complete overhaul of kit was gone through and nothing was left to chance for the last moment. The plan of attack was that the first zero was to be at 3.10 a.m. in conjunction with the springing of the huge mines which had been lying dormant for so long - waiting the lightning spark that would liberate them from their bondage and allow them to stretch their limbs in all their awful power. Then after the first attack there was to be a second zero hour 10 hours later. This final attack was to advance our old original front line something like 3000 yards, into enemy territory. I will give later more definite information on the attack - these few facts just give the reason for the elaborate preparations we went through to have everyone conversant with the events to come. We had at this time a splendid lecture on the forms of artillery barrage we would operate under and all the plans made to silence enemy batteries. From this time on the enemy paid very marked attention to all our back areas. Shelling our roads and where he suspected dumps to be, and shelling the batteries with gas shells. Several times we had gas alarms caused by the gas from these shells drifting towards our camp. It was most annoying to be pulled out of bed in the

[PHE0109]
0004005

dead of night by a large monster that ultimately turned out to be a man with his gas mask on. However, we soon got used to this and was quite valuable to all because everyone was on the qui vive for gas all the time.

All this up to now has covered the ground to the time when we were notified of the day and the hour of attack, so really the points of main interest start now.

I well remember the news coming in code from Brigade Headquarters. All the officers of the battalion were assembled discussing the plans for the operation, so its arrival could not have been more opportune. At last the great day had come when the opportunity to strike another blow for the good old Empire had arrived and the meeting dispersed leaving behind any atmosphere of doubt and facing the future full of possibilities. Quietly and with a right good will everyone got to work to get all stores fitted out. We had only a very short time - a matter of a few hours because we were to move that night, the 6th of June 1917, from the Rue de Sac camp at 10 pm. We were all ready to move with an hour or two to spare and we spent this time talking over the future and at the same time doing justice to a good meal. The minutes gradually crept round towards the time to move and at last after a hearty handshake all round we started on our great adventure. "C" Company were to move first, then "A" followed by "D" and "B". The leading company passed the starting point sharp to time and we set out along the road towards Ploegsteert Wood. At this stage the enemy commenced a very intense bombardment of all our back areas with gas shells and occasional high explosive. Whether he was suspicious of anything we don't know, but if he was only after counter battery work, it was the largest volume he had ever put over. We first noticed gas when we were two miles from our system of trenches which we

[RECEIVED]
20/10/1917

were to occupy before the attack and immediately the order had to be given that all gas masks were to be worn. This was a tremendous hardship because it nearly reaches a point of suffocation to be subject to continual exertion with a mask on. Our men with great grit and tenacity and an indomitable spirit which no one can deny them - stuck it out until we finally got on to higher ground and free from gas. It was from about Regina Camp on that the areas subject to gas were at their worst and it was pitiful to see the horses and mules affected by it - gasping for breath as we passed them. It was most fortunate that the Hun was only using gas shells - had he used shrapnel we would have suffered heavy casualties. As it was our losses were extremely light and it was here that we lost the only officer killed in the battalion. Lieut. W.F. Robertson - one of the finest officers we had. He was killed instantly by a gas shell which struck him on the head before exploding. Many of us will remember how intense the fire was along the road just at the site of that old windmill where the 6th Battery had been knocked out previously and from here on we had our most heavy and anxious time. A little lower down than this we were to strike off on the Brown Route across a field to Suicide Corner. No. 4 Platoon was leading for "A" Company because they were carrying for the Stokes gun crew, so we halted them at this point to load up the shells which up to this stage were moved on hand carts. Each man carried two sand bags with two shells in each, making an addition to his load of nearly 44 lbs. Nos. 3, 2 and 1 Platoons passed on while No. 4 was loading up, so as not to waste time and cause congestion and by the time they were passed, No. 4 was ready to move. At this stage several most alarming blocks occurred which necessitated frequent halts and it was most trying to the strongest nerves to sit tight in this open field while it actually rained gas shells. They were falling all round and you could plainly hear the snap of the detonator that burst the shell sufficient enough to liberate the liquid that formed

the gas. Suicide Corner never more truly earned its name and it was a great relief to at last be on the move and past it. Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons kept straight up the road to the Catacombs and reached our assembly trenches without sustaining any casualties. Nos. 3 and 4 followed the Brown Route which led up and through the Ploegsteert Wood. Words fail to describe the conditions in the Wood. Shells rained into it without ceasing - trees were falling in all directions and the whole place was full of gas. The duck boards in many places were smashed to atoms by direct hits and yet through all this we came safe and sound and reached the light railway line that runs through the centre of the wood and parallel to our trenches. Along this we went and on each side of us were huge stacks of shells and ammunition and among all these, shells were falling. Imagination ran rife at this stage thinking of all the possibilities that might occur, but we only lost two men. At last we arrived at the entrance to Heath Trench which runs across Hill 63 starting from the Messines Road. Here another block occurred and we were held up for half an hour still under heavy fire. At last we moved and found the trench blown in in several places - trees shot away and fallen right across the trench - but what did all this matter - we were at last on high ground and could take our gas masks off and breathe the pure, fresh air of heaven. From here on we were also free from the shelling and had the opportunity to square up and see how we stood. We moved along this trench into the subsidiary line and here took up the position that we would occupy when we moved up to the attack. Each platoon had a given area marked out for it and in this beforehand barrels had been placed full of water. What a blessing that spell there was, and all refilled their waterbottles who needed them and then lay down to snatch a few hours rest before the hour to attack.

In a little tumble-down dug-out I collected all our

officers who reported to me that all was well. This report was sent on to Battalion Headquarters and we then ate what we had brought for breakfast and had a drink of hot cocoa - made on the spot. Several had a good sleep but the majority just waited quietly for the zero hour.

As the time gradually approached for the great effort everyone was ready waiting for the hour to arrive that held our fate in its hands. Our first formations were due to attack at 3.10 a.m. and at that hour the barrage was to open and the mines sprung. Suddenly Bedlam was let loose. It would be impossible in words to describe the inferno. The earth seemed to vomit fire and was shaken as though by an earthquake - the air screamed shells and snapped bullets and above all was the roar of the guns, the crackle of the machine guns and the hum of aeroplane propellers. To us who were not to attack for several hours yet was spread out a panoramic view of the most wonderful battle yet fought and from our point of vantage the work of the New Zealanders and ourselves could be plainly seen. What the wildest mind can conjecture cannot describe the condition of the enemy lines under this hail of shot and shell. All was hidden by a slowly moving curtain of dust - dust that was lit up by the flashes of bursting shells - then behind this slowly moved the kahki figures of our first waves of advancing troops. On they went, cleaning up all opposition and gradually reports came in that all was well - objectives gained and held and many prisoners coming in. When our guns first opened up all sorts of alarm lights were fired into the air. Huge rockets bursting into all colors - then they faded gradually or were hidden by the rapidly thickening dust cloud. In reply to these signals his guns opened and of course we had our casualties. With us in the subsidiary line we were most fortunate, only losing two men wounded by fragments. Then the

[original]
200/1000

whole earth was shaken by the effect of the mines. The trenches rocked and trembled and I fully expected that they would cave in - the whole surroundings right along the battle front were weirdly lit up by the flash from them. The largest mine on the front was close to us - containing 20 tons of gun cotton - so I will endeavour to describe the effect of this one. All were on the tip-toe of expectation for this one to be sprung. Our first warning that she was fired was by sounds like distant rumblings of thunder - then gradually getting closer - then directly to our front the earth was seen to be rising like a huge mushroom - suddenly to be flung into space with an awe-inspiring roar and the earth trembled - to me it appeared as if with mingled fear and relief - fear of the dread power she had stored in her bowels - relief because it had vented its fury and although she was sadly torn, its menace was gone. This mine made a crater 300 feet wide by 90 feet deep and it was supposed to be directly under a huge dug-out with accommodation for 200 men. Debris of all description rained down with dull thuds for quite a time then all was over. To say "still" would have been quite wrong because the roar of our guns coupled with all the other noises of battle took up the din which at times seemed to increase in its intensity.

Coupled with our 18 pounder barrage we had machine guns everywhere and they spat death ahead of our advancing troops at the rate of 600 bullets per gun per minute. Our 18 pounder field guns were firing at the rate of one shell every five seconds to every 25 yards. When I tell you this, you can imagine how the ground was lashed with lead and gather also what enormous casualties the enemy must have suffered. Let me further describe the mind picture of this battle as we saw it. Just ahead of the Infantry nosed twelve tanks squirting fire along the enemy trenches and butting into any concrete emplacements that held a machine gun. Away around

[unclear]
[unclear]

the northern end of Messines Ridge and travelling along Huns Walk, surged about 600 Cavalry. Along the road they dashed into action and it again looked like a war of movement. The New Zealanders attacked the Messines Ridge and they looked like ants as they swarmed up the face of the hill - through and round the ruined houses that every now and again seemed to vanish into clouds of black-red dust as an enemy shell landed with a crump into them. Behind us in the air like so many huge grubs were dozens of our observation balloons - watching results and eagerly searching for targets for our batteries. As the sun rose, right in the orb appeared a tiny grub. This was the only balloon the enemy had up. Later on it was put down in flames by one of our airmen. During the morning he again attempted to put another balloon up but owing to some accident or fear that he had - it bolted and blew away behind his lines and was lost to sight. Long before daylight, several of our aeroplanes were patrolling our front and as dawn approached they seemed to be coming from everywhere. Daylight revealed to us the air full of our machines, some flying high till they just looked like bees - others flying low over the enemy trenches firing at his infantry - so low that you expected to see them shot down any moment. Then with daylight appeared the ominous black puffs around them - from the enemy anti aircraft guns. Early in the fight one of our machines had its tail cut off by one of our own shells - but managed to land safely just in front of the trenches where we were assembled. I fully expected that the enemy in attempting to shell it, would shell us, but fortunately all his attention was attracted elsewhere.

At last our time came to move and all our energies had to be concentrated on our own particular part. Moving by platoons in file from our trenches we went through gaps in our own wire and advanced towards our own front line. All this area was cut up by shell fire and as we moved forward

the enemy spotted us and turned on a fairly heavy fire. We had a few casualties, but moved forward unconcerned across No Man's Land (which is not a correct name because it always belonged to us) then to the crossing over the River Douve. All the enemy wire had been blown to atoms here and proved no obstacle at all. When our first attack was to be made, parties were to carry out bridges for the attacking troops to cross by and it was here that the first bridging party had fallen at their posts. Evidently a shell had burst just as they had their bridge in position because they all lay there dead - two of them had in their death struggles still retained hold of the rope carrying handles. There was no time now to mourn the loss of brave comrades, so we pushed on to our first objective. To try and give you a picture of a modern battlefield is an impossibility. It was from the time of crossing the bridges that we just saw the actual effects of our own shelling. Trenches and earthworks were gone and in their places were huge shell holes, wrecked wire, broken dug-outs and dead men. This is what met the eye all round as we moved along and the first distance we had to cover was about 3,000 yards. We passed several captured machine guns and trench mortars as we reached his second line and parallel and over a communication trench was showing the track of a tank as it waddled along cleaning this trench up. We at last reached Schnitzel Farm and its heavy wire defences. The enemy was shelling this point heavily when we reached it so we either lay up in shell holes or made a detour to avoid it. The old farm which was to have been our main objective in the first plans of attack was now ~~xxx~~ nothing but a mass of torn and crumbled bricks. Behind this again was Bethlehem Farm surrounded by thick trees and hedges. The old farm house was blown to pieces, but round in the hedges were numerous concrete dug-outs in the largest of which we captured a battalion commander and the whole of his staff. Enemy shelling at this point was particularly hot and we had to

move on. Through this farm ran a light railway linking up with a large dump and running on round behind Messines Hill. It was at this point that Lieut. Leo Little had to leave us and go back to the clearing station - he had been badly gassed but with wonderful pluck had managed to keep going so far.

Just beyond Bethlehem Farm our troops who had gone forward to the attack first were digging in. This part was known to us as the Black Line. Digging away for all they were worth they yet found time for a smoke and a joke and when we arrived it was more like a picnic than a battle. Here I assembled the company in the formation that we would attack in and then all lay down for a rest and a yarn. When I arrived on the scene, most of the company were assembled in front of the Black Line, but I thought it advisable to move them behind it. It was a stroke of luck that I did because just where they had been came in for very heavy shelling later on. We got into touch with the units on each flank and found that all was ready for the final attack.

While waiting here we had several casualties - one man killed by a direct hit from a shell which failed to explode. Another man was hit on the arm by a big fragment that came humming through the air like a big top. The work of digging our new line of trenches was well in progress and we were only worried by shelling and the fire from a few machine guns. My officers and myself were able at this point to make observations of our front and make doubly certain of our objective. There was no mistaking it, because there was a low hedge running straight along it straight up to Huns Walk. It was at about this time that the enemy commenced to mass for counter attack. We got the word back quickly to the artillery and they dropped a magnificent barrage right onto the spot. I learnt afterwards that not only there but right along the roads as far back

as Lille he was moving up troops and our artillery fire got on to these as well. This goes to show the value of air supremacy - our machines saw all this and reported - the enemy had no machines up and as a result did not see us massing. We found out afterwards when we got up on to this ground that he had been cut to pieces and nothing came of the counter attack. We were troubled by a machine gun directly to our front, but this was beaten down by the fire from one of our Lewis guns. There was a certain amount of uncertainty created at this stage by the changing of our hour to attack, but when the hour came all doubt was thrown to the winds and we went straight into it. All the other units who were to attack at the same time as ourselves were well into position before it was time to start so all ranks had a good spell before the second attack. Our barrage that was put on at 1.30 p.m. when the enemy attempted to counter attack kept going from that time on and when our zero hour arrived simply spread out and thickened up into a wonderful outburst. The confidence of the day's results was on us and as 3.30 p.m. struck we were up and advancing to the attack. The enemy immediately put on a heavy barrage but it was ahead and behind us. We found the wire in front of Ulna Trench in very good order but found several good gaps. Through these we surged under a very heavy fire from machine guns which became more intense after we got through. Here we suffered many casualties - the whole of our Stokes and Vickers gun crews were knocked out and at this stage Lieut. Fraser did wonderful work. He brought the gun into action himself - located the hostile guns and brought continuous and accurate fire to bear on them. In this way he saved the lives of many men in my company and his actions were invaluable. His gun was twice knocked out and he himself wounded and freed to retire. Meanwhile the company was held up by the fire from machine guns in a concrete building. These were put out of action by the

aid of Mills Grenades and the company were able to get forward onto the objective allotted to us. We captured two batches of prisoners and No. 2 Platoon did excellent work outflanking a large number of the enemy compelling them to surrender. At this stage I was struck through the right shoulder by a sniper's bullet but managed to keep going for a few hours after this. We got the sniper who was up a tree about 75 yards away. One of our Lewis gunners put a magazine through the tree and he dropped like a stone. The unit on my left was held up for several hours and I endeavoured to help them by pushing well forward - as a result of this my left flank was well in the air but not dangerously. I was personally forced to retire after losing a lot of blood and after sending back several messages to forward Battalion Headquarters, I slowly made my way back towards our rear lines. To me it then appeared full of risk because it was a bullet swept area and the enemy was shelling parts very heavily. Several times I had to take refuge in friendly shell holes until an outburst of firing was over and then push on. Many and varied were the sights I saw while going back. German dead were everywhere but singularly few of our own. Many of our boys were walking cases and they were doing their best to help one another along. I passed several carrying parties coming up with their Yukon packs filled with ammunition and rations. Along the side of the Messines Hill the pack mules were threading their way and all this just a few hours after a great battle. The tanks were going back home after a busy day - several damaged - one on fire and yet another lying on its side in a huge shell hole - completely out of action. On my left a large number of men were digging strenuously to complete a long communication trench to connect up with our forward positions. Further back, I came to our old front line and what a change was there. Motor wagons had come right along

the old Messines Road carrying engineers' stores - ammunition and rations - further back parties of men were filling in recently made shell holes in the road. Along this came galloping our eighteen-pounder batteries getting into their new forward positions ready to hammer the Hun anew. About this spot I found our casualty clearing station but they were so busy here and had more serious cases than I, so I went out and had something to eat with two of my old men - Privates Woodhouse and L'awn - both stretcher bearers. They had been doing noble work all day and were just about played out. From here I went and reported to Battalion Headquarters and gave them all the history of the day and suggestions for further actions. I was beginning to feel rather weak through loss of blood so hurried on from here to our next clearing station for treatment. While doing this distance, which was about 1000 yards, I passed through a brigade of our Vickers guns all ready in position to open fire should any S.O.S. be put up from our front line. I at last reached the dressing station and got bandaged up. Excellent arrangements were made here for a hot drink and something to eat and I received every attention from one of my old men, Private Gates, who was on duty here. This dressing station was just close to the Catacombs and I had to go from here across to where a light railway was running. Here I had several hours to wait because we had no engine and the track was being repaired in several places. While I was here, one of our ammunition dumps blew up - it was a tremendous explosion. At last our engine arrived and our few trucks were towed off. Just as we moved off it seemed as if every gun we had opened fire. The noise was terrific and, in the state of nerves some were, most distressing. I learnt afterwards that it was in response to a call to help repulse a heavy counter attack. This light railway fed most of the batteries round about, so you can

imagine it was no pleasant time passing close to them all for over an hour. At last we were through them and getting away from the din and we reached a haven of rest in the shape of a New Zealand Y.M.C.A. hut. Here we had hot coffee and biscuits and then onto another medical station where all received an anti tetanus injection. I was covered in dirt and mud - my tunic saturated with blood so I must have presented a pretty picture. I was that tired that I could have lain down alongside the road and gone to sleep. We were taken from this point to the Steenwerck Hospital in motor lorries. I met L. Daff here and when I was at last admitted to a ward, I found myself in the next bed to MacDougall and a few beds away was Alec Fraser. Several other officers from our Brigade were there also and we had quite a good time yarn-ing together. Trains left for the coast every few hours but I was dead to the world for a few hours in a very heavy sleep.

Next morning about noon I left by train for Rouen and a slow, tedious journey it was too. We arrived late that night at our destination and were quickly transferred to the various hospitals by motor ambulances. I never before appreciated a bath so much as I did there and afterwards got into a clean pair of pyjamas. I was in the hospital for three days and got the joyful news that I was to sail the next day for England. It was a magnificent trip up the Seine from Rouen to Havre and the river in the rays of the setting sun looked an absolute picture. We waited at Havre for darkness and then slipped across the Channel. We arrived at Southampton early in the morning and then took train for London. My final destination was the 3rd London General Hospital, Wandsworth, and here I will finish to take up my story afresh when I write of my experiences after that.

These few memories of that great day would be

incomplete if I did not pay tribute to the noble actions of all my officers, N.C.O's. and men throughout that trying time and it will always live with me - the honour and privilege that is mine to command such men. Their cheerful dogged tenacity coming through the gas - their wonderful bravery under the heaviest fire was a marvel to me - fear is not part of their composition, and their discipline was wonderful. Pages could be written about them but words fail me - swamped with admiration. We will do honour to our fallen comrades by renewed efforts - spurred on by their spirit which is ever present with us.

As time and opportunity offers, I will write of my happy time in hospital and during leave and of the continual kindnesses showered on me - wonderful and of a whole-heartedness beyond description. The world knows the result of this great battle - how all objectives were gained - some after very stiff fighting - others with less opposition and all at a tremendously heavy price to the Hun. This victory was the fore-runner of the great victories that have followed since, and goes to prove the superiority of our organisation, our men and our guns - all leading to the one sure end - the final overthrow of the Hun.
