

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-63607-1 - The Tunnellers of Holzminden (with a Side-Issue):

Second Edition

H. G. Durnford

Excerpt

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## PROLOGUE

“B/112th will detail the liaison officer for the Group for to-morrow the 5th.”

The Brigade orderly splashed in bearing the unwelcome message. I had just turned in. The never-to-be-forgotten fatal three days' downpour which had set in on the 31st July 1917 and had upset so many calculations had just stopped and we had enjoyed an afternoon and evening of bright sunshine and cloudless skies. The water in the dug-out, which had risen steadily in spite of temporary responses to our efforts with an old trench pump and a chain of buckets, was now gradually beginning to abate and the stretcher on which I slept was once more high and dry. Also I was due to go down to waggon-lines in two days' time, and life generally was taking on a less sombre hue.

It could afford to. Our six weeks in action in the Salient had been lived in an atmosphere of almost unrelieved gloom, an atmosphere—so we had come to believe—inalienable from the place itself.

One had come to realise what men had meant who in earlier days on the Somme—when all was said to be quiet at Ypres—had trekked south into the Valley of the Shadow of Death and remarked that “it was better than the Salient.” Now we had seen for ourselves. It had not merely been the shelling and the fact that there was not a really safe spot, except in the very ramparts of the Eastern wall themselves, between

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Belgian Battery Corner and the front line. It had not merely been that the German gunners conveyed the impression that they were *aiming at you*, that they knew exactly where you were, and that they were doing it—had been doing it all along—more as a pleasure than as an allotted task. It had not been the fact that no fatigue or waggon-line party could set great hopes on returning scatheless from a job of work; nor that here hostile aeroplane observation seemed more acute than in other parts; nor again that rarely a night passed but one saw or heard of some shambles on a main traffic road. It was none of these things. The spirit of Ypres was abroad, impregnating those new to her. From the very morning when, accompanying a harassed, jumpy acting C.R.A. on his round of battery inspections, I had first seen her, I had felt the spell upon me. It was like grey skies and a wind in the east, the quintessence of sombreness. The intervals of quiet could not be called peace; they served only to intensify the solitude. The history of the place seemed to cast its stamp on those who sojourned in it.

We had come into action at the beginning of July. Our instructions had been to get “in” and camouflaged and registered and then wait for “the day,” and that waiting had been sorely trying to the patience. It had been far worse than sitting on the Messines Ridge in June. We had been told we should be “silent,” but we had fired steadily nevertheless, and this meant, of course, more ammunition and added risk of casualties amongst horses and men. It had meant having the men out of cover to shift the shells from their depôts to the gun-pits; and such things were considerations when we

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A street in Ypres.



The Cloth Hall in 1917.



The Menin Gate of Ypres.

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## PROLOGUE

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were losing men at the rate of about two a day and the stock of capable gunners and N.C.O.'s, depleted at Messines, was beginning to run dangerously low. "D" Battery on our immediate right had had an even worse time. Poor old "D." They were always getting the rough of it since Courcellette, and this time they had got it very rough indeed. They had had no cellar to put their gun-crews in and we had been unable to spare them a share in ours, so they had left emergency crews at the guns and worked them by nucleus shifts, the remainder sleeping a long way behind.

The preparations had dragged their slow course along, and we had gone on with our daily routine, never knowing what the next minute was not going to produce, unloading and storing the ammunition, and heaving a sigh of relief when the last pack-horse had discharged his daily load and that anxiety at least was off our shoulders for the day; checking the sights and aiming-posts, strengthening so far as we could the pits, watching and shepherding the men; gassed one night and on duty all the next and then gassed again the third—the deadly mustard fellow had just made his costly *début*; counting the leaden hours, congratulating ourselves each time that—our duty over—we made the dug-out door afresh; and ever and anon looking hopefully through the tattered screen which still served to shield our part of the Menin Road from hostile observation to where Passchendaele Church stood prominent and quite intact on the opposite slope.

In five weeks the Corps Artillery alone had lost (I believe the figure is correct) 568 officers, killed, wounded, or gassed, and other ranks also had lost in proportion. We ourselves had lost one officer (gassed almost as soon

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as we had got in), five out of our six N.C.O.'s, and twelve gunners or bombardiers. "D" had had a young officer just out from England killed with a sergeant immediately behind our own guns, and a direct hit on one of their dug-outs had deprived them of three more sergeants and two gunners at one fell swoop. The toll had mounted up steadily, and though the C.-in-C. had issued a special appreciation of the bearing of the artillery in these difficult circumstances, we had day by day been feeling more the heavy strain.

Then had come the last days of July. All the conceivable practice barrages had been fired and the Huns made wise to the uttermost.

Then again—amidst rumours that the French were two days late—the storm clouds had gathered from the unfavourable quarter, and finally on the 31st July the great unwieldy barrage had unwound its complicated length in drizzling rain on the Hun lines. The infantry had gone over and reached the "black line" up to scheduled time: but on the "black line" they had lost co-ordination; when the barrage advanced again they had been late to follow up; the barrage had rolled on unheeding; our men, floundering in its wake on hopeless ground and now in a steady downpour, had had to come back and consolidate on the "black line," while the batteries awaited in vain the longed-for order to advance.

Well, what was one job more or less after all? One might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, and I should go down to waggon-lines with all the clearer conscience on the 6th, and sleep.... How I would sleep! I would get down there for lunch if I could, have a

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The Battery in action N. of the Menin Road.



The Menin Road.



At the waggon-lines.



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## PROLOGUE

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quiet ride in the afternoon into “Pop,” and come back to waggon-lines for an early dinner and bed. How glorious to wake up once more, and to hear the birds twittering outside! It seemed ages ago since one had done so last, and it was in reality just eight days. My waggon-line billet was in a small farm-house. Madame and her man had been, for those parts, friendly enough. I remembered having tried to convey to Madame that next time I visited her, Ypres would be free. She had not understood, and perhaps it had been just as well.

Yes, a late breakfast, after a sluice-down in the open air, a leisurely toilet, and a stroll round the horses; and then perhaps a real joy-ride, an all-day affair towards Nieppe Forest....

I rang up the battery and gave my orders for signalers and an orderly on the morrow. There was only one other subaltern available for the job, and as the Major was out at the time I deputed myself. It is the unwritten rule.

I read through the standing orders for the Group liaison officers, finished my chapter of *Sonia*—I was to read the next in a very different setting—and went to sleep.

The Menin Road was a populous concern in those days and the varied traffic comforted our gregarious souls as we walked down at a round pace next morning after breakfast to pay our respects *en route* to Infantry Brigade and the senior Artillery Liaison Officer of the Group in the big labyrinth of dug-outs at the bottom of the hill. Hell Fire Corner, though still occasionally shelled “on spec,” was no longer the shunned, depressing cross-roads that it used to be. Now it even boasted

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a military policeman to control the traffic. Ambulance cars and heavy lorries passed and met us. The road was thick with infantry and fatigue-parties of various kinds going up and coming out.

The shattered boughs and fallen branches, which had blocked the unused road before, had now been side-tracked; only dead mules and horses here and there had created fresh obstructions. Fritz was putting most of his metal this morning on to the front line and the ridge where we were due at noon; but even back here he had guns enough to send over his one a minute, searching—now that he might no longer observe—for some of his old favourite spots. So we did not loiter.

At Infantry Brigade they were making their toilet. The senior Liaison Officer told me that battalion had shifted its headquarters during the night: “too hot to stay where it was.” He gave me what he understood were the map co-ordinates of their new abode, and I took my departure.

We crossed the old No Man’s Land, passed the working-parties at their thankless tasks of road-making in the churned morass, and picked our way warily round the crater lips across the old German front line system till we struck the railway. It did not seem to be getting shelled, and would at least afford better going than if we plunged through the crater-field direct towards the front line. My intention was to nurse the railway for a mile or so, and then, leaving it, to strike across up the ridge in order to hit off “The Rectory,” where Battalion H.Q. were reported to be.

I had not been forward myself since the show. It was worse even than I expected. The ground was just