
ONE YOUNG MAN

THE SIMPLE AND TRUE STORY OF A CLERK WHO
ENLISTED IN 1914, WHO FOUGHT ON THE WESTERN
FRONT FOR NEARLY TWO YEARS, WAS SEVERELY
WOUNDED AT THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME, AND
IS NOW ON HIS WAY BACK TO HIS DESK

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CHAPTER V

ONE YOUNG MAN AT HILL 60

MANY have described in vivid, and none in too vivid, language the fighting in the spring of 1915. This one young man went through it all, through the thickest of it all. He can tell a tale which, if written up and around, would be as thrilling as any yet recorded of those crowded glorious hours. But I prefer, and I know he, a soldier, would prefer, to chronicle the events of his day after day just as they occurred, without colour, and without comment.

I print, then, Sydney Baxter's account of the fighting as he wrote it. I promised that

this should be an altogether true chronicle, and it is well that some who live in the shelter of other men's heroism should know of the sacrifices by which they are saved. And then, too, as I read the notes he had jotted down, I heard a suggestion that we were all in danger of "spoiling" the wounded who come back to us—after enduring, for our sakes, the pains he here describes.

For three nights the bombardment had been tremendous.

It was 7 o'clock on the Sunday morning when we first got the alarm—"turn out and be ready to march off at once." We heard that the Hill—the famous Hill 60—had gone up and that we had been successful in holding it, but the rumours were that the fighting was terrific. We were soon marching on the road past battered Vlamertinghe. Shells of heavy calibre were falling on all sides, and we made for the Convent by the Lille gate, by a circuitous route—round by the Infantry Barracks. We dumped our packs in this Convent, where there were still

one or two of the nuns who had decided to face the shelling rather than leave their old home.

We were sorted up into parties. Our job was to carry barbed wire and ammunition up to the Hill. I was first on the barbed-wire party; there were about fifty of us and we collected the "knife-rests" just outside the Lille gate, and proceeded up the railway cutting. Shells were falling fairly fast, as indeed they always seemed to along this cut. At last we got our knife-rests up by the Hill and dumped them there. Fortunately we had very few casualties. We started to go back, but, half-way, we were stopped at the Brigade Headquarters, a badly damaged barn, and were told that we had to make another journey with bombs. We were just getting a few of these bombs out of the barn when the Boches landed three shells right on top of it. Many of our men were laid out, but we had to leave them and try to get as much ammunition out as possible. The barn soon caught fire, and this made the task a very dangerous one indeed. Every minute we were expecting the whole lot of

ammunition to go up, but our officer had already taken a watch on it and gave the alarm just a few seconds before the whole building went clean up into the air.

We then began to retrace our steps along the railway out to the Hill. Each man carried two boxes of bombs. Just as we reached the communication trench, leading on to the Hill itself, the Boches sent over several of the tear-gas shells. We stumbled about half-blind, rubbing our eyes. The whole party realised that the boys holding the Hill needed the bombs, so we groped our way along as best we could, snuffling and coughing, our eyes blinking and streaming. We stood at intervals and passed the bombs from one to the other, and had nearly completed our job when the word came down that no one was to leave the Hill, as a counter-attack was taking place a few minutes before 6 o'clock. We had then been at it for nearly ten hours. By this time the bombardment from both sides was stupendous; every gun on each side seemed concentrated on this one little stretch, on this small mound.

Six o'clock came and I heard a shrill

whistle and knew that our boys were just going over the top. Immediately there was a deafening rattle of machine guns and rifle fire. And then a stream of wounded poured down this communication trench. The wounds were terrible, mostly bayonet. None were dressed; there had been no time, they were just as they had been received. Many a poor chap succumbed to his injuries as he staggered along our trench. To keep the gangway clear we had to lift these dead bodies out and put them on the top of the parapets. It was ghastly, but you get accustomed to ghastly things out here. You realise that fifty dead bodies are not equal to one living. And these poor fellows, who only a few minutes before had been alive and full of vigour, were now just blocking the trench. And so we simply lifted the bodies out and cast them over the top. By this time the trench was absolutely full of wounded, and our little party was told to act as stretcher-bearers, and to get the stretcher cases down. We were only too glad to do something to help. The first man that my chum and I carried died half-way

down the cutting. We felt sorry for him, but could do nothing. He was dead. So we lifted his body on to the side of the track and returned for the living. This work lasted some considerable time, and when more stretcher bearers came up, most of the cases had been carried down, so we returned to the Convent exhausted, nerve-shaken, and very glad of the opportunity of a few hours' sleep. The sights we had seen, the nerve-racking heavy shelling had upset our chaps pretty badly. Many of them sobbed. To see and hear a man sob is terrible, almost as terrible as some of the wounds I have seen—and they have been very awful. However, as quite a number of the men had only recently come out, it was natural enough that we should be upset by this ordeal. Time and repeated experiences of this kind toughen if they do not harden a man,—but for many this was the first experience.

Early the next morning the whole battalion made a move nearer to the Hill. For the greater part of the day we stood to in dug-outs on the side of the railway embankment, but at dusk we lined up and received

instructions as to the work we had to do that night and the following day. Our officers told us that we were going to the Hill to hold off all counter-attacks, and that if any man on the way up was wounded no one was to stay with him. He must be left to wait for the stretcher-bearers. Every man would be needed for the coming struggle, and although it seemed almost *too* hard that one must see his chum struck down and be unable to stop and bind up his wounds, there was no doubt that the order was very necessary.

We started off in single file by platoons. This time we did not go up the cutting, but made our way round by the reservoir and the dilapidated village of Zillebeke. The first man to go down was one of my own section. We remembered the order not to stop, although the temptation was very strong. So we left him, wishing him the best of luck and hoping that he would soon be in Blighty. After this the casualties came faster and faster as we entered into the shell-swept area. The machine guns were sweeping round and were making havoc in our

ranks. Gradually we drew near to the little wood just beside Hill 60, and were told to occupy any dug-outs there until further orders. It was at this time that the whizz-bang shell made its debut. We had not encountered this kind of shell before; it was one that gave absolutely no warning and was used for quite small ranges.

We had been in these dug-outs for about half an hour when we were told to fall in and each man to carry two boxes of bombs. We then went into the communication trench of the old front line. At this stage our company commander was wounded.

However, we got on to the Hill, and each man was detailed—some for firing, some for bombing, and some for construction. All the trenches were blown in entirely, and a large number of us, including my chum and myself, were detailed for this construction work. Under heavy shelling we tried to build up the blown-in portions of the trenches. This was just at a corner leading right on to the Hill and part of our old front line. We laboured here all night through. Just before dawn the shelling in-

creased, and the bombardment grew very terrific. All possible were rushed up into the crater to take the places of the fallen. Casualties were terrible, and the wounded came past our corner in one stream; several of my own friends were amongst them, and two of them, who had come out with me, were killed just a few yards away. This terrific cannonade continued until dawn, when things quietened down a little. Every one's nerves were on edge, and all of us were thoroughly tired out. In every part of the trench lay numbers of dead bodies; in fact, to move about, one had to climb over them. I sat down, for some time done to the world, on what I thought was a sandbag. I discovered afterwards it was a dead body.

Shortly afterwards we were relieved by another regiment, and in small parties of tens made our way back into Ypres. This was done in daylight, and we were spotted and shelled by the Boches. However, we were only too glad to get away from that ghastly hell, and literally tore along the hedges down past the reservoir into Ypres. At the hospital, at the other end of the town,

the remnants of the battalion were collected, and it was there that Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien spoke to us, congratulating our battalion on its stand the night before. Worn out, we lined up and marched back along the road to Vlamertinghe, fondly imagining we were going back to our well-earned rest (as a matter of fact that was the programme), but we had not been in these huts more than half an hour when down the road from St. Julien there rushed one long column of transports, riderless horses, and wounded (mostly of the French Algerian regiments). And everywhere was the cry, "The Boches have broken through!"

Orders were soon forthcoming, and we turned out, loaded magazines, and marched off in the direction from which the Boches were supposed to be coming. On our way up many dispatch riders passed, and each one had the same comforting message—"The Canadians are holding them." We went no further, but received orders to dig ourselves in across the road, and that in the event of the Boches getting as far as this we were to hold them until the last man.

Fortunately the splendid Canadians had not only held their ground, but with terrible losses had pushed the enemy two or three miles back; had, in fact, practically regained all the ground lost.

At nightfall we drew picks and shovels and made our way in the direction of St. Julien. We got to the Yser Canal, and in crossing the bridge met the batch of wounded coming back. This was not heartening, but certainly gave all of us a keener desire to get to grips. On the side of the banks of the Yser we were formed into three waves and received instructions that we were going over in extended order to drive the Huns from the position. But the Canadians had done so grandly that we were not needed until the following morning, when, in broad daylight, the remnants of the once whole battalion, in single file, made their way along the hedges, taking advantage of every possible cover, up to the village of St. Jean.

Much to our surprise we did not stop there, but went right through and came within view of the Boches. Immediately we

were under the special care of their artillery, and within a short space of time lost half of our numbers. We had to dig ourselves in with entrenching tools, but after having got fairly decent cover, had to move on again over to the left. We got right forward into the front line, and found it held by a mere handful of the Canadians, who received us with enthusiasm and were so heartened by our reinforcements that they were more determined than ever to hang on to the last.

Meanwhile between the two lines our wounded lay unattended. Those who were able made their way, crawling and rolling through the barbed wire, into our lines. At dusk half of the Canadians occupying the trench made one rush after another to bring in their wounded and helpless comrades. It was a wonderful sight. Again and again these fellows went out, each time carrying back a wounded man. I was the extreme end man of our regiment, and so was right next to the Canadians themselves. Their officer, who was hit some time during the evening, came back with his arm in a sling,

refusing to go down the line to the dressing station, as he preferred to stay with the remnants of his company. He was a most encouraging chap, and it was here that I noticed the difference between the companionship of these officers and men and those of our own army. The ordinary private would pull out his small packet of Woodbines and offer one to his officer, who would accept it with the same feeling of gratefulness as he would a cigar from a brother officer.

We stayed with these Canadians for two days. For some reason or other the transport had failed to bring up our rations, but we did not suffer for lack of food, for whatever the Canadians had, we had too. They shared with us all their rations and kept us for those two days.

At the end of that time, during which we had witnessed several attacks on the right, we were relieved from those trenches and marched back to the farm on the other side of the Canal. But it was not for a rest; for every night we had to go up digging and consolidating the trenches

regained and digging communication trenches.

It was on one of these digging fatigues that my chum was killed. He and I had been given a small sector to dig, and it was really a fairly quiet night, as far as firing was concerned. We had dug down a depth of about three feet and had secured ourselves against rifle fire and were putting the final touches to our work, which we had rightly viewed with pride and satisfaction, when the order came—"D company file out towards the left." We were terribly disappointed, for we had worked all that evening on digging ourselves in here and we knew that it meant a fresh start elsewhere. We were just clambering out when there rang out one single shot from a sniper, apparently lying in front of the German lines.

We all got up with the exception of my chum. I did not for a minute imagine he had been hit, but merely thought he was making sure that the sniper had finished, so I touched him—and he half rolled towards me. I lifted him up and said, "Did you catch it?" All he could do was to point

to his chin. He was an awful sight. A dum-dum or explosive bullet had caught his jaw-bone and had blown the left lower jaw and part of the neck away. I realised at once that it was hopeless, for it took four bandages to stop the spurting. One of our fellows ran off for the stretcher-bearers. One of these came back, but he could not stop the flow of blood at all, and the corporal said, "No good: it will all be over in a minute." I could not believe it at all—it did not seem possible to me that George, with whom I had spent every hour of every day in close companionship for so many months past, was dying.

The party went on and I was left alone, but I risked all chances of court martial and stayed with my wounded friend. I couldn't leave him until I was absolutely certain that he was past all aid. He did not last very many minutes, and I knelt there with my arm round his shoulders, hoping against hope that something could be done. He was called to pay the supreme sacrifice of all. And with just one gasp he died.

I was in a terrible condition. My clothes

were soaked in blood, my hands all red, my mind numbed. Nothing could be done, so I went and joined my company, but first made application to the sergeant-major that I might help to bury my chum. This was granted, and as three other men were killed that evening, a party of us were detailed to make graves for them. I can see now those four graves in a square, railed off by barbed wire, on the cross-roads between St. Jean and St. Julien. On one corner stood an estaminet and trenches ran all round. A chaplain was passing, and we had a service of a minute or two. The time was about 2 o'clock on Saturday morning. We were only able to dig down a couple of feet, and these graves must, I fear, have suffered from the heavy shelling which followed, but I like to think that my chum still rests there undisturbed.

How I got back to the barn that night I do not know. I certainly was not my natural self, and it was more a stagger than a march. It was impossible to realise that I should see George no more. And on the following day I had to face the still harder

task of writing to his parents and to the girl he had left behind.

To this, written by Sydney Baxter, I add nothing. Not to me has it come to dig a shallow, shell-swept grave for my chum. What words, then, have I?