

ATTACK

AN INFANTRY SUBALTERN'S IMPRESSIONS
OF JULY 1ST, 1916

BY
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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CHAPTER III

ATTACK

DAWN was breaking. The morning was cool after a chill night—a night of waiting in blown-down trenches with not an inch to move to right or left, of listening to the enemy's shells as they left the guns and came tearing and shrieking towards you, knowing all the time that they were aimed for your particular bit of trench and would land in it or by it, of awaiting that sudden, ominous silence, and then the crash—perhaps death.

I, for my part, had spent most of the night sitting on a petrol tin, wedged be-

tween the two sides of the trench and two human beings—my sergeant on the left and a corporal on the right. Like others, I had slept for part of the time despite the noise and danger, awakened now and then by the shattering crash of a shell or the hopeless cry for stretcher-bearers.

But morning was coming at last, and the bombardment had ceased. The wind blew east, and a few fleecy clouds raced along the blue sky overhead. The sun was infusing more warmth into the air. There was the freshness and splendour of a summer morning over everything. In fact, as one man said, it felt more as if we were going to start off for a picnic than for a battle.

“Pass it down to Sergeant H—— that Sergeant S——I wishes him the top o' the

mornin’,” said my sergeant. But Sergeant H——, who was in charge of the company’s Lewis-guns, and had been stationed in the next fire-trench, was at present groping his way to safety with a lump of shrapnel in his back.

An occasional shell sang one way or the other. Otherwise all was quiet. We passed down the remains of the rum. Sergeant S——I pressed me to take some out of a mess-tin lid. I drank a very little—the first and last “tot” I took during the battle. It warmed me up. Some time after this I looked at my watch and found it was a minute or two before 6.25 A.M. I turned to the corporal, saying—

“They’ll just about start now.”

The words were not out of my mouth before the noise, which had increased a

trifle during the last twenty minutes, suddenly swelled into a gigantic roar. Our guns had started. The din was so deafening that one could not hear the crash of German shells exploding in our own lines.

Sergeant S——I was standing straight up in the trench and looking over to see the effects of our shells. It was a brave thing to do, but absolutely reckless. I pulled him down by the tail of his tunic. He got up time and again, swearing that he would “take on the whole b—— German army.” He gave us pleasing information of the effects of our bombardment, but as I did not want him to lose his life prematurely, I saw to it that we kept him down in the trench till the time came for a display of bravery, in which he was not lacking.

We had been told that the final bombardment that day would be the most intense one since the beginning of the war. The attack was to encircle what was almost generally considered the strongest German "fortress" on the Western Front, the stronghold of Gommecourt Wood. There was need of it, therefore.

Just over the trenches, almost raising the hair on one's head (we were helmeted, I must say, but that was the feeling), swished the smaller shells from the French .75 and English 18-pounder batteries. They gave one the sensation of being under a swiftly rushing stream. The larger shells kept up a continuous shrieking overhead, falling on the enemy's trenches with the roar of a cataract, while every now and then a noise as of thunder

sounded above all when our trench-mortar shells fell amongst the German wire, blowing it to bits, making holes like mine craters, and throwing dirt and even bits of metal into our own trenches.

I have often tried to call to memory the intellectual, mental and nervous activity through which I passed during that hour of hellish bombardment and counter-bombardment, that last hour before we leapt out of our trenches into No Man's Land. I give the vague recollection of that ordeal for what it is worth. I had an excessive desire for the time to come when I could go "over the top," when I should be free at last from the noise of the bombardment, free from the prison of my trench, free to walk across that patch of No Man's Land and opposing trenches till

I got to my objective, or, if I did not go that far, to have my fate decided for better or for worse. I experienced, too, moments of intense fear during close bombardment. I felt that if I was blown up it would be the end of all things so far as I was concerned. The idea of after-life seemed ridiculous in the presence of such frightful destructive force. Again the prayer of that old cavalier kept coming to my mind. At any rate, one could but do one's best, and I hoped that a higher power than all that which was around would not overlook me or any other fellows on that day. At one time, not very long before the moment of attack, I felt to its intensest depth the truth of the proverb, "Carpe diem." What was time? I had another twenty minutes in which to live in com-

parative safety. What was the difference between twenty minutes and twenty years? Really and truly what was the difference? I was living at present, and that was enough. I am afraid that this working of mind will appear unintelligible. I cannot explain it further. I think that others who have waited to "go over" will realise its meaning. Above all, perhaps, and except when shells falling nearby brought one back to reality, the intense cascade-like noise of our own shells rushing overhead numbed for the most part of the time one's nervous and mental system. Listening to this pandemonium, one felt like one of an audience at a theatre and not in the least as if one was in any way associated with it oneself.

Still, the activity of a man's nerves,

though dulled to a great extent inwardly, were bound to show externally. I turned to the corporal. He was a brave fellow, and had gone through the Gallipoli campaign, but he was shaking all over, and white as parchment. I expect that I was just the same.

"We must be giving them hell," I said. "I don't think they're sending much back."

"I don't think much, sir," he replied.

I hardly think we believed each other. Looking up out of the trench beyond him, I saw huge, black columns of smoke and *débris* rising up from our communication trench. Then, suddenly, there was a blinding "crash" just by us. We were covered in mud which flopped out of the trench, and the evil-smelling fumes of

lyddite. The cry for stretcher-bearers was passed hurriedly up the line again. Followed "crash" after "crash," and the pinging of shrapnel which flicked into the top of the trench, the purring noise of flying nose-caps and soft thudding sounds as they fell into the parapet.

It was difficult to hear one another talking. Sergeant S—I was still full of the "get at 'em" spirit. So were we all. The men were behaving splendidly. I passed along the word to "Fix swords."

We could not see properly over the top of the trench, but smoke was going over. The attack was about to begin—it was beginning. I passed word round the corner of the traverse, asking whether they could see if the second wave was starting. It was just past 7.30 A.M. The

third wave, of which my platoon formed a part, was due to start at 7.30 plus 45 seconds—at the same time as the second wave in my part of the line. The corporal got up, so I realised that the second wave was assembling on the top to go over. The ladders had been smashed or used as stretchers long ago. Scrambling out of a battered part of the trench, I arrived on top, looked down my line of men, swung my rifle forward as a signal, and started off at the prearranged walk.

A continuous hissing noise all around one, like a railway engine letting off steam, signified that the German machine-gunners had become aware of our advance. I nearly trod on a motionless form. It lay in a natural position, but the ashen face and fixed, fearful eyes told me that

the man had just fallen. I did not recognise him then. I remember him now. He was one of my own platoon.

To go back for a minute. The scene that met my eyes as I stood on the parapet of our trench for that one second is almost indescribable. Just in front the ground was pitted by innumerable shell-holes. More holes opened suddenly every now and then. Here and there a few bodies lay about. Farther away, before our front line and in No Man's Land, lay more. In the smoke one could distinguish the second line advancing. One man after another fell down in a seemingly natural manner, and the wave melted away. In the background, where ran the remains of the German lines and wire, there was a mass of smoke, the red of the

shrapnel bursting amid it. Amongst it, I saw Captain H—— and his men attempting to enter the German front line. The Boches had met them on the parapet with bombs. The whole scene reminded me of battle pictures, at which in earlier years I had gazed with much amazement. Only this scene, though it did not seem more real, was infinitely more terrible. Everything stood still for a second, as a panorama painted with three colours—the white of the smoke, the red of the shrapnel and blood, the green of the grass.

If I had felt nervous before, I did not feel so now, or at any rate not in anything like the same degree. As I advanced, I felt as if I was in a dream, but I had all my wits about me. We had been told to walk. Our boys, however, rushed for-

ward with splendid impetuosity to help their comrades and smash the German resistance in the front line. What happened to our materials for blocking the German communication trench, when we got to our objective, I should not like to think. I kept up a fast walking pace and tried to keep the line together. This was impossible. When we had jumped clear of the remains of our front line trench, my platoon slowly disappeared through the line stretching out. For a long time, however, Sergeant S——l, Lance-corporal M——, Rifleman D——, whom I remember being just in front of me, raising his hand in the air and cheering, and myself kept together. Eventually Lance-corporal M—— was the only one of my platoon left near me, and I shouted out to

him, "Let's try and keep together." It was not long, however, before we also parted company. One thing I remember very well about this time, and that was that a hare jumped up and rushed towards and past me through the dry, yellowish grass, its eyes bulging with fear.

We were dropping into a slight valley. The shell-holes were less few, but bodies lay all over the ground, and a terrible groaning arose from all sides. At one time we seemed to be advancing in little groups. I was at the head of one for a moment or two, only to realise shortly afterwards that I was alone.

I came up to the German wire. Here one could hear men shouting to one another and the wounded groaning above the explosions of shells and bombs and

the rattle of machine-guns. I found myself with J—, an officer of "C" company, afterwards killed while charging a machine-gun in the open. We looked round to see what our fourth line was doing. My company's fourth line had no leader. Captain W—k, wounded twice, had fallen into a shell-hole, while Sergeant S—r had been killed during the preliminary bombardment. Men were kneeling and firing. I started back to see if I could bring them up, but they were too far away. I made a cup of my mouth and shouted, as J— was shouting. We could not be heard. I turned round again and advanced to a gap in the German wire. There was a pile of our wounded here on the German parapet.

Suddenly I cursed. I had been scalded

in the left hip. A shell, I thought, had blown up in a water-logged crump-hole and sprayed me with boiling water. Letting go of my rifle, I dropped forward full length on the ground. My hip began to smart unpleasantly, and I left a curious warmth stealing down my left leg. I thought it was the boiling water that had scalded me. Certainly my breeches looked as if they were saturated with water. I did not know that they were saturated with blood.

So I lay, waiting with the thought that I might recover my strength (I could barely move) and try to crawl back. There was the greater possibility of death, but there was also the possibility of life. I looked around to see what was happening. In front lay some wounded;

on either side of them stakes and shreds of barbed wire twisted into weird contortions by the explosions of our trench-mortar bombs. Beyond this nothing but smoke, interspersed with the red of bursting bombs and shrapnel.

From out this ghastly chaos crawled a familiar figure. It was that of Sergeant K—, bleeding from a wound in the chest. He came crawling towards me.

“Hallo, K—,” I shouted.

“Are you hit, sir?” he asked.

“Yes, old chap, I am,” I replied.

“You had better try and crawl back,” he suggested.

“I don’t think I can move,” I said.

“I’ll take off your equipment for you.”

He proceeded very gallantly to do this. I could not get to a kneeling position my-

self, and he had to get hold of me, and bring me to a kneeling position, before undoing my belt and shoulder-straps. We turned round and started crawling back together. I crawled very slowly at first. Little holes opened in the ground on either side of me, and I understood that I was under the fire of a machine-gun. In front bullets were hitting the turf and throwing it four or five feet into the air. Slowly but steadily I crawled on. Sergeant K—— and I lost sight of one another. I think that he crawled off to the right and I to the left of a mass of barbed wire entanglements.

I was now confronted by a danger from our own side. I saw a row of several men kneeling on the ground and firing. It is probable that they were trying to pick off

German machine-gunners, but it seemed very much as if they would “pot” a few of the returning wounded into the bargain.

“For God’s sake, stop firing,” I shouted.

Words were of no avail. I crawled through them. At last I got on my feet and stumbled blindly along.

I fell down into a sunken road with several other wounded, and crawled up over the bank on the other side. The Germans had a machine-gun on that road, and only a few of us got across. Some one faintly called my name behind me. Looking round, I thought I recognised a man of “C” company. Only a few days later did it come home to me that he was my platoon observer. I had told him to

stay with me whatever happened. He had carried out his orders much more faithfully than I had ever meant, for he had come to my assistance, wounded twice in the head himself. He hastened forward to me, but, as I looked round waiting, uncertain quite as to who he was, his rifle clattered on to the ground, and he crumpled up and fell motionless just behind me. I felt that there was nothing to be done for him. He died a hero, just as he had always been in the trenches, full of self-control, never complaining, a ready volunteer. Shortly afterwards I sighted the remains of our front line trench and fell into them.

At first I could not make certain as to my whereabouts. Coupled with the fact that my notions in general were becoming

somewhat hazy, the trenches themselves were entirely unrecognisable. They were filled with earth, and about half their original depth. I decided, with that quick, almost semi-conscious intuition that comes to one in moments of peril, to proceed to the left (to one coming from the German lines). As I crawled through holes and over mounds I could hear the vicious spitting of machine-gun bullets. They seemed to skim just over my helmet. The trench, opening out a little, began to assume its old outline. I had reached the head of New Woman Street, though at the time I did not know what communication trench it was—or trouble, for that matter.

The scene at the head of that communication trench is stamped in a blurred but unforgettable way on my mind. In the

remains of a wrecked dug-out or emplacement a signaller sat, calmly transmitting messages to Battalion Headquarters. A few bombers were walking along the continuation of the front line. I could distinguish the red grenades on their arms through the smoke. There were more of them at the head of the communication trench. Shells were coming over and blowing up round about.

I asked one of the bombers to see what was wrong with my hip. He started to get out my iodine tube and field dressing. The iodine tube was smashed. I remembered that I had a second one, and we managed to get that out after some time. Shells were coming over so incessantly and close that the bomber advised that we should walk farther down the trench be-

fore commencing operations. This done, he opened my breeches and disclosed a small hole in the front of the left hip. It was bleeding fairly freely. He poured in the iodine, and put the bandage round in the best manner possible. We set off down the communication trench again, in company with several bombers, I holding the bandage to my wound. We scrambled up mounds and jumped over craters (rather a painful performance for one wounded in the leg); we halted at times in almost open places, when machine-gun bullets swept unpleasantly near, and one felt the wind of shells as they passed just over, blowing up a few yards away. In my last stages across No Man's Land my chief thought had been, "I must get home now for the sake of my people." Now,

for I still remember it distinctly, my thought was, "Will my name appear in the casualty list under the head of 'Killed' or 'Wounded'?" and I summoned up a mental picture of the two alternatives in black type.

After many escapes we reached the Reserve Line, where a military policeman stood at the head of Woman Street. He held up the men in front of me and directed them to different places. Some one told him that a wounded officer was following. This was, perhaps, as well, for I was an indistinguishable mass of filth and gore. My helmet was covered with mud, my tunic was cut about with shrapnel and bullets and saturated with blood; my breeches had changed from a khaki to a purple hue: my puttees were

in tatters; my boots looked like a pair of very muddy clogs.

The military policeman consigned me to the care of some excellent fellow, of what regiment I cannot remember. After walking, or rather stumbling, a short way down Woman Street, my guide and I came upon a gunner Colonel standing outside his dug-out and trying to watch the progress of the battle through his field-glasses.

"Good-morning," he said.

"Good-morning, sir," I replied.

This opening of our little conversation was not meant to be in the least ironical, I can assure you. It seemed quite natural at the time.

"Where are you hit?" he asked.

"In the thigh, sir. I don't think it's anything very bad."

“Good. How are we getting on?”

“Well, I really can't say much for certain, sir. But I got nearly to their front line.”

Walking was now becoming exceedingly painful and we proceeded slowly. I choked the groans that would rise to my lips and felt a cold perspiration pouring freely from my face. It was easier to get along by taking hold of the sides of the trench with my hands than by being supported by my guide. A party of bombers or carriers of some description passed us. We stood on one side to let them go by. In those few seconds my wound became decidedly stiffer, and I wondered if I would ever reach the end of the trenches on foot. At length the communication trench passed through a

belt of trees, and we found ourselves in Cross Street.

Here was a First Aid Post, and R.A.M.C. men were hard at work. I had known those trenches for a month past, and I had never thought that Cross Street could appear so homelike. Hardly a shell was falling and the immediate din of battle had subsided. The sun was becoming hot, but the trees threw refreshing shadows over the wide, shallow brick-floored trenches built by the French two years before. The R.A.M.C. orderlies were speaking pleasant words, and men not too badly wounded were chatting gaily. I noticed a dresser at work on a man near by, and was pleased to find that the man whose wounds were being attended to was my servant L—. His

wound was in the hip, a nasty hole drilled by a machine-gun bullet at close quarters. He showed me his water-bottle, penetrated by another bullet, which had inflicted a further, but slight, wound.

There were many more serious cases than mine to be attended to. After about five or ten minutes an orderly slit up my breeches.

"The wound's in the front of the hip," I said.

"Yes, but there's a larger wound where the bullets come out, sir."

I looked and saw a gaping hole two inches in diameter.

"I think that's a Blighty one, isn't it?" I remarked.

"I should just think so, sir!" he replied.

"Thank God! At last!" I murmured vehemently, conjuring up visions of the good old homeland.

The orderly painted the iodine round both wounds and put on a larger bandage. At this moment R——, an officer of "D" company, came limping into Cross Street.

"Hallo, L——," he exclaimed, "we had better try and get down to hospital together."

We started in a cavalcade to walk down the remaining trenches into the village, not before my servant, who had insisted on staying with me, had remarked—

"I think I should like to go up again now, sir," and to which proposal I had answered very emphatically—

“You won’t do anything of the sort, my friend!”

R— led the way, with a man to help him, next came my servant, then two orderlies carrying a stretcher with a terribly wounded Scottish private on it; another orderly and myself brought up the rear—and a very slow one at that!

Turning a corner, we found ourselves amidst troops of the battalion in reserve to us, all of them eager for news. A subaltern, with whom I had been at a Divisional School, asked how far we had got. I told him that we were probably in their second line by now. This statement caused disappointment. Every one appeared to believe that we had taken the three lines in about ten minutes. I must confess that the night before the attack I had enter-

tained hopes that it would not take us much longer than this. As a matter of fact my battalion, or the remains of it, after three hours of splendid and severe fighting, managed to penetrate into the third line trench.

Loss of blood was beginning to tell, and my progress was getting slower every minute. Each man, as I passed, put his arm forward to help me along and said a cheery word of some kind or other. Down the wide, brick-floored trench we went, past shattered trees and battered cottages, through the rank grass and luxuriant wild flowers, through the rich, unwarlike aroma of the orchard, till we emerged into the village “boulevard.”

The orderly held me under the arms till I was put on a wheeled stretcher and hur-

ried along, past the "boulevard pool" with its surrounding elms and willows, and, at the end of the "boulevard," up a street to the left. A short way up this street on the right stood the Advanced Dressing Station—a well-sandbagged house reached through the usual archway and courtyard. A dug-out, supplied with electric light and with an entrance of remarkable sandbag construction, had been tunnelled out beneath the courtyard. This was being used for operations.

In front of the archway and in the road stood two "padrés" directing the continuous flow of stretchers and walking wounded. They appeared to be doing all the work of organisation, while the R.A.M.C. doctors and surgeons had their

hands full with dressings and operations. These were the kind of directions:

"Wounded Sergeant? Right. Abdominal wound? All right. Lift him off—gently now. Take him through the archway into the dug-out."

"Dead? Yes! Poor fellow, take him down to the Cemetery."

"German? Dug-out No. 2, at the end of the road on the right."

Under the superintendence of the R.C. "padré," a man whose sympathy and kindness I shall never forget, my stretcher was lifted off the carrier and I was placed in the archway. The "padré" loosened my bandage and looked at the wound, when he drew in his breath and asked if I was in much pain.

"Not an enormous amount," I answered, but asked for something to drink.

"Are you quite sure it hasn't touched the stomach?" he questioned, looking shrewdly at me.

I emphatically denied that it had, and he brought a blood-stained mug with a little tea at the bottom of it. I can honestly say that I never enjoyed a drink so much as that one.

Shells, high explosives and shrapnel, were coming over every now and then. I kept my helmet well over my head. This also served as a shade from the sun, for it was now about ten o'clock and a sultry day. I was able to obtain a view of events round about fairly easily. From time to time orderlies tramped through the archway, bearing stretcher-cases to the dug-

out. Another officer had been brought in and placed on the opposite side of the archway. The poor fellow, about nineteen, was more or less unconscious. His head and both hands were covered in bandages crimson with blood. So coated was he with mud and gore that I did not at first recognise him as an officer. At the farther end of the arch a young private of about eighteen was lying on his side, groaning in the agony of a stomach wound and crying "Mother." The sympathetic "padre" did the best he could to comfort him. Out in the road the R.A.M.C. were dressing and bandaging the ever-increasing flow of wounded. Amongst them a captive German R.A.M.C. man, in green uniform, with a Red Cross round his sleeve, was visible, hard at work. Every-

thing seemed so different from the deadly strife a thousand or so yards away. There, foe was inflicting wounds on foe; here were our men attending to the German wounded and the Germans attending to ours. Both sides were working so hard now to save life. There was a human touch about that scene in the ruined village street which filled one with a sense of mingled sadness and pleasure. Here were both sides united in a common attempt to repair the ravages of war. Humanity had at last asserted itself.

It was about eleven o'clock, I suppose, when the "padré" came up again to my stretcher and asked me if I should like to get on, as there was a berth vacant in an ambulance. The stretcher was hoisted up and slid into the bottom berth of the car.

The berth above was occupied by an unconscious man. On the other side of the ambulance were four sitting cases—a private, a sergeant, a corporal, and a rifleman, the last almost unconscious. Those of us who could talk were very pleased with life, and I remember saying: "Thank God, we're out of that hell, boys!"

"What's wrong with him?" I asked the corporal, signifying the unconscious man.

"Hit in the lungs, sir. They've set him up on purpose."

The corporal, pulling out his cigarette case, offered cigarettes all round, and we started to smoke. The last scene that I saw in Hébuterne was that of three men dressing a tall badly wounded Prussian officer lying on the side of the road. The ambulance turned the corner out of the vil-

lage. There followed three "crashes" and dust flew on to the floor of the car.

"Whizz-bangs," was the corporal's laconical remark.

We had passed the German road barrage, and were on our way to peace and safety.

CHAPTER IV

TOLL OF ATTACK

WE climbed the little white road which led through the battery positions now almost silent, topped the crest, and dipped into Saily-au-Bois. The village had been very little shelled since the night before, and appeared the same as ever, except that the intense traffic, which had flowed into it for the past month, had ceased. Limbers and lorries had done their work, and the only objects which filled the shell-scarred streets were slow-moving ambulances, little blood-stained groups of