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Artillery

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Title: 26th Battery, Australian Field Artillery

March 1918



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- 2nd March - A snowstorm accompanied by fierce winds raged all day, and the temperature dropped considerably. There was little artillery activity. At night the gun teams proceeded to the position and the guns were withdrawn and 'pulled into action' again two miles further north into the position occupied by us when supporting the Infantry raid on February 10th. The night was quiet but very dark. The guns were got into the position without mishap. The cause of this move was another raid to-morrow night.
- 3rd March - This morning the guns were "shot in" and everything prepared for the expected night operations at WARNETON. At 11.45 p.m. the artillery barrage opened up and the raiding party of the 9th Aust. Inf. Bde followed. The raid was most successful, the enemy's second line being penetrated, numerous casualties inflicted in addition to 40 prisoners and two machine guns being taken. Casualties to our Infantry were light. The weather was still windy and cold and the nights very dark.
- 4th March. - A programme of harassing fire was kept up during the early part of the night. At 12.50 a.m. a further raid was made on the enemy at WARNETON. It was made by two parties under the usual artillery barrage, those on the Right finding the Hun on the alert and manning the parapet. The trenches were rushed and the enemy killed or captured. On the Left a wide ditch had to be crossed but in spite of all difficulties much destruction was wrought on his trenches, dugouts and emplacements. Two counter-attacks were repulsed. At about 3 a.m. our guns returned to their former position about GUNNER'S FARM. 730 rounds were expended during the above operation. The night was very dark and a good deal of rain fell.
- 5th March - A decided improvement in the weather conditions. Visibility was fair, and hostile planes flew over the battery at a low altitude both in the morning and afternoon.
- 6th March - Hostile planes were extremely active and repeatedly flew low over our trenches, but were dispersed by our anti-aircraft fire. Bombs were dropped about the O.P. at SURREY FARM and a number of 4.2 shells were also fired in this direction. WARNETON Tower, an exceptionally strong concrete O.P. used by the enemy was to-day demolished by our 15" guns. Many attempts have been made to destroy this tower but till to-day had proved unsuccessful.
- 7th March - Visibility throughout the day was very poor, but in spite of this there was a fair amount of artillery activity on both sides. Our guns fired about 60 rounds on enemy roads and farmhouses at request of Infantry. At 2.45 p.m. hostile 4.2 Batteries 'got on to' the Right Section but did not do any damage. At 3.30 p.m. these guns switched on to the Left Section and the vicinity of the control station, altogether 300 rounds being fired. The cookhouse was blown up, but there were no casualties to the men or damage to the guns. The Battery expected to receive orders to 'pull out' shortly and preparations were being made at the Wagon Lines to hand over. A vehicle turn-out was inspected this afternoon by Gen. GRIMWADE.

- 8th March - Visibility indifferent. Our guns fired 60 rounds on hostile working parties dispersing same. 30 rounds were fired by a 5.9 battery the shells falling in the vicinity of the Battery. 200 rounds 4.2 also fell about the position. No casualties resulted and no guns were hit, although it was necessary to evacuate the position temporarily. Lieut. E.A.CODY returned from St. John's Wood and was taken on strength of 26th Battery.
- 9th March - Weather was fine and warm but visibility poor owing to ground mist. Our fire consisted of 20 rounds on a hostile working party. A shell gas attack was made by hostile artillery during the night.
- 10th March - Again warm and fine. Considerable activity in the air and also from artillery. Enemy aircraft flew over the position in the morning. Hostile fire consisted of 300 rounds 4.2 and 5.9 which fell in the vicinity of the Battery without doing any material damage. A high velocity gun shelled STEENWERCK Station. Our guns fired 60 rounds on hostile working parties. Towards evening and at night another shell gas attack was made by the enemy. The battery positions and back areas were given most attention and a few of our gunners were slightly affected by the gas. During the night our heavies fired continuously. A Battery half-holiday at the Wagon Lines.
- 11th March - Fine and hot with a heavy haze. Hostile H.V. guns shelled the town of NIEPPE and thereabouts. This was probably a retaliation shoot for the shooting done by our heavies last night. Owing to the poor visibility aerial activity was slight. Wagon Lines were inspected by Gen. GRIMWADE during the afternoon. Many rounds of gas shell were put over by the enemy during the evening some falling in the back areas. The 26th Battery handed its guns over and were relieved in the line by 14th Battery, 5th A.F.A.Bde, 2nd Aust. Div. Our Right Section pulled out of action and returned to Wagon Lines. Another shell gas attack was made by the enemy was made to-night.
- 12th March. - Reveille at 5 a.m. The Battery moved out at 10 a.m. travelling with the Brigade via BAILLEUL and OUTERSTEENE to VIEUX BERQUIN. On the outskirts of the latter Village the Battery took up Wagon Lines. The 7th Brigade are now in the Rest Area. A few minutes after the Brigade had passed thro' BAILLEUL the enemy shelled the Town with a H.V. gun. A number of shells fell in the Town, causing the civilian population to hurriedly evacuate. The Town was crowded as it happened to be a market-day. There was much difficulty in obtaining sufficient accommodation for the troops in the new lines. The horse standings were covered in but the barns in which the men were billeted were in a very dilapidated condition and anything but clean. The sections were very scattered and proper supervision meant much travelling about. Majpr PLAYFAIR returned to 26th Battery from Div. Arty Hqrs.

- 13th March - Fine and hot. All hands hard at work getting the lines into order and generally cleaning up. The country here is flat and all under cultivation. Young crops are beginning to show and the trees are budding, showing signs of an early spring. Two Lewis guns are now attached to the Battery for aerial defence. The men in charge of these guns are qualified Lewis Gunners, having been through a Lewis Gun School.
- 14th March - Weather changed to dull and wet. Improvements about the horse lines and cook house are being made.
- 15th March - Again fine. Usual routine and camp improvements carried out. Major PLAYFAIR unexpectedly left the 26th Battery to-day to go to 4th Aust. Div. as Brigade Major. Capt. COLQUHOUN was now Battery Commander (Note by Capt. Colquhoun re Major Playfair).
- 16th March - A Signalling School is now in progress and a number of telephonists have been sent from the Battery to go through the Course. Usual Camp programme is being carried out and the long evenings are devoted to football and other games. Polo is being played by the Officers.
- 17th March - Fine hot weather continues. No 18746 Sgt. A.J. SHIELDS and No. 18885 Bdr KEEP marched out to St. John's Wood to-day.
- 18th March. - Wagon Lines were inspected by the C.R.A. to-day. The neighbouring towns of BAILLEUL and HAZEBROUCK are daily being shelled by hostile guns and are rapidly being deserted by the civilian population. Battery half-holiday was granted.
- 19th March - Light rain fell all day. Invitations were sent to all Batteries by the C.R.A. to attend a performance by the 3rd Div. Pierrot Troupe in Sec Bois. No. 18946 Sgt. TREVANION returned from R.B.A.A. to-day after 4 months on the Instructional Staff and was taken on strength of 26th Battery again.
- 20th March - Beautiful fine weather once again. Lectures on Gunnery and gas were given to-day. A Programme of Sports was being arranged.
- 21st March. - Usual routine was carried out. The evening was devoted to practice for the coming Sports meeting. There was a full moon at night and with it much aerial activity over back areas.
- 22nd March - A hot day. The usual routine was carried out. By Major PLAYFAIR'S request the Football Medallions presented by him were distributed to the members of the winning team.

- 23rd March - The camp routine was as usual during the morning. The afternoon was to be a half-holiday and the Sports meeting was to be held, but at 2 p.m. without previous warning orders came through that the Battery was to be on the Road in two hours time. The suddenness of the order staggered everyone, and it meant that all would have to work at highest pressure to be in readiness within the time allotted. To make matters worse the Battery was short handed owing to the large number of men away on English furlough. However, the Battery pulled out on time, every available vehicle being packed to it's limit. Fortunately Motor transport was available but then a large amount of material had to be abandoned.
- The Brigade travelled to the Morbecque Area and Billeted there for the night. The horses were picqueted in an open field and the personnel found accomodation in the various barns and outhouses.
- During the night the town of HAZEBROUCK which was only a few kilometres away was both shelled and bombed. No one seemed to know where the Brigade was bound for and many wild rumours went through the Camp. Owing to the recent hostile offensive on the Somme it was thought that the Brigade would be sent in that direction. All leave had been cancelled and even the men who had reached CALAIS and were actually on the leave boat were taken off and returned to their Units.
- 24th March - Reveille at 6 a.m. The day was hot and still. The morning was devoted to re-packing the vehicles, and making preparations for the long route march which seemed imminent. All unnecessary gear had to be discarded, the number of blankets reduced to two per man and the kit bage emptied of everything except the actual necessities. When the Battery left these lines there remained a small mountain of salvage.
- The column travelled via MORBECQUE and AIRE and came to a halt for the night at the small village of WITTERNESSE. A few hours previous to the passing of the Brigade thro' AIRE, hostile heavy guns had been at work firing a 17" projectile. The burst of one of these huge shells severed a roadway and demolished houses on either side. Numbers of civilians were leaving the Town hurriedly for neighbouring villages.
- By the time the Brigade had settled down in WITTERNESSE there was not much room to spare. The horses were picqueted along the roadsides and the vehicles and guns also lined up. There were many refugees from the Town which had been strafed by the Huns looking for temporary quarters and this made the matter of billeting rather difficult. Eventually barns were found in which the tired troops could sleep.
- 25th March - Reveille at 5.30 a.m. The day turned out fine and warm. The Battery transport was doomed to be still further reduced. Orders were issued that all vehicles which were not of Military pattern had to be abandoned. There were three carts of a decidedly unmilitary character "attached" to the Battery. In one was carried the Canteen and the Yandoo Printing Outfit. All had to be left behind much to the chagrin of the troops. Both these institutions had been of inestimable value the former enabling the men of the Battery to purchase many little delicacies otherwise unprocurable. The Yandoo Paper had, since the days of the ARGYLLSHIRE been a source of amusement and interest to all the members of the 7th Brigade. The managements of both Canteen and Yandoo in spite of this setback are determined to become re-established at first opportunity. The other " spare" vehicles carried kits and signalling

- 25th March - gear. Much of this had to be left to the mercy of the Salvage Corps or peasantry. Even the Soldiers' mail had to be reduced, many packets and parcels of men on leave had to be distributed among the subsections. Never before had the 26th Battery travelled so light. At 8.30 a.m. the Column moved on, passing thro' the Towns of Lambres, Pernes en Artois, picking up the main traffic route. The main Road was packed with traffic of all descriptions, endless columns of Motor transport, guns, limbers and ration wagons. The further South we went the steeper became the country. About 5 p.m. the Brigade entered the Town of VALHOUN here to occupy Wagon Lines for the night. As before, the horses were picqueted in the open, the men sleeping in barns more or less weatherproof. A high wind blew all this day and the night was unusually cold. Rain fell at intervals.
- 26th March - 5 a.m. Reveille. The Brigade was on the Road at 9.30 a.m. An hour later we entered a steep valley in which lay the Town of St.POL. Here, were evidences of hostile shells and bombs many houses being wrecked. The majority of the civil population had already evacuated. It was a long climb out of the valley on to the highlands. The road was in excellent order and the traffic during the morning was not so congested. A halt was made for about an hour at midday to feed and water, and then the column moved on again passing thro' the town of Frevent about 3.30 p.m. From here, the main road was congested, Frevent being the junction of several roads, all laden with troops and transport. travelling in a Southerly direction. Towards evening a long and very steep descent was made into DOULLENS, a fairly large Town. It was here that we began to realise the extent of the Hun advance. Remnants of British Artillery Batteries and Infantry Battalions came straggling along the Road some of the men declaring that the enemy was then only 12 kilometres away. The 3rd Div. Infantry were disentraining at DOULLENS Station as the Brigade passed through. Another long climb and numerous halts before we again reached level country. The moon had risen and with it hostile bombing planes. One bomb dropped in the rear of the battery 100 yards from the Road and things began to look unpleasant. DOULLENS Railway Station was heavily bombed half an hour after our Infantry had left it. Another bomb fell some distance ahead but fortunately it likewise missed the road. Shortly after 9 p.m. the Brigade turned off the main Road to and followed a winding track across country, up hill and down dale for nearly an hour, finally pulling into a tree-lined field in a little village named COULLEMONT. By the time horses had been watered, fed and picqueted it was nearly midnight. Billets were then allotted - the usual farmhouse barrack - and after a very welcome cup of tea and a snack the weary troops turned in for a well earned rest. It had been a long day and nothing to eat from midday till midnight.
- 27th March - At 6 a.m. the camp was up and preparing for another day on the road. We moved out at 9 a.m. returning to the main road, crossing same and on through the villages of MONDICOURT, PAS EN ARTOIS and PUCHVILLERS. The roads were now becoming worn, and a strong headwind blew clouds of dust into our faces. Streams of refugees were toiling along the road. Old men and women driving huge farm carts stacked high with household goods, crates of fowls and fodder. Tied behind the carts were cows calves and goats. Perched on top of the loads were the farmer's children. In some cases old women pushed laden barrows and perambulators. It was all a very sad sight.

- 27th March - After a midday halt for lunch we continued the march. During the afternoon Battery Commanders were called to the front of the column and went ahead to reconnoitre the positions. The column passed thro' the small Village of BEHENCOURT at dusk after travelling across country for some miles, and took up temporary Wagon lines in an open field by the roadside. The Battery Commander, Capt. Colquhoun picked up the Battery here and orders were issued that the guns were to go into action the same night. After a hurried meal the Officers, guns and crews, first and second line Wagons went forward leaving one Sergeant, Quartermaster, spare men and horses in the lines just taken up. (on the right of the Amiens Albert Road) The Battery took up its position on a grassy rise, bare of any cover. The guns were not dug in or camouflaged. The teams returned to the rear about a mile, and with the wagons formed the mobile lines. Very little sleep was had this night. Across the open country blew an icy cold wind which did not improve things.
- 28th March. - The day broke with rain threatening and the bleak wind still blew. All day the gunners and drivers were hard at work building shelters and at night we received orders to move the guns forward as the Infantry had advanced a considerable distance without meeting with any opposition. When the Australian troops took over, the whereabouts of the enemy had not definitely been ascertained, our Infantry advancing until they came in contact with his outposts. In some places there were no troops to be relieved, and the enemy could have advanced without a check. The advent of the Colonial troops seemed to put heart into the fleeing peasantry and many there and then returned to their homes. All seemed to place great confidence in "Aussie". Our guns were advanced several thousand yards and took up a position beyond the Village of HEILLY and in the vicinity of the junction of the SOMME and ANCRE Rivers. Before daylight everything was in readiness. The immobile Wagon Lines moved back into the Village of BEHENCOURT to-day, finding a comfortable billet in a barn and unoccupied farmhouse. Rain fell at intervals. Battery was now located at J.15.a.20.20. - Sheet 62D France.
- 29th March - Hostile artillery shelled the villages in the back areas throughout the day. The mobile Wagon Lines took up a new position in the rear of the village of HEILLY on a steep slope in the side of which the men dug themselves in, utilizing ground sheets, scraps of iron, looted tarpaulins and old scraps of canvas to form shelters. This primitive little township of burrows and gunyahs sprang up like mushrooms during the night and looked like anything but a military encampment. At the foot of the hill were the horse lines and wagons. Lieut WATT was left in charge of these lines. Rations during the last week had not been very plentiful so the troops wasted no time and set out in search of provended in the empty villages just behind the firing line. Fowls pigs and heifers all had a sudden ending, and for days the cookhouses at the several Wagon Lines were filled with savory odours. At the Battery position the guns were not idle. Irregular bursts of fire were directed on the enemy's roads and communications. At night our Infantry made

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(cont.)

an attack supported by the Artillery, the latter putting down a creeping barrage behind which the Infantry succeeded in advancing their line. The following order was received by the 7th Brigade from 3rd Aust. Div. :-

"To Battery Commanders,

The situation demands that the line of the 3rd Army be maintained at all costs. There must be NO withdrawal, if breaks occur the line must be linked up again on the general line of our present position with aid of such troops as can be made available and which are now beginning to arrive.

Any local withdrawal owing to enemy interruption will be in the general direction E to W. and not N.W. and must be temporary only pending restoration of the line.

VII corps must ensure that it's Right is firmly maintained on the SOMME. The position at BRAY is to be maintained with the utmost determination."

Air reports say the enemy is massing preparatory to making another attack, and that he is busy bringing up more artillery.

30th March - Weather dull and wet. Early this morning the whole of our forward area was subjected to a very severe barrage of 5.9's, 4.2's, and 77mm shells. The battery position was also shelled and the gun crew of "F" sub. gun were knocked out, one man being killed and four seriously wounded.

No. 20809	Gnr T.WALKER	Killed.
No. 18918	Gnr E.J.PIPER)	
No. 18878	Bdr J.A.HUNTER)	Seriously wounded.
No. 18879	Cpl W.K.HUNTER)	
22802	A/bdr J.D.GANNON)	

All these were original members of the Battery. Two horses of D. Sub-section were also wounded. The teams had been ordered up to the guns in case it was found necessary to go forward. Following the barrage the enemy Infantry attacked in 12 waves of dense formation, but were beaten off with heavy casualties. The artillery fire broke up their formations, and the smaller groups were dealt with by machine guns. None of the attacking force succeeded in reaching out first line trenches. During the hostile operation aircraft were very active. One Hun plane was brought down by one of our machines.

31st March - The following facts are worthy of note. In the position now occupied by us much use is being made of visual signalling both by flags and lamps. In all our previous positions telephonic communication had been the means of controlling the battery. The mode of action is now very much changed. Instead of the battery position being prepared by an advanced working party - gun pits dug (as in the early days) cupolas erected over them and sandbagged - the guns are now trotted into action, unlimbered and swung into position and the gun limbers of ammunition run alongside. The teams then trot to the rear. The gun limbers are fed by the Wagons from the Wagon lines. The six guns stand boldly in the open and are not even camouflaged. To erect and structure about the guns would only be an obstruction in case it was necessary to make a rapid advance or retirement. No protection is offered to the gunners with the exception of the gun shields, and against present day high explosives these are little better than sheet iron.

31st March - In many instances during the present offensive open
(cont.) sights have been used by the gunlayers.
Hostile batteries coming into action have on a number of occasions been caught by our fire and put to rout.
To the men behind the guns there is a great deal of satisfaction in being able to see the havoc wrought by their fire.

Throughout the day the guns were kept busy. Harassing fire was kept up at intervals and several times enemy guns were engaged. Hostile working parties were dispersed with losses.

At noon two hun planes crossed our line at a high altitude and at 3 p.m. enemy machines flew across the right of our position at a very low altitude. Hostile artillery was rather quiet. Heavy rain squalls occurred during the day.