MAJOR TOM'S WAR

The Diaries and Letters

of Major Thomas Horatio Westmacott

of the Calcutta Light Horse

1914 – 1919

Transcribed by his grand-daughter Verity Walker (September 2018 version)

Introduction

This is the raw material which inspired Major Tom's War.

The creation of this document was inspired by my daughter Matilda's secondary school trip to Belgium to see the war graves almost ten years ago now. I have been working on it, and then the book it grew into, off and on, ever since.

Matilda and Adelaide Walker are Tom's great grand-daughters. I also used Tom's 'war diary' (more of a scrapbook really, full of cartoons, official correspondence, and newspaper extracts and photographs) when I attended secondary school. Later, when I worked for the Imperial War Museum, I ensured that parts of it which were unique, notably the details about executions by firing squad and field punishments, were copied and these are now held in the IWM archive for use by future historians.

The diary has passed down through the family to Tom's elder daughter, Verity's Aunt Elizabeth (Hughes) and now to Elizabeth's elder child Philippa (Clegg). We are so lucky to have it as a family resource. It is an amazing window to its time. I began by taking high-resolution photographs of every diary item as something of an insurance policy and have added page numbers to the original in soft pencil for ease of reference.

This transcription is a combination of diary accounts, extracts from loose letters and annotations. The aim of this transcription is to give an account of Tom's war so that places and battles may be matched to real places in Belgium and France today I have therefore omitted a lot of the detailed description of the diary itself, especially its photographs and scrapbook contents and Tom's short notes relating to them, which are rendered photographically instead, concentrating instead on the type-written sections. I have put in a few clarifications and notes where appropriate but have kept these to a minimum.

My comments are in normal typeface and in purple. Additional letters and notes by Tom are boldfaced to differentiate them from the main diary entries. I have arranged the material chronologically as far as is possible.

Much of the material comes from letters Tom sent to my grandmother Laura Evelyn Winnington-Ingram. Tom lost his first wife Mary in India before the outbreak of war. He married Evie, Mary's first cousin and best friend towards the end of the war – she is Miss Winnington-Ingram in the early letters and 'my wife' later on, with a bumpy courtship in between! It was Evie who typed up the diary entries, saving us from much of Tom's cramped handwriting. She also lightly edits the content and in one instance conceals an entry ('Bolting the Tabasco').

Perhaps Tom's keenness to volunteer for the war had something to do with losing someone precious. Then again, the Westmacotts that didn't go into the Church as a profession were a warlike lot, and three of Tom's Westmacott cousins failed to return from the Western Front; two sons from the same family, Charles and Spencer, died at Ypres in 1915 and 1917 (these two commemorated at the Menin Gate).

Tom survived. He was certainly lightly injured in March 1918 during the Retreat from the Somme but according to family memory was also gassed in an earlier incident. This is not mentioned in the diary anywhere but an incomplete and poignant letter I have placed in 1917 may allude to it. Certainly after the war a doctor advised him to find work in the open air. He acquired some kind of steam plough and hired himself out to plough people's fields, only returning to his work as a country solicitor in Manningtree, Essex, once his lungs had recovered. Ploughing in peaceful fields may also perhaps have been cathartic: no such label as 'post-traumatic stress disorder' in 1918.

Tom was a quiet man with a fierce and unpredictable temper, nick-named 'Peppery Poona' by his long-suffering Home Guard brigade in the Second World War. He was frightened of motor travel, sometimes travelling in the back of the car with a blanket over his head.

His daughters always felt he would have preferred sons and found his expectations high. He was at his happiest astride a horse or fishing for trout in a Welsh mountain stream, so long as the mountain was not too high – he had acute vertigo, ironic for someone so courageous under fire. Perhaps it too was a legacy of the war.

He died in 1951, ten years before I was born.

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Many thanks and enjoy the read!

Vee Walker

September 2018

Spellings – Mohametan for example – are Tom's own. Where text was difficult to read I have inserted a ? and a best guess.

My comments are in purple standard type.

The war diary entries – Tom's letters transcribed by Evie, who lightly edited as she went, are in dark blue.

Material from Tom's unedited letters is shown in dark blue italics

Tom's later summary document written for the official history of the Central India Horse is in dark blue boldface.

Letters by others are in black.

1. Beginnings

When war broke out, Tom was serving as a cavalry officer with the Calcutta Light Horse in India (the C. L. H.). I believe that he and Mary had gone to India with the East Indian Company where he worked as a solicitor in a legal capacity of some sort. Late in 1914 (November 13th) he received a telegram sent by a relative of Mary's, probably her father (the Westmacotts and the Lawsons remained very close):

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Indian Telegraphs

WESTMACOTT PUANCO CALCUTTA

CAPTAINS COMMISSION OFFERED WORCESTERSHIRE YEOMANRY

LAWSON

On receiving this cable I left Calcutta by the mail train the same night, caught the mail steamer at Bombay and sailed for England. I just got away in time, as the Govt. of India wired to Bombay to stop me, an order having been issued that no volunteer officers were to leave the country owing to the war.

Another officer of the Calcutta Light Horse who did the same thing was sent back to India from PORT SAID.

And so Tom left India on 14th November 1914 when the war was in its infancy.

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Soon after I landed in England I went to the War office with a letter from Uncle Dick [one of many Richard Westmacotts in this military family and a man of influence] *to Lord Kitchener in which he asked for a cavalry commission for me and reminded him that after having been promised the Bombay Command some years ago, he gave it to another officer. As a result I was given this commission* [Captain in the 12th Reserve Regiment of Cavalry, Aldershot]. *I commanded Lord Kitchener's escort of the C. L. H. when he first came to Calcutta after the South African War.*

Loose notes, 4 large sheets stapled together, written retrospectively but relevant chronologically here. This may have been written as a contribution to a history of the Calcutta Light Horse. Referred to elsewhere as CIH notes, written for a later regimental history of the Central India Horse, I have inserted these where logical to do so and dates provided.

I joined the Regiment near Therboanne on 18th January 1915 and was posted to 'B' Squadron at Upen d'Amont, Goodfellow being my Squadron Commander.

General Mike Rimington commanding the Indian Cavalry Corps otherwise known as 'Iron Ration' had issued orders to all B.O.s with Indian Troops were to wear Loonghis and it was not until he had tried this form of headgear himself, owing to a boil on his head and realised the discomfort thereof that we were able to give up wearing them. At about this time HM the Queen sent out a Christmas present to the troops in France consisting of box of chocolates and a cholera belt per man. The latter were commonly known as Queen Mary's belly-go-rounds. The men having no notion what they were intended for insisted on wearing them on their heads like balaclava helmets.

We stayed at these billets until March 8th when we moved up in reserve for the battle of Neuve Chapelle. The following is a copy of Sir Douglas Haig's special order to the 1st Army of 9th March 1915.

"We are about to engage the army under very favourable conditions. Until now in the present Campaign the British Army has by its pluck and determination gained victories against an enemy greatly superior both in men and guns. Reinforcements have made us stronger than the enemy in our front. Our guns are both more numerous than the enemy's are and also larger than any used by any Army in the field. Our Flying Corps has driven the Germans from the Air. On the Eastern Front and to the South of us our Allies have made marked progress and caused enormous losses to the Germans who are harassed by internal troubles and shortage of supplies, so that there is little prospect at present of his reinforcements being sent against us here.

"In front of him we have only one German Corps, spread out on a front as large as that occupies by the whole of our Army (the first).

"We are now about to attack with about 48 Battalions a locality in that part which is held by some 3 German Battalions. It seems probable also that for the first day of the operations the Germans will not have more than 4 Battalions available as reinforcements for the counter attack. Quickness of movement is therefore of first importance to enable us to forestall the enemy and thereby gain success without severe loss. At no time in the War has there been a more favourable moment for us and I feel confident of success without severe loss. The extent of that success must depend on rapidity and determination with which we advance. Although fighting to preserve the British Empire and to protect our Homes against the organised savaging of the German Army, to ensure success every one of us must play his part and fight like men for the honour of old England." **D. Haig Genl., Commanding 1st Army.**

2. The Battle of Neuve Chapelle, March 1915

The Second Indian Cavalry Division were in reserve at the battle, waiting to go through the gap in the event of an infantry attack proving successful, which unfortunately was not the case.

Extracts from C.I.H notes continued

On 4th, 5th March '15 the Mhow Brigade did a night march of about 35 miles to Amette. It was pitch black and we were the leading regiment. Goodwin, a very earnest soldier and our Brigade Major elected to lead us by the stars. After some time he stopped in the middle of a village having presumably lost his way. An old woman looked out of a window but Goodwin continued to hunt wildly for the Great Bear or some other constellation, until a voice out of the darkness was heard to say 'sotto voce': 'Why don't you ask the d.....d old woman the way and get on with it.' Goodwin took the hint and the column proceeded. I was told to follow in the rear. I soon found I had the choice of two evils, either to keep in touch with the C.I.H. and lose the Regiment behind of keep in touch with the latter and lose the C.I.H. I decided to stick to my own friends. Shortly after a jackass chipped in behind me on the line of march. The next regiment followed Balaam's friend and at dawn, lo and behold, they were in the town of Aire, miles from their destination, with the ass rubbing himself against the town pump and braying cheerfully.

While we were in Amette the whole town turned to and made pads of cloth which were soaked in some chemical and sewn into the ends of our loongies to be tied over the mouth in case of a gas attack, a feeble contrivance when compared with the elaborate gas masks issued later on, but fortunately we were never called on to use them.

P5 (2 sheets)

7th March 1915

At 4pm got orders to leave billets and to march to ENQUINGATTE. Marched at 6 and arrived there at 8 in a howling gale. Nougier, the squadron interpreter, was in Paris, and Goodfellow and I with our very slender stock of French had to get 12 men and

horses and ten mules into billets. We managed it by 10, in darkness and rain. When we got to our own quarters the cheery Pte. Moore, my servant, said "This 'ouse is lousy. The lidy of the 'ouse scratches 'erself something 'orrid". As far as I know we collected no vermin. Mud awful.

8th March 1915

Orders to stand to all day to start if necessary at one hour's notice. Very heavy firing towards LA BASSEE. Believe it to be an English advance at last.

9th March 1915

Had to take the Regimental transport to THEROUANNE for the G.O.C.'s inspection. Two of the light draught horses broke out of billets in the night and I had to send a corporal to look for them. Of course the General asked to see the brutes and only two were available. Still standing to. Slept in my clothes for the second night running.

Heard that the 5th Corps were attacking Neuve Chapelle, as it covers La Bassee, and if we can take it La Bassee will be untenable. The two British infantry divisions from India are in support, and we are in reserve. The following general order was issued to the army by the Army Commander:

Tom then quotes from a long 'special order to the first army' from Douglas Haig which 'talks up' the battle they are facing: the British army 'superior both in men and guns' through 'pluck and determination', 'more numerous and larger guns', 'Flying Corps has driven the Germans from the air', '48 battalions attacking a locality held by three German battalions'. Speed is emphasised and 'each one of us must play his part and fight like men for the honour of Old England.' Reality, alas, was somewhat different, and Tom recounts the losses of the next few days:

11th March 1915

... heard we were attacking AUBERS after taking Neuve Chapelle and that we had taken one thousand Germans. The French have taken PERTHE with the loss of ten thousand men and four hundred officers.

13th March 1915

Up as usual at 4.30. heard a British cavalry brigade had had a dart and had had to fall back in the face of heavy machine gun fire. Heard also we had lost 8000 men in our attacks of the last two days.

14th March 1915

Marched back to Estree Blanche. The Column started at 5pm and I got the transport in at 10.45. Had a bit of a breeze with Anderson of the ammunition column. I suppose the fact is that Douglas Haig expected to break the German line and to slip the cavalry through the hole, but it failed to come off, so we go back again to await our chance.

Neuve-Chapelle was the first battle of modern warfare, where the old tactics of breaking a line of infantry to allow the cavalry through to attack from the rear simply didn't work in the face of machine guns. Tom's battalion was not called on to fight this time, so he survived. Tom never describes the shock of any carnage encountered, and he was a man who stuck to his duty above all things, but he was intelligent and sensitive, and it is not hard to imagine. Diary entries become increasingly indifferent to the death around him.

Extract from C.I.H. notes, continued:

After Neuve Chapelle we went back to our billets and kept moving from one to another until the end of April when I went on leave with Hutch. When we got back to France on 28th April we found that the Indian Cavalry had been rushed up to Belgium for what is now known as the 2nd battle of Ypres, when the enemy made their first gas attack. Hutch and I rejoined at Watow. As we passed through Hazebrouk we passed convoys of wounded and swarms of civilians flying before the German advance, a most pitiable sight and the Country had already been drained of fighting men and they were all old men, women and children with their belongings piled in farm carts, perambulators, little carts drawn by dogs and so forth. It was not quite so bad as the stampede of the civilians when the Fifth Army broke in March '18 and the British were driven to Amiens across the old Somme battlefield and the Country held by the Indian Cavalry in the summer of 1917, but that is another story and has nothing to do with the regimental history of C. I. H.

3. The Second Battle of Ypres, April 1915

P7

This was the occasion when the Germans made use of gas for the first time. The French Colonial troops on the right of the British were utterly broken, and if it had not been for the great courage of the Canadian troops there would have been a British disaster, as nothing but the cavalry stood between the Germans and the Channel.

The Indian Cavalry Corps was in billets round Aire and was rushed up north with the utmost speed.

27th April 1915

Being on leave crossed by the afternoon boat from Folkestone to Boulogne with Hutchison of the C. I. H. Got a train at midnight, everyone talking of nothing else but the big German attach at Ypres.

28th April 1915

Got to Aire and found that the Brigade had marched, so Hutch and I got a lift from the supply column. As we passed HAZEBROUK we saw a tremendous lot of wounded and some dead, with a draped Union Jack in front. Heard also that POPERINGHE had been wiped out. Heard that the Canadians had lost 5000 men. Passed a tremendous lot of refugees flying from the German attack, a most pitiable sight, stacks of bedding and odds and ends piled up on country carts. Old people pushing perambulators full of household goods and tired dogs pulling little carts and boxes on wheels.

Rejoined the regiment near WATOW in Belgium. The first person I saw was the Colonel, who said I was just in time for the death, as the infantry were finished and the cavalry were out to the last horse and man. Apparently the greatest battle of the war is going on. We hold them here, but there is no word from the second army at la Bassee, and the 40th Pathans and the Canadians have been wiped out.

29th April 1915

Much the same time as we passed at Neuve Chapelle, except that we have no beds to sleep in. Saw a war balloon. Terrific firing early in the day, and then more or less silence, with the occasional thunder of heavy guns. Saw a tremendous amount of shelling of aircraft, most amusing, the sky being full of puffs of smoke as the shells burst.

30th April 1915

Everything very quiet all day.

May 1st 1915

Still quiet, but heard we were on the eve of a big attack, and would advance tomorrow.

Heard of a fine thing done by Sheepshanks of the 12th Cavalry in Busra [Basra, Iraq]. He had a patrol of 20 men, and was cut off by 500 Arabs. He charged through them and turned and charged again without his men. Came through them again, picked up his men, and charged again, taking a toss, losing his sword, and picking up an Arab sword.

2nd May 1915

Marched back via CASSELL to EYHOOK. I had to wait behind to settle any claims for damages and started a long time after the regiment. Picked up Jackson of the 29th, and rode with him and the Lucknow Brigade. Based old Mike Rimmington, the Corps Commander, on the road, who sent an A. D. C. (aide-de-camp, an assistant) to tell me to stop and speak to him. Thought I was going to take it in the neck for not wearing a loongee (part of the Indian cavalry uniform, probably a neck-cloth or turban?). Instead he was quite civil, asked my name, and said that it was lucky we had not been used, as if we had been it would only have been because the infantry had failed to hold the Germans.

Heard that the Germans had crucified three Canadian prisoners with bayonets. The Canadians then took a hundred German prisoners and shot them where the Germans could see.

As soon as we reached the billets we were ordered to sew pads of cotton-wool into the loose end of our loongees, so as to tie them over our noses and mouths in case we were gassed by the Germans.

Some 'atrocities' Tom refers to in the diary (such as the massacre of Belgian nuns mentioned later on) we know now to be propaganda – stories told by the English to make soldiers feel angrier and braver and more patriotic. This however has the grim ring of truth about it, and war makes animals of many men.

C. I. H. notes continued.

On 23rd May 1915 we had a great beat for a pig in the Woods at Nedenchelles. The Sikhs of ?D and B Squadrons went through the wood in line, dismounted and put up a good boar, but just as he reached the edge of the wood and was about to break, the French Gamekeeper rushed out waving his arms and yelling 'Voila le sanglier'. The boar broke back and we never saw him again and lost our gallop. The men said he was very hairy and more like a bear than a pig.

On 13th June 1915 one Squadron from each Regiment in the Division was inspected by T.M. the King and Queen of the Belgians. 'C' Squadron represented the C. I. H.

On 28th June 1915 Tom's recommendation to be promoted to the rank of Major is turned down although his commanding officers strongly endorse it. The army is a hierarchical institution and it was felt that however deserving, Tom had not been with the English as opposed to the Indian army for long enough to become a Major serving over the heads of officers who had been with the English army for longer.

The letter versions of these accounts are shown in red below and survive as incomplete letters. Evie may have attempted to throw away anything she regarded as too personal for posterity. Tom is already trying to flirt with Evie, somewhat heavy-handedly. There is mention of an Archie Pugh, his partner in India, swindling him.

The section which follows fits here chronologically and is assembled from letter fragments which Evie for whatever reason excluded from her typed-up version.

Oh! I say, the interpreter took some more photographs in the trenches today, so I hope to send you some more when we get back to Amettes. I am glad I sent you the others because you said "thank you" nicely.

…

I don't know that I shall have to live in India if I went into the army after the war. Almost all the regular officers with the British can often can often opt out and I might perhaps get something to do there. However, lots of things may happen yet. I have still got to be wounded. The Port Saïd man has told me a lot that has come true and that will I expect come true in due course.

…

Well, you bloodthirsty child, I am glad you enjoyed the operation. It sounds sufficiently horrible for anything. I still think you very much too hard and I put my finger to my nose and I say "Yah Gott Strafe Hospitalen Britischen ge Red crosschen hoch gebornen qui est a Ross" [my translation: Jah, God punishes the superior British Red Cross hospitals which are in Ross.]

I really meant stop. It is the PM. The guns are all very busy. My clothes are all again hanging out of the window as clean as they were the day I put them on. I am sitting on a very hard chair in my billet. A mosquito is trying to bite me & as I have no defence against the beast I must go to bed. Good night old girl.

…

I shall have started to tell you when I get home and you really must put your pride or whatever the dream is in your pocket & see me somehow.

…

I have the brass fins (fumes?) of two German shells & a bit of shell & a lot of shrapnel which burst 50 yards in front of our trenches last night. Tomorrow is our last day & we bus back to Amettes in the evening. We send another digging party on the 14th but I shan't have the luck to command the squadron again as I shall have to stay and mind the horses while James or Reggie has a show. I have arranged for 8 to 10 miles solid footslogging for the last three days & I am getting quite a figure though my high chin is still of service to ribald? Mouths in the squadron.

…

Now yesterday was the finest day we have had. To begin with I woke at 7 – being the relief we did not march until 9.30 – with the sound of heavy machine-gun fire outside my window & there was a tank blazing at a French air balloon over the tank. Then up came our aeroplane and drove him away. Then the Bosche started dropping shells near the Railway station and so it went on till 9.30 when we marched. Just as we reached the mouth of the communications trench "who-o-o-o" went a shell over us and the burst in the middle of a lot of gunners and horses out in the open about 150 yards ahead. Don't think me a great beast, but I jumped out of my trench and cheered, all on my lonesome. I simply couldn't help it. Well then we got into a place where we were working. My squadron was on the left of the move and the Enniskillings were on the right & shells began to drop right away then. I sat on the parapet to make sure that the men kept under cover, because they would stick their heads out and look at the shells instead of going on with their work & each time I would hear the "who-o-o" I slipped into the trench until the shell went off bang & then I scrambled out again. It was simply glorious. Of course there was no danger or I should have been terrified. Then a tank came and flew down the line being shelled by anti-aircraft guns all the way without being damaged.

4. Vermelles

P9 (3 sheets)

2nd July, 1915, Noeux-les-mines

Well, here I am at last within touch of something interesting. Each brigade has to take its turn at repairing the trenches which were taken by the French near VERMELLES, and today our Brigade has sent up parties of 200 men from each regiment to this place. We came up in 45 London buses and about three miles out were divided into groups of 5, as we were under the German observation, and might draw fire. The town is shelled most days and our landlady showed us a bit of shell which came through the window yesterday. After tea I went to the top of a big heap of coal slag with a shell hole in it, and two or three collapsed houses in front of it. I could see shells bursting all round a church just beyond Vermelles, where we dig tomorrow, while the ridge of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette was covered with bursting shells. In front was a double tower at LOOS, called Tower Bridge, used as an observatory by the Bosches, made of open steel work and apparently impervious to our shell fire. Overhead were 7 of our captive war balloons and a kite and the air was thick with all kinds of aeroplanes, all being shelled by one side or the other.

The town swarms with troops of every nationality and it is most interesting. I wish I could describe it to you better. The men are like children at the thought of having something to do.

3rd July, 1915, Vermelles

... the shells going over make a tremendous row, and we expect German batteries to begin ranging soon as our people are so very busy. It is very hot with no shade and we all marched up in our shirtsleeves. Vermelles is a mere skeleton of a place. The French sapped right up to it and then stormed it with the bayonet. The Bosche fought well, and they had to fight their way from house to house. The country people still seem to go about as usual, though most of the farm houses have a hole in them. Each farm has a dug-out alongside and if the Bosche start shelling the farmer and his family sit in it and scratch themselves until the game is over.

As we came up yesterday in motor buses, we passed the Queen's and the South Staffords, covered with mud, and the former reduced to about two companies and singing 'Tipperary', the first time I have heard it out here. They were a hard-bitten lot, and were plugging cheerily along in the dust. As our old busses went by, they shouted out 'Bank! Bank'!

7.30pm

I am back, very tired, after a ten mile tramp on my flat feet, in almost tropical heat, but I really think I came in the freshest of the squadron. I halted at an estaminet [a bar] and gave each man a glass of beer. At first they pretended to be coy on religious grounds and I just told them not to be fools, and they lapped it down like *mother's milk* [Tom's troops were Indian Sikhs with strict beliefs on alcohol, but here it must have been a choice between drinking week French beer and collapse through dehydration]. Harold Keighley and Rawdon MacNab relieved us with D and C squadrons, and Harold had a narrow squeak. He strolled up to look at Vermelles, which runs almost down to the trenches, and while he was there the Germans started their 'afternoon hate', and he was right in the middle of it.

5th July

The Bosche was awfully lively yesterday. I went out with the second relief at noon, and from then until two he was hard at it. I asked Colonel Bell, who was in command, if I might take a native officer into Vermelles. He said I would be several forms of fool if I went, but I might go if I liked, so I took my senior officer, Harnam Singh, with me. The Welsh regiment and some gunners were billeted in Vermelles. I had a talk with an unshaven private leaning up against a wall, and he told me what the different kinds of the shells were. There was a particularly nasty one which kept whining overhead called a 'Pipsqueak'. Shrapnel kept bursting to our right front and about 200 yards to our right flank they kept on putting over coalboxes. The Munsters and some gunners were in billets at M on the map and had 13 killed and wounded. As we marched up at about L they put two shells through the roof of the church about 200 years away.

Well, to return to Vermelles, we came to the conclusion after seeing the church that it was a very unhealthy spot, and I decided to go back. Such dreadful sights, beds and babies' cots and all kinds of household gear higgledy-piggledy in each

direction. We picked up a couple of chairs to sit on in the trenches, and started off, old Harnam Singh stalking along behind me. You would have laughed to see six foot of hairy Sikh carrying a kitchen chair behind a filthy, bespectacled solicitor, similarly equipped, with no collar and in his shirtsleeves.

Well, I saw at once that the old mug thought he was covering me from shell fire, and I asked him what he was doing and he said quite simply that he was covering me. I told him not to be an ass but it was no good, as he said that it was his duty to cover his British officer. Just as we reached the edge of the village, the ass saw a rosebush in what had been a garden, and said he was sure Tubby Bell would like some. If you could see Tubby Bell, you would appreciate the joke! Before I could stop him he dropped his chair and climbed over the wall, and was picking roses. I didn't like this one little bit but I had to pretend I didn't mind, and then he came back with a vast bouquet of roses and we continued our pilgrimage. I was real glad to get back to our shelter trenches again.

The Inniskilling (6th Dragoons) working party was heavily shelled on their way home. After dark, a private soldier spotted a lamp signalling going on from a house overlooking the road, and they rushed in and caught a woman and four men, one in French uniform. Harold Keighley saw them marching off between men with fixed bayonets, so I hope they have all been shot today.

Tom describes Vermelles as his 'baptism of fire', and little wonder. He describes Vermelles itself as in ruins, and how the parish priest is shot as a spy on his own church steps. There is a photo of Tubby Bell in the diary, he is a stocky bloke who looks as though he could have taken a joke!

P10

I had my baptism of fire at VERMELLES. My regiment was billetted at NOEUX-LES-MINES for a short time in June 1915 and we used to march out daily to VERMELLES to dig trenches. The first day we marched in close formation, a Bosche plane came over & in a few minutes after we were shelled.

Vermelles itself was in ruins, the French having taken it after the fiercest hand to hand fighting. While the enemy still held it they shot the parish Priest on the steps of his own church as a spy.

The LORETTE RIDGE was on our right and while we were there the French took the RIDGE and drove the enemy out of SOUCHEZ with a loss of 80,000 French killed. The guns never ceased firing in the whole time we were there. Months after, we took over the RIDGE & the place was still thick with the dead of both sides, whom we buried.

I went to the village with a Sikh officer named Harnam Singh, a Rissaldar, to look at the place. While in there the enemy started shelling & we cleared out. Harnam Singh would walk behind me. I asked him what he was doing & he said quite simply that he was covering me. I told him not to be such an ass, but it was no good as he said it was his duty to cover his British officer. This officer was burned in FREVENT.

Harnam Singh is listed on the CWGC website as dying in 1916 [Sikhs are burned on a pyre rather than buried].

5. Authuile

C.I.H. notes continued

On 2nd September 1915 the Regiment took over the trenches at Authuile close to Martinsart. Our guns were rationed to about 6 shells a day and we had to manufacture bombs out of empty jam tins, which might or might not go off if we threw them. Reggie Durand and I were the B. O.s with B. Squadron, Hutch A Squadron, Major Cook (I think) in command and Norman Leslie Adjutant Brigade H.Q. was in Martinsart. I forget the name of the Brigadier but he was a great nuisance and would not leave us alone. Possibly the Indian Sowar's ideas of sanitation were a trifle obsolete but that was no reason why Tabasco Jim should send a Medical Officer down to bother us about latrines. This particular M.O. came down to B. Squadron and asked where I thought the latrines should be dug. There was a particularly nasty corner which was always being sniped by the enemy and I strongly advised the M.O. to dig his latrines there. He at once went to inspect the place was nearly bagged by a sniper and that was the last we heard about latrines.

Front line trenches at Authuile, 3rd September 1915

There is an oddity in the diary at this point. Just visible beneath the entries that followed was the top of another – they had been deliberately glued over the top to hide it. I have now photographed each sheet and replaced the fragile original sheets, reinforced in places, so that the one beneath may now be read with care. The original tissue is damaged in places but by using a mirror to look at the imprint of the text on the sheets above I was able to create a complete transcription of the bottom sheet. I think this entry was too raw for public consumption.

The same incident is included in the C.I.H. notes and I include both for interest here:

C.I.H. notes continued

In a joyful moment Reggy discovered that Tabasco Jim had his dinner in Martinsart at about 8. He also discovered that if a jam pot bomb was lobbed into the German front trench, which was only a few yards away, Fritz at once shelled Martinsart good and hearty, accordingly daily at about 7.50, a bomb was thrown into the

German trench, his guns opened on Martinsart. Tabasco Jim and the gilded staff descended hastily to the cellar, their dinner as spoiled and we felt that life was indeed worth living. Reggy called this 'Bolting the Tabasco or ancient sports revived'.

P11

My regiment took over the trenches at AUTHUILE for a month in Sept. I was in command of B Squadron with Reggie Durand who was killed afterwards at HARGISCOURT as my second-in-command. We arrived to find nothing but the old French trenches with no traverses and no dugouts so we set to work at once digging. I had to go out one night to inspect the wire which was very bad consisting mainly of unbarbed wire but the French and the enemy here seemed to have a tacit arrangement not to attack each other. The 5 minutes waiting before crawling out into no man's land was worse than a cold bath but once one was out the excitement kept one going.

For a fortnight Durand and I took turns to go out nightly on patrol. He loved it but I hated it and I only did it to encourage the men. One night in particular the enemy knew our patrols were out and he raked the long grass between the lines where we were with a machine gun, at the same time firing on our wire to prevent our return. The gun kept traversing through the grass and just swinging back before it reached me. He kept it up for an hour, one of my men was hit in the side and all I could do was lie still in a cold sweat. Our guns were only allowed to fire 6 rounds a day & for every round they fired the enemy gave us at least 60 in reply.

Durand was in charge of the very few rifle grenades we owned and we found that if he put a grenade into the Bosche line they at once shelled MATINSART where our brigade H.Q. was. The Brigadier was not popular and was called Tabasco Jim. He had his dinner at 8. At 8.10 each night Durand used to put a grenade into them and at once they shelled HQ, driving the Brigadier to ground & spoiling his dinner. This we called "Bolting the Tabasco" or 'ancient sports revival'.

THIEPVAL was [this sentence is unclear] just in front of us, a very strong point ... from which to view our old line. After THIEPVAL had been taken and our wretched little defences were blotted out, the Bosche line was as strong as ever,

masses of dugouts yards deep and concrete trenches. It made me wonder at our chaps holding the line as long as we did.

...

I am not sure if the entry above was an earlier version of the entry of 4th September which follows (on the sheets pasted over the top). If it is, considerable embroidery has taken place in the second version, notably about his hand being cut to pieces – an example of historiography in action? Different stories recalled at different times for different audiences? Or perhaps it was another occasion altogether. I'm just not sure.

...

Oh Evelyn, you would like this place. I suddenly got orders to come up with Hutchison and Williams to take over from another regiment yesterday, as James Gourlie is still out of it with his gout. I arrived about 5 in the evening in heavy rain and had to walk through about a mile of communication trench. The front line trenches are all cut deep in the chalk and are safe against anything bar high explosive. At one point the German trench is within 40 years of C squadron, but B squadron (mine) is about 200 yards distant. The result is that the Bosche is always lobbing shells into C Squadron, nasty things called Minnewerfers, which are shot out of trench mortars, while B comes off quite peacefully. Of course there is a lot of sniping on both sides, but so far only one man in C has been injured.

Reggie Durand and I are in a dug-out about 10 feet below the surface. The beds are rabbit-wire stretched on little uprights, straw full of creepy-crawly things, ones valise, a rug and great-coat. The dug-out is six feet by nine feet. The rock in front of the door is a mark for the Bosche, and about once a minute a bullet comes smack against it five feet above my head, and one chuckles at the waste of ammunition. I have tried vainly to draw the Bosche. A man waits with a rifle handy, and I waggle my cap over the parapet in the hope that a Bosche will come out and have a shot, but he has played that game before and is not having any.

Our guns and the Bosche shell each other all day, and the shells go trundling backwards and forwards overhead, and sometimes the Bosche favours us, but not very often. It is all very dirty and thoroughly squalid, and we never take off our

clothes, but I am afraid I am enjoying it all immensely. I shall be terrified if the Bosche gasses us or attacks or makes himself otherwise unpleasant, but no-one could be afraid of what goes on now? The food problem is the worst part of this show. We have eaten filthy garbage for the last three days, and I look back with regret to English food. When I was explaining this morning where I wanted to put a sniper's post, I heard a covey of partridges calling quite close. They don't mind shell fire a bit, though one was killed by some German shrapnel only the other day.

We have what are called listening posts which run under our parapet, and out under our wire entanglements. I went right out last night in one of ours, and heard nothing but the bullets whining overhead, but it was strange out there in the bright moonlight. Reggie Durand takes out a squadron patrol tonight and my idea is that they will dig themselves lightly in, and jump out and collar any Bosche that happens to pass. I am not allowed to go myself, because I command the squadron. Wouldn't it be fun!

4th September 1915

Well, after all I went, and this was the manner of my going. Col. Maxwell said that he would have no monkey tricks but that the wire was to be looked over, and Major Cooke commanding us with a little prompting from me decided that Reggie had a bad cough, which might give him away, and that I was not really in command of the squadron, as it belonged to James, and that I was obviously the proper person to go.

The regiment stood to their arms at 7pm, and at the same moment the Bosche opened a heavy bombardment with Minnewerfers on A and C squadrons and everyone except sentries and officers were sent into the bombproofs. It is most trying to stand on a parapet with Minnewerfers tumbling about when your soul yearns for the bottom of the deepest dug-out. Well, this went on until seven forty-five, when they stopped after doing no damage, so we had out the men and dismissed them at 8. Then I went and had some dinner. At 9 it was pouring and as dark as the pit. I picked two men to go with me and wriggled through the listening passage under the parapet, and climbed out of the hole at the end with my heart in my mouth. The opening was about halfway through the wire, and we had to scramble through the wire as best we could, being caught up every moment. At

last we were clear and we turned to our right and wriggled along the edge of the wire.

I held my revolver in my left hand and felt along the wire with my right, the two men following with fixed bayonets. Every two minutes up went a Bosche star shell, and we fairly rubbed our noses in the mud. Do you know, when I was out of the listening passage and in the open it was like champagne, and I felt exactly like I feel like when a good boar charges. Twice the Bosche spotted us and the bullets splashed around us, but we were not touched. At last I heard a challenge in a whisper, and there was Reggie out in front of our right flank to show me the way back. I thought I might as well do A squadron as well while I was about it, so we wriggled on along their front.

Once we were fired on by an 'A' sentry, who I suppose thought we were Bosches, but eventually we got back and very pleased with ourselves. My right hand is cut to pieces with feeling barbed wire, as one had to run ones hand along it the whole way. Old Amar Singh, the fine old Rissaldar Major, was too quaint for words. He begged me not to go, and would you believe it, when I got back there he was outside the listening passage with six men, waiting to come to my help if I got into trouble.

Poor Reggie was awfully sick at not being allowed to go, so I mean to send him out tonight. The worst of it is that he is inclined to be foolhardy and I know quite well I shall have to send out half the squadron to get him out of a hole. I say, I do hope you do not think me dreadfully conceited for writing like this, and I do love to write & tell you everything & you did ask me to tell you what I felt like under fire. Well I find my nerves quite steady under the fire in the trenches & when I get a job like last night I feel quite young again. The anticipation has been the worst part of it all through. I think I have found myself now. I think I am fit to lead men in the attack and I think the men would follow my lead. I do feel such a pig for having grumbled to you as I did a couple of weeks ago, because I am getting all I wanted now. I shall be heartily glad to be safe off out of this place but I wouldn't have missed it for worlds.

I have not heard from you since the 24th, but of course you are up to the neck with your wounded & I won't grumble. All the same please write to me when you can find time.

Goodbye Evie Dear, much love,

Yours ever,

Tom

[Lieutenant Reggie Durand was killed in 1917.]

15th September 1915

Make a note that we are now in 1st Division, having swapped places with another brigade. I am very glad, because General Barrow, who used to command our brigade, now commands First Division, and he has always been rather nice to me.

We were relieved at midnight on the 12th, filed out of the trenches and marched six miles to our horses. My hairy aunt, I was footsore! Somehow sleeping in your boots makes you footsore. Then we rode 15 miles and got to Beaucourt at six in the morning. Most of the way I was fast asleep in the saddle. We rested at Beaucourt till six-forty-five pm and then marched to Pecquisny, getting in about 11 pm on the 13th. I hadn't realised until we got to Beaucourt what tremendous strain we had been under. I went into a dismantled park and lay in the shade of a bush, and just stared at the sky, and drank in the utter peace and quietness of it all, without a gun to break the stillness. Then I went to sleep. The men just lay by their horses, dog-tired and nearly all sleeping.

Once I think I was very nearly done in. We had to send out four patrols of two men each with orders to lie still and wait on the chance of a Bosche patrol coming along, other squadrons doing the same ...

P13

This was how I did it: I put out patrols No 1, 2 and 3 fifty, thirty and fifty yards from our trench, and I took a fourth patrol consisting of a native officer and myself another thirty yards to the right of number 3. Having once posted the patrols we couldn't move from 9pm till 12.30am. After I had been there for a quarter of an hour, I found there was a German machine-gun about 150 yards away to my right front. The Bosche never gives away the position of his machine guns if he can help it, so to make us think it was only rifle fire, he was firing single shots, but he was what is called traversing, that is to say swinging the muzzle of his gun like a

hosepipe so as to rake the grass for our patrols. I heard him begin on the right and the shots crept gradually nearer and old Harnam Singh and I fairly flattened ourselves on the ground. Nearer it crept and nearer until it was about eight yards to our right, and then it turned and went back. After a bit the same thing happened again, and I realised we were just outside the limit of its traverse.

I promised to send you a sketch of our trenches at Authuile. The near side of the trench was honeycombed with the men's dug-outs, just little holes scooped in the rock. They only go into the bombproof shelters in case of a very heavy bombardment with ?H.E. The trenches, having been made by the French, are quite twice the width of those usually built by us. We had working parties hard at work the whole time building up the parapet with sandbags. My squadron alone filled and used seven hundred and fifty bags in the ten days we were there, and we could have done with ten times the number. All the trenches are named after Scotch places with impossible names [like Gourock!].

After the second Battle of Ypres where the Indian Cavalry Division was in reserve, we marched back to the AIRE area, my regiment being billeted at AMETTE. The French Arab cavalry were in the neighbourhood and, being all Mahommedans [Muslim] they came over and tried to fraternise with our Mahommedan soldier, but they are a drunken lot & our people, who drink no liquor, refused to have anything to do with them. They were mounted on weedy little Arab ponies with most cruel bits and curious padded saddles. We invited them to a mounted show by our people, which greatly impressed them: bare-backed wrestling, tent-pegging and two men of the 2nd Lancers fencing on one horse.

6. Battle of Loos, September 1915

P17

This was the first battle in which battalions of the New Army took part. The first Indian Cavalry Division was in reserve in the neighbourhood of Bernaville, the idea being that the infantry would make a gap through which the cavalry would pass, but this did not happen.

21st September 1915

Colonel (afterwards General) Brancker, and Captain 'Blot' Fellowes of the Flying Corps came over from H.Q. to fetch James Courlie, and told us that a very big push was now imminent, and that we have a new gas which is to be used. We are apparently to push with the French at one and the same time, and the old 'Iron Ration' (e.g. the Indian Cavalry Corps) is to have its chance. Brancker, who is a very knowledgeable person, is pessimistic. The Russians have let us down so badly that the prospect of ultimate final victory is not good.

22nd September 1915

The Indian Cavalry were all inspected unexpectedly by Lord Kitchener. I suppose it is a case of 'Ave Caesar! Morituri te salutant!' Our Division, consisting of the Mhow, Sialkote, and Lucknow Cavalry Brigades (seven regiments of Indian Cavalry, three regiments of British Cavalry, three batteries of Royal Horse Artillery, the ammunition column, and the Machine Guns) was drawn up in a big hollow. With a bright sun shining it was a stirring sight, horses, guns and men all looking fine. The Mhow brigade was the directing brigade, and my regiment was the directing regiment. The British officers of the regiment were in line in front and the whole Division had to take their dressing from them. Everyone except the officers dismounted, but they had to sit their horses looking to the front and preserving their dressing. Kitchener was over an hour late, and it was most tiring for officers and chargers.

C.I.H. Notes continued:

On 23rd September 1915 we moved to Bernaville in reserve for the battle of Loos, but, as always happened, afer waiting a few days we moved back again to billets.

P19

23rd September 1915

Marched at noon to Bernaville, about twenty kilometres distant, a very long day. Beastly billet in a cafe, having to pass through the landlady's room to get to mine.

24th September 1915

Did nothing all day, just waited about for orders which never came. The weather broke, after three weeks of fine weather, and the rain fell in torrents in the evening, both men and horses being out in the open fields.

25th September 1915

Got up at 3.30am and rode to COUTURELLE to make a reconnaissance of the roads by which we were to advance if the infantry attack succeeded. It rained the whole time, and I did not get back till nearly noon, my horse, a 16th Lancer troop horse belonging to Pte Moore, being very done after his forty miles. I had to write my report and draw a map as soon as I got in. I saw swarms of French troops on the road, including an infantry regiment who shouted 'Vive L'Angleterre!' when they saw me. When I got in I found everyone expecting an instant move, but I am happy to say that it turned out to be wind as usual and I got a decent night's rest.

26th September 1915

Standing to all day, and this continued till the 1st of October, when we marched back to WAVANS, the attack having proved a failure.

26th September 1915

Heard the true story of the Battle of Loos, and why we did not do better. We had two fresh divisions, the 24th and the 25th, waiting with busses and cars to rush them up, but John French said they must march on their flat feet, and when they got to Loos they were dead-beat. When told to advance, they bolted as soon as they came under fire, and only the Guards Division saved the situation. I believe the behaviour of the Guards at Hulluch Wood was magnificent. They had to attack

in the open and were simply mown down. They were then retired, and their dressing as they went back was even finer than when they went up. They brought back every wounded man with them.

Note. In spite of their early bad luck, the 24th Division became a very fine fighting Division later on, and one of their brigades, the 17th, was with the Canadians when they stormed Vimy Ridge. They were just out from England at the time of the Battle of Loos, and the men had never seen a shot fired even in the trenches.

C.I.H. Notes continued:

On 29th October 1915 the Indian Cavalry were to have been inspected by H. M. The King, but at the last moment the parade had to be cancelled because H.M. had a bad fall from his horse.

On 11th November 1915 both Indian Cavalry Divisions were inspected by General Allenby, a most magnificent sight, 19 Cavalry Regiments and 6 Batteries R. H. A.

On 24th December 1915 to my bitter disappointment I was appointed A. P. M. [Assistant Provost Marshal] of the 4th Cavalry Division. Col. Sam Brown did his best to save me but Genl/ B. Gwyn Barrow, G. O. C., insisted on my taking the job and there was no more to be said.

One curious thing happened to me in connection with the Regiment after I had been sent to D.H.Q. Rissaldar Harnam Singh of 'B' Squadron died in Hospital some way behind the lines [FREVENT] and James Gourlie and Amar Singh the R.M. asked me if I could help have him burnt properly. We motored over to the place where Harnam Singh died and I saw the Town Major who said that he could let us have a little wood and that he would do what he could to help. In due course the R.M. and most of the Sikhs in B & D Squadron went off for the day and when next I saw him the R.M. said that it all went off very well. I thought no more about it, but a couple of years later when I was with the 2nd Corps HQ in the Bridgehead on the Rhine I ran across the same Town Major. He said 'Well you are a nice fellow, you and your precious Sikhs. You nearly let me in for a court-martial!'

It then came out that when Amar Singh turned up with his braves, the Town Major showed him a huge pile of pit props, meaning them to take a tin or two. He then thought that the Sikhs might not like it if he waited for the cremation, so he went away.

That wily old bird Amar Singh then put the bidy on top of the pile of pit props and poured the petrol dump on top and lit the bonfire. You can imagine what the blaze was like. The burning petrol ran into the river, which flowed through the town, and evntually the fire brigade and every soul in the place had to turn out to save the place. No-one could speak Hindustani and Amar Singh and his bandits, thoroughly pleased with themselves and the burning went back to the Regt.

On January 20th 1916 Tom was promoted, much against his will and that of his regiment, to the role of Assistant Provost Martial – a kind of senior military policeman. The next year would see his involvement in the conflict on the Somme.

P20

The Cathedral at ALBERT was surmounted by a statue of the Madonna holding the infant Christ in her arms. The statue was gilded and formed a landmark which could be seen for miles. The Cathedral was heavily shelled by the enemy & the statue was struck, but oddly enough it remained hanging by the feet at right angles to the building so that the legend grew up that the war would end when the Madonna fell. I first saw it when I went into the trenches with the Central India Horse in Sept. 1915 in the AUTHUILLE sector in front of THIEPVAL.

I next saw it during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. It was still there when I marched through with the 4th Cavalry Division in the spring of 1917 when we marched up for our unlucky attack on the Hindenburg Line at BULLICOURT.

It still hung there in 1918, until the army took the town in the disastrous retreat of the 5th Army from the Somme in March 1918, when a shell from a British gun brought it down. This retreat was the turning point of the war as the enemy was so exhausted by it that he could not stand against our victorious counter-attack in the later part of the year.

...

P24

The short entries below are captions for some funny cartoons drawn by Lt Colonel G.R. Maitland of the 4th Cavalry Division.

Billeting in the average French farmhouse was a difficult matter, as the people were nearly always surly and objected strongly to having us. These farms, with no sanitation, and the general refuse and manure heap outside the front door, were most unsavoury billets. A French interpreter was attached to each unit.

…

This lady complained that she was hoeing turnips in a field and that a British gunner came up and played to her on a mouth organ. He seemed to be so friendly and she began to talk to him. He then said "Look at that aeroplane!" She looked up and the next moment she found herself on the ground. We paraded all the gunners for her inspection, but she could identify no-one. She was a bad character and, I should say, a liar.

…

P26

We were always being warned with G.R.O.s about muzzling dogs. British staff were the worst offenders and particularly Brigadier General Nick Haig, the C-in-C's cousin, who commanded the MHOW brigade. When people like this ignored the order, it was hard for the Military Police to enforce it against humbler folk.

…

The first kind of gas mask issued to the Indian troops (was) an evil-smelling thing. In order to stop joy-riding and as a check on spies, barriers were put up on the main roads from time to time, at which all cars were stopped. The occupants had to show their passes and say where they were going.

…

P28

In order to stop joy-riding and, as a check on spies, barriers were put up on the main roads from time to time, at which all cars were stopped. The occupants had to show their passes and say where they are going.

...

P30

The Mahommedan cavalry very often wear their steel helmets on the top of their turbans (like this). The Sikhs absolutely refused to wear helmets as it was against their religion.

...

P32

A G.R.O. was issued that civilians were not to buy any rations, as the ordinary British soldier was always selling them or giving them away.

...

We received orders to mark all tracks and roads. I told my Sergeant Major WALSH to mark a track 'bridle track' – of course he spelled it bridal track and I never heard the end of it.

...

The pronunciation of French names defeated the British soldier. There was a place called QUATRE VENTS, a windy place on top of the hills. The road leading there was marked 4 VENTS and the men would call it 'Four Vents' (in English).

...

Bouquet was the French cook attached to the 4th Cavalry Division by the French Govt. In civil life I believe he was chef at Sheppard's Hotel in Cairo. After their heavy losses at Verdun, he and other attached men were recalled to the French Army.

...

We did a little pigsticking [boar hunting, at which Tom was expert], *not far from the battlefield of CRECY. Roast pork would have been a welcome addition to army rations.*

7. Tom becomes an Assistant Provost Marshal

31-12-15

My dear Mother,

Please keep the enclosed Christmas Card for me. The humour is a little heavy, but it is a nice souvenir of the war.

I think the enclosed translation will interest Father.

Today is the anniversary of the great Guru or Saint who really founded the Sikh nation. The Rissaldar Major of the C.I.H. is the leading Sikh in France and he sent me no less than three invitations to come to the great Sikh ceremony, which always takes place this day. As our old cove is giving us no service today or tomorrow, I thought I might as well go to a brethren service instead & it certainly did me more good than our old duffer would have done. The local Mairie was filled up as a church with chairs for the British Officers and benches for the Indian Officers & as many could cram in. The "Granth" or sacred book was on a high table & behind it on a pile of cushions sat the priest. The book was covered with a silk scarf and over it from the roof hung a gorgeous canopy. How they could have dragged it about with them for two years beats me. Outside was a huge tent made of wagon covers full of men all beating tomtoms. We had to take off our boots in the presence of the Granth. Then the Rissaldar Major made a speech of which this is a translation. Mind you, it is a religion of the sword, but I was very much impressed with the sincerity of the people all through. After the R. M's speech an old grey-haired officer of the Deccan Horse held forth on the great honour of falling in battle & that it had never been the custom of the Sikhs to turn their backs our enemy & he wound up by saying that the Sikhs in France were the children of their British Officers & that they looked to them to lead them straight when the time comes. Perhaps rather contrary to the tenets of our own religion but I was a soldier among soldiers and I felt uplifted by it.

Then we all stood up and some passages from the sacred Granth were read. Then the congregation shouted their battle cry & my blood sang (aren't I a heathen?)

Then the British Officers were given silk handkerchiefs & the show was over as far as we were concerned. The Sikhs kept it up for another 3 hours.

Dear love,

Your loving son,

Tom

P34

Translation of a speech made by Rissaldar Major Amar Singh (I.O.M.) C.I.H. in Dec 1916 to all the Sikhs with the two Indian cavalry divisions. A big school was used for the meeting. The 'Granth' or sacred book was brought in under a silk canopy on a silk cushion. All the British officers had to take off their boots.

Gentlemen:

Mahiguru ji ka Khalsa Siri Wahiguru ji ki Fatehi.

All of you know:

a. whose anniversary it is today

b. What the task is before us

c. and what is the real function (of) holding such a gathering of this.

Gentlemen, I am sure every one of you can easily answer the above questions; of which only a short explanation I am just going to lay before you.

Today is the birthday anniversary of that great Guru who saved us from the claws of tyranny and gave us a place in the history of the nations of the world. Guru GOBIND SINGH ji was born on this day to crush and destroy that barbarous dynasty of tyrannical rulers and thus save the helpless Hindus from the misery they had fallen in. Guru GOBIND SINGH ji describes in the following words the grand mission that the Almighty had trusted him with:

Says the Almighty: "I acknowledge you (Guru GOBIND SINGH) as my son and I send you into the world to preach the religion of truth everywhere.

Having received this command from God himself, the great Guru says: "God has sent me to the world for the sake of religion.".

Gentlemen, knowing that such was the object of Guru's coming into this world it is our duty today to recall to our memory the good he has done to our nations. Let us remember those valuable doctrines and instruction he has left us and not only remember them but shape our lives according to the ideals he preached and then alone we can be called a true and faithful nation. This is the main object of our coming together today.

Our forefathers made it a custom to hold such gatherings to commemorate the great deeds of the past – a fact which is one of the essentials in keeping a nation alive. There is a maxim – that people with no past have no hope for the future. We who have such a grand past must take care that our future will be equally grand.

First of all it was Guru NANAK ji who lad the foundation of our nation at such a time when the rulers of India were treating their Hindu subjects with the greatest tyranny. If every act of their tyranny were described fully the mind would simply shudder at the horror of the same.

It is only a hint that is required at present to imagine the horrors of those times. This much would suffice to say that neither property nor person of any Hindu subject was safe. Not to speak of the money taken away leaving the families to starve but even the children were snatched away leaving the parents to mourn; and still more the wives were forced away leaving the houses desolate and disgraced. None had any freedom of thought or liberty of conscience. Bhai Gurdas ji describes those times in the following pathetic words:

'Rulers were the butchers with murder as their instrument for cutting. Religion had flown away from the world. Falsehood reigned like Darkness and Truth, like the moonlight rare.' Further he says: 'The Almighty heard the cries of the oppressed and Guru NANAK ji.' Again he says: 'Guru NANAK ji came and the darkness gave place to Light. That is, after the appearance of Guru NANAK the tyrants disappeared from the world.

He adopted the path of truth and showed others the same and this established peace everywhere, and sowed such a seed which, being well nourished by four of his successors (gurus) was developed into a plant, i.e. the plant of our nation. It began to received military training from Guru HARGOBIND ji and the succeeding gurus until the great guru GOBIND SINGH ji was born. He modelled the sect into an independent

military nation and gave it the name of 'KALSA PANTH'. By this time the tyranny of the rulers had reached its highest degree and nothing but a strong military power could resist the same. It was this nation which was entrusted with that task. Just as at present the British Government has taken up the task of crushing German offensive militarism to save the small peaceful nationalities of Europe.

'To crush the tyrants and to protect the helpless' was the motto of our great Guru. Gentlemen, these horrible deeds committed by the rulers on their Hindu subjects prompted Guru GOBIND SINGH ji to offer his own dear father in a sacrifice to prevent the same. All of you are aware of the hardships he had to suffer to obtain freedom for the helpless subjects. Nay, still more he did not hesitate to offer even his own dear little ones as a sacrifice for the same. At that time orders were issued to convert a whole section of Hindu community by force to Mohamedanism on penalty of death. When this royal order reached the Hindu subjects they all came to Guru TEGBAHADAR ji and explained their difficulties. Guru TEGBAHADAR ji told them that a holy life was required for sacrifice to save the situation. At that time Guru GOBIND SINGH (who was then only seven years old) asked his father 'Who could be holier that yourself and hence a fitter person for sacrifice?' Guru TEGBAHADAR ji quite appreciated the correct sense of duty which actuated his son to point out himself as the fittest sacrifice. Did filial love come in the path of duty of Guru GOBIND SINGH ji when he suggested the above?

He (Guru TEGBAHADAR ji) then told the people (who had come to seek for his help) to tell the king that they were all ready to be converted if he could convert Guru TEGBAHADAR ji.

When the king received this news he sent for the Guru and brought him to Delhi. He asked him to be come Mohamedan, upon which the Guru flatly refused and explained that the king ought not to maltreat his subjects. He paid no heed to the good counsel and got him murdered.

Remember it was the great Guru GOBIND SINGH ji who alone told his father to give his life as a sacrifice to alleviate the suffering of the helpless Hindus.

After the murder of Guru TEGBAHADAR ji Guru GOBIND SINGH ji determined to give full development to the plant of the Sikh nation, which was planted by Guru NANAK ji and nourished by the blood of the succeeding Gurus. From this time he ordered his

Sikhs to keep arms. That is to say this great Guru established the military character of KHALSA PANTH.

The world knows what part the Khalsa Panth took from that day in crushing the tyrants and helping the poor helpless subjects.

By giving his Sikhs 'Amrat' he filled them with a spirit of heroism and bravery. He commanded us to take part in the holy war saying that the one who lost his life would attain salvation. The Guru says, 'Oh Moon, Oh Sun, Oh Fountain of Mercy, listen to my prayer. I ask thee for nothing but fulfilment of my heart's desire. My arms look grand enough in the field but the grandness will prove real if I succeed in doing my duty before I die. Oh God, thou art always the good helper of the good so grant me my prayer.' Blessed are the lives of those who always utter with their mouths the God's name and whose minds are always occupied with thoughts of holy war. The human body is destructible and not everlasting. The best of honour alone can cross the ocean of life. This body ought to be the home or courage in which burns the light of wisdom and which is swept clean with the broom of knowledge.'

Now gentlemen, you think how Guru GOBIND SINGH ji brought up the Sikh nation and how he tried to give it the military training.

The battle of CHAMKAUR tells you he did not hesitate to sacrifice even his own sons and that in the end even he himself died fighting. You can now compare the horrors of those days with the freedom and liberty since Providence gave us the benign British government as prophesied by Guru TEGBAHADAR ji. We live happily and everybody is free to practice his own religion. We are spending our time so comfortably and happily that even in such a critical time as this we are with the kindness of our officers celebrating so magnanimously the birthday anniversary of our Guru.

Brethren think of these acts of kindness of our benign government through which the Sikh Nation looks so lively today. We are enjoying the fruits of the services of our forefathers: and the good of our coming generations lies in our hands. To keep the name and honour of our people as bright as ever is our duty. All this can only be achieved when according to the command of our guru Sahib we are ready not to let anything come in our way of doing our duty to our king. We have avowed before our

Gurus that we shall never hesitate to sacrifice our lives in the holy war. This is the only way in which we can be called true Sikhs.

In the end let us pray that we may be of some help to our British rulers in destroying the German tyrannical ambitions as our forefathers destroyed similar tendencies of the then rulers."

I find myself wondering whether the diary deliberately places this stirring call to arms immediately before the section on the death penalty. It was important enough for Tom to translate and set down in full, and it mirrors how carefully he translates and renders Yadram's last words in the next section.

Carbon copy note headed (in pencil): My dear Mother, please put these with your other documents which belong to me. You can send them.

Yours,

Tom.

25th February 1916

Headquarters, 1st Indian Cavalry Division, France

My dear Pugh,

I have your letter of 28th January. I have not got a copy of the partnership deed before me, but that is not material. I told you that I left it to your sense of fairness to decide the question of interest and collection charges & I am ready to leave it at that.

Please pay all money found to be due to me, by 20 ?? audit, to Dick as I have an account with him.

Don't bank too much on a new partnership. The Cavalry will probably take it in the neck this summer all right. I am one of the 4 staff officers who go with the G.O.C. Division, so I stand as healthy a chance of being perforated as most people.

I was at the H.Q. of the IIIrd Army on Monday at a lecture on the battle police at Loos. One Division had all their Police done in. It was most interesting, more

particularly as the country area over which the attack was made was where I had my baptism of fire with the Regiment in the summer near Vermelles.

I saw Graves yesterday at a wrestling match. The Corps is full of C.L.H. men.

I'm afraid soldiering has spoilt me for civil life after the war.

Yours sincerely,

T.M. Westmacott

I saw Appleton near Albert. He has my job with the Ulster Division.

P42

When I took the job of A.P.M. of the 1st Indian Cavalry Division Lieut. General Mike Rimmington commanded the Cavalry Corps and he had a most brutal form of Field Punishment. The man was seated astride a pole about 4 feet off the ground and his feet were drawn straight out and lashed to two picketing pegs driven into the ground on either side. His hands were handcuffed behind his back and the man sat there for 2 hours at a stretch. The Discipline of the Division was very good. When Genl. Sealy joined the Divn. With the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, he asked me to take his prisoners for him. I agreed to do so if he would give me a party of Canadian police to tie his men up. It did the Canadians a lot of good. They sent me one incorrigible Drunk and after 3 days he sent word to his C.O. that he would go on the water for the rest of the war, if he could be removed from my clutches. Eventually John Bull got hold of it and said that the A.P.M. of the Divn. Must be a Hun. G.H.Q. then issued this order (field punishment).

P46 (2 sheets)

I was appointed Assistant Provost Marshal of the First Indian Cavalry Division in December 1915, and during that period I had to attend three executions, one for the purpose of instruction, and two in my own Division. The following are extracts from my diary:

14th April 1916

I was staying with Bowring of the 51st Division, and we received orders to attend the execution of a deserter in the Cheshire Regiment. The man had deserted when his battalion was in the trenches and had been caught in Paris. He was sentenced to death, but the sentence was remitted and he was sent back to his battalion. He did so well in the trenches that he was allowed leave back to England. He deserted again and after being arrested was sent back to his battalion in France, when he was sentenced to death. This time he was shot. We got up at 3.30am, and Bowring and I were driven to the HQ of the 5th Division, the car breaking down on the way.

When we got to D. H. Q., Coates of the 15th Hussars, the A.P.M., had gone on with the firing party. We caught them up and I found Coates, the firing party, and a company of the Cheshires drawn up opposite a chair under a railway embankment. The condemned man spent the night about half an hour away. He walked from there blindfolded with the doctor, the parson and an escort. He walked quite steadily to the parade, sat down in the chair, and told them not to tie him too tight. A white disc was pinned over his heart. He was the calmest man on the ground. The firing party was 15 paces distant. The officer commanding the firing party did everything by signal, only speaking the word 'Fire!'. The firing party was twelve strong, six kneeling and six standing. Before the condemned man arrived, the firing party about turned after grounding arms, and O.C. firing party and the A.P.M. mixed up the rifles and unloaded some of them. The officer commanding the company called them to attention, which should have been done before the condemned man arrived. On the word 'Fire!' the man's head fell back, and the firing party about turned at once. The doctor said the man was not quite dead, but before the O.C. firing party could finish him with his revolver he was dead, having felt nothing. The company was then marched off. The body was wrapped in a blanket, and the A.P.M. saw it buried in a grave which had been dug close by, unmarked and unconsecrated. (Later in the war executed men were always buried in cemeteries).

26th June 1916

A Sowar in the 29th Lancers shot the Wordi Major (native Adjutant) of the Regiment dead. He then threw away his rifle, tore off most of his clothes, and rushed off to the H.Q. of the Lucknow Brigade, where he happened to catch General Morton Gage, the Brigadier in the street. He told the General a long story, but as the General was British Service he could not understand a word. The man was a Delhi policeman, and a Jat [from NW India and Pakistan], who enlisted for the period of the war. He is a sulky kind of fellow but there is no doubt that the Wordi Major, who was an absolute rotter, goaded the poor fellow to desperation.

After this date, we moved down to the neighbourhood of DOULENS for the Battle of the SOMME. Until 18th July the man was in my charge, and I had to drag him about with D.H.Q. until that date, very hard luck on the man. He behaved very well the whole time and one day he said to me, "Sahib, I am quite certain now that I shall not be shot, as you have kept me so long."

15th July 1916 copy letter sent c/o Cousin Laura

My dear Dick,

I was sent up to the battlefield on duty this morning, and as I saw a good deal which would interest you, I will write while everything is fresh in my mind.

We first visited one of the pounds which I saw in the making about two months ago. It consists of three enclosures divided by barbed wire, one for officers, one for NCOs and one for men. There were about 30 men in it clothed in bluish grey, taken last night.

From there we went on to the town where the golden Madonna and child hang from the Church Tower. I thought she had been taken down, but I was mistaken. The extraordinary thing is that the church is a mere tottering shell, but neither the mother nor the child have been hit. The town itself has been pretty badly damaged by shell fire.

Then we went a bit further and began to hear rumours that a British Cavalry Regiment, whom we know well, had been in action, and in the end we ran into a Cavalry subaltern in another Regiment whose aid that one squadron had been sent

out and that they had run into machine guns in high corn. They divided into sections so as to avoid the fire as much as possible and beat the corn out. 30 Bosches they killed outright with the lance, and 60 they took prisoners. The machine gun officer was told to attack a hill, but he misunderstood his orders and thought he was to open fire from a hill. He advanced at the gallop and lost all his pack horses at once with machine gun fire. He made a gallant effort to recover his own guns from the packs and was shot dead in the attempt. Still, the arme(e) blanche has vindicated itself.

A little further on we saw another 'pound' with about a company of prisoners in it. They were dirty and weary and we did not like to go and gloat over them, poor devils.

Then we began to pass a stream of wounded, and the number of lightly wounded was wonderfull and their morale was magnificent. The car could only crawl as the road was crammed with troops. Next we began to pass freshly killed horses, and at last we reached the original Bosche front line and we got out and walked. Their trenches were deep and their dug-outs had long flights of stairs leading down to them, but our heavy bombardment must have been terrific as 6ft trenches were blotted out by shell holes as big as a room. It was quite easy to trace the ebb and flow of the fight. I believe the German machine-guns were manned by veterans of the guard who died to a man at their guns doing hideous execution as our attacking lines swept forward. At one place there was a great shell hole with a pool of crimson water in it. A parapet of sand bags hasd been thrown up facing our line and behind it lay a wrecked machine gun rest, bits of German clothes and clips of cartridges & in front was the broken but(t) of a British rifle & a British steel helmet with a bullet clean through it from front to back. Their trenches ran in every direction and at every turn we came across a dug-out. Every foot was ploughed by shells and everywhere lay the litter of the great fight, unexploded shells, grenades, both British and German, clothes, cartridges, trench mortar bombs, entrenching tools, food, German beer bottles by the thousand, telephone wires, and those horrible crimson pools & over everything a sickening stench. Behind us, as far as we could see, our guns were firing hard over our heads & over the infantry, the shriek of the field gun shells mixed up with the solemn lumbering rush of our heavies, white puffs showing where our shrapnel was bursting and dense clouds rising slowly showing where our

heavy stuff was getting home. What struck me very much was that the Germans were making very little reply. Their daily strafe in the trenches last September was very much heavier than this.

All along the road in front of us were lines of German crosses where their dead lay thick, buried before we stormed the position.

We made an excellent lunch and walked into the village where there had been very fierce fighting. I told you what VERMELLES looked like last year after the French stormed it. It was nothing to this. The village had simple ceased to be. Here the Germans had faced us with the bayonet and a heap of broken rifles showed where our infantry had used the butt. A long shallow trench had been loosely filled in, & a rough wooden cross had been stuck in it, and on it was written 'A German soldier lies here 7/7/16'. All this time our shells were howling overhead while the Bosche stayed quiet, but the stream of wounded showed that he was still hitting pretty hard.

We walked into a wood, which has been mentioned fairly often in the papers in the last few days. It was full of dog tired infantry bivouacking & the whole place looked as though it had been smitten by a tempest & the same horrible smell brooded over the whole place.

As we had to go aa long way to get home, we started back and were caught up by a British Officer of a native cavalry regiment riding cheerily along with a bullet through his right arm. He said he wasn't going sick, & I don't suppose he will. He is simply typical of the feeling all through the Army, that we can't be beaten and we are on the high road to Victory.

After what I have seen, today, I can't tell you how proud I am to be an Englishman. If only our disgusting politicians will let us, we shall beat Fritz into a cocked hat.

When you have done with this will you please send it on to Pershore & ask them to keep it for me.

Your loving brother,

Tom

19th July 1916

Had a long ride of about 28 miles to VILLERS CHATEL, north of AUBIGNY, Yadram, the murderer, riding with me under escort the whole way. On arrival, orders came for his execution.

20th July 1916 [NM I obscure the name of the Army Chaplain here as he has been fictionalised into Griffin in Major Tom's War – I do not want to cause distress to his descendants]

Rode over to the Lucknow Brigade H. Q. and to the 29th Lancers and arranged everything including the place of execution.

Sent Yadram to the Regiment under escort to have the sentence promulgated. XXXXXX, the divisional chaplain was a great nuisance, as he obtained leave from the divisional commander to visit Yadram during the night. As Yadram was a Jat and not a Christian we all considered this a great piece of impertinence on XXXXXX's part.

21st July 1916

'Got up at 2.45 a.m. and went over to the 29th Lancers with Gordon, the General's A.D.C., and Winckworth my assistant. The Regiment was drawn up dismounted in (a) hollow square with the firing party and the chair at the front. The firing party consisted of twenty men, five from each squadron. They grounded arms and faced about and moved 3 paces to the rear, while I mixed up the rifles and unloaded some of them. Then they marched back and picked up their arms. The prisoner was then brought up under blindfold with a white disc pinned over his heart, and he sat down in the chair. As Sergeant Walsh, my provost sergeant was tying him to the chair he shouted in Hindustani "Salaam, oh all Sahibs! And Salaam, all Hindus and Mahometans of this regiment! There is no justice in the Hindu Sirkar. I did this deed because I was abused. Those of you who have been abused as I was go and do the same, but eat your own bullet and do not be shot as I shall be."

Then the O.C. firing party gave the signal, and the party came to the present, and on the word 'fire' they fired a volley. The regiment and the firing party then faced about and marched off. Five bullets had gone through the disc, but the man still

breathed, and I had to shoot him through the heart with my revolver, a horrid job. The grave had already been dug at the firing point, and Yadram was put straight into it and the grave was filled in and levelled by a fatigue party from the regiment.'

These entries are among the most quoted from the diary. They have been used by revisionist historians to point a finger of blame at Tom for his 'ruthless efficiency' in the execution. It is important to remember two things: firstly, military justice was very rigid in the First World War, and if it had not been Tom in charge it would have been another; secondly, Tom observed a previous execution voluntarily and noted where it caused undue stress to the victim. In the executions he supervised, he made sure that the grave was dug and the firing squad present and ready before the blindfolded victim arrived. As much as possible was done silently and by signal, only the word 'Fire' being spoken as the man died. Tom also spoke Hindi and understood and recounted for posterity what Yadram said before he was shot, commenting earlier that the General who had heard Yadram's story when he first committed the murder spoke none, which to us today has more than a touch of Blackadder about it. No, it was not a fair trial by modern standards, but he had murdered a fellow soldier, and according to the laws of the day it was the norm. The execution Tom supervised was the only possible result, even though the murder victim was described as 'an absolute rotter who had goaded Yadram to desperation'.

Tom was mentioned in despatches for the first time on 9th April 1917. This honour was as good as it got during the First World War: medals tended to be awarded after, not during the war. People mentioned in despatches had carried out 'gallant or distinguished services in the field', and those at home could read about them in a list in the Times newspaper. The 'mentions' come from Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, but are signed by the Secretary of War, Winston S. Churchill, who of course would lead the Allies to victory in the Second World War. We are not sure why Tom was mentioned – it may have been the episode with the barbed wire, or it may have been his efficiency in terms of military discipline, as it was recognised this was a hard job.

Reggy was mortally wounded in a raid near Hargicourt on 20 June 1917, one of those entirely futile raids ordered by High Command, leading to nothing and meaning the loss of valuable lives.

I expect many of us will remember the jovial soul in charge of what was I believe a naval gun, who spent his time up a tree behind our lines. He appeared to have a roving commission to do what he liked and great was our joy when he flattened out Thiepval Chateau [NB do not think this paragraph refers to Reggie?].

Just before our relief, a cement platform was constructed by the Sappers in our trenches. We were told that it must not be touched until the cement hardened as it was wanted for a trench mortar but alas the weather was hot and Jemadar Boota Singh was sleepy and when the Sapper inspected the platform next day it had set all crooked and no-one could imagine why!

Continued:

From 8th to 12th August 1916 I was on duty at Chateau Bryas during H.M. the King's visit to France. On 11th August all ranks were paraded for the King's inspection. L/D Arjan Singh 'B' Squadron being the only Indian on parade was spoken to by H.M. who asked his name and regiment.

The following letter is not in the diary, but loose, and incomplete – we have pages 4 & 5 to the end. It is written on upside down British Red Cross Hospital, Ross-on-Wye headed paper. There are no entries in the war diary for 1917 at all and the last for 1916 is 23 July. The letter which follows is undated but there is mention of Reggie Durand who dies on June 29th 1917 [Reginald Heber Marion Durand, Captain, 38th King George's Own Central India Horse, buried I.A.2, Tincourt New British Cemetery] so it cannot be later than this date.

My guess is Tom was injured or possibly gassed in the trenches late 1916 [after 12th August] or early 1917 and ended up sent home to convalesce. He mentions Evie's refusal to marry him – but obviously still hopes for the best. The missing pages are frustrating!

...

what it is. Do you call that quite fair? I don't. You ask what would have happened if you had answered differently and I had come home wounded. That is another delicate question to answer. The war & particularly my last experience of it has rather changed my outlook on life generally & I feel full of hope that it is making me less selfish than I was. When I first asked you to marry me I don't think I realised the possibilities, as far as you were concerned, if I got badly damaged & you were fond of me. I do realise them now very keenly & I know that I ought to have said nothing until after the war is over. Luckily no harm has been done, because you don't care about me, so as far as you are concerned it won't matter what happens to me, while the mere fact of loving you helps me a great deal. I realised that a great deal the other day in the trenches. I'm afraid this is rather involved, as it is difficult to explain on paper.

Having doubtless floundered deeper into the morass than ever and having annoyed you still more by talking about a thing which you don't like to talk about, I will try to answer your question.

The dug-out was exactly like a family vault – always damp and cold. I slept like a top whenever I got the chance. We had tea & bacon & eggs (doubtful ones) at 5am. Coffee and a stew of ration beef & potatoes at noon – if we got tinned milk we were lucky. Tea at 4 & coffee & what was left of the stew and jam at 7 or 8pm. It was not exactly luxury but Eva? twice sent me a cake and some vegetables. One had to stand up sometimes if the men were not quite happy. For instance the Bosche always put in a bit of heavy machine gun & rifle work between 3 & 5AM. All our casualties happened then. One day I found a recruit firing his rifle from the bottom of the trench & I d-d his eyes and empties the magazine from the parapet. That is the sort of thing I mean. One didn't like it, but it had to be done. Reggie Durand of course is entirely fearless & likes walking up and down under heavy fire. I don't, but it has to be done.

Taking them all round the men behave very well – one must have some cowards in every Regiment – and one realised the feet of clay in one or two idols. Now I will tell you a little thing, which pleased me awfully. The Regiment have been awfully nice to me ever since I came back from the trenches. They have always been nice but I somehow always felt that they looked on me as an amateur. Well they are quite

different somehow now & as one of them said to me the other day 'Well you are a real soldier now.'

We don't expect to go into the trenches again for some time, as we hope to have other fish to fry.

I don't know what happened to the wee cat, she disappeared. I heard a French interpreter was seen carrying her, so I hope she found a home out of range of the guns.

I think some of your hospital patients do [?perfect service] & I wish – no I won't say that, because you will at once get your tail up.

My Welsh partner is a sweep and the less said about him the better.

I wonder if you will go on writing to me as long as I want you to!

Cheeri Oh!

Yours ever

Tom

3.3.17 [loose letter]

My dear Mother,

A curious thing happened here yesterday. There is a woman in the place who lives by taking photographs. Her husband was mobilised at the start of the war and was reported missing after the battle of Charleroi. Everyone condoled with her & said he couldn't really be dead and she accepted their condolences. Well a day or two ago the Commissioner of Police got an unsigned letter advising him to search the house. Lo & behold in the cellar was the husband alive & kicking. He was wounded at Charleroi, went to a civilian's house & changed his clothes & came back with a lot of refugees, slipped into his wife's house in the dark, found he was reported dead & jumped at the chance of hiding. All the same, it must have been a hideous life. Think of knowing yourself to be a coward & feeling you might be caught at any time. They say he will either be shot of get 25 years. The French point of view is different from

ours. When I told a Frenchman I was sorry for the wife as she probably did it out of love for her husband, he just laughed and said, 'Monsieur, when all the women of France have given their men, why should she be pitied for keeping back her man?' I saw the crowd in the street when they took him away, all women & such women, with faces like flints & not a spark of pity among them. It made me realise what the revolutionist women would have been like in the French Revolution, just tigresses out for blood.

I think tea without sugar perfectly filthy, but I persist.

I wonder what ?Larges you will be.

I fear it means India for Dick & when he gets there, they will bag him for Mesopotamia.

Dear love,

Your loving son,

Tom

3/7/17 (letter, apparently a carbon copy)

My dear Mother,

I have just been through rather an interesting experience which i think you may like to hear about, as it is the first chance I have had of handling prisoners hot from the grid. My own regiment was not in the raid, the object of which was to attack a farm in front of our lines, where we knew the enemy was doing a lot of work at night. I got onto a horse at 8.45pm & rode up to about half a mile behind battl. HQ. I told Arjan Singh to take the horses back, but he stuck in his toes and said that if there was going to be a show, he was sure I would want the horses, so I left him in a wood. It was very cold with an occasional shell swooshing over, Very lights going up over the line & a machine gun yammering away to the left. I got to Battl. HQ at 10.30 & stowed my escort away in a sandbagged shelter behind a quarry. The raiders were all lying about resting. Lewis of my own Regt. Was at the telephone & I went and yarned to him for a bit & then sat in a chair & waited. About midnight the men fell in & marched off in two bodies, as they were attacking from two sides.

Everything was quiet until 1am except for the usual trench noises, pack animals passing with rations and so forth. Suddenly at 1am every gun spoke at once. Of course they were firing at a comparatively small target & the result was simply wonderful. It was as if a lot of express trains were suddenly let loose over our heads. The shooting of the guns was beautiful. The shells burst in one line. The row was terrific. The prisoners told me afterwards that they were taken by surprise & I think we must have smashed their signalling apparatus, as they did not send up a single rocket for help. Their guns made practically no reply, for which I was not sorry, as I was not in a pleasant place in case of a barrage.

They plugged away with rifle & machine gun fire & we got quite enough [overshies?] to realise that we are not in a pyrotechnic display. After a bit our raiders signalled that the job was finished & the barrage lengthened out to cover their retirement. ¾ of an hour after they went over the top, the first lot of prisoners came in to me. They all had their hands up over their heads. Two Prussian NCOs marched like brave men, but the rest were simply terror incarnate. One or two were sobbing bitterly. A prisoner told me afterwards that their officers had told them that the Indian troops always mutilated their prisoners. My Sikh orderly Duffada is a grim looking chap with his big black beard &, when he grinned at them like a hungry tiger looking at a bone, they howled.

The Regt. Were paying the raiders 15fr for each Bosche dead or alive, a coat being the ?accepted and visible sign of a dead Bosche. Some of the men were walking clothes shops and I think the bag must have been heavy. Each man as he came in assured me that he had killedat least two men. It was interesting to see the way different men were affected. Some of them were literally drunk with battle. One poor chap stumbled up to me and went down all of a heap at my feet with a bad wound in the stomach.

I bundled off my prisoners in batches. As they came in & [?showed] them to the dugouts, where the intelligence people were to examine them. When the show was over I walked back to the dugouts. One always says a great deal about the brutal way one will treat prisoners. As a matter of fact I found some people feeding them with hot soup & tea & I'm ashamed to say that I let them do it. My part of the show was over pretty late & I was pretty tired when I rode home. I got into bed at 7am and you can imagine my disgust when they rang me at 11am to say another batch of

prisoners were coming in. I dragged my weary bones out of bed, had a cup of tea, & bath & cantered back to the prisoners' dug-outs. Apparently our patrols went out to collect our dead about 6am & came across a party of Bosches who surrendered at once. A Battalion escort brought them down to me. When we searched them we found some French money on them. I thought it odd and they said they had sold their watches to the escort. I have up the Pathan N.C.O. in command of the escort, a bandit with red hair. He grimaced all over his face and said, "Sahib, the prisoners begged us to take their watches, but we said we would rather pay for them"! The watches were good ones and the price paid very low. Likewise the prisoners asked if they could have their watches back, so, knowing the gentle Pathan as I do, I had my doubts about the bona fides of the sale and made them disgorge.

A staff officer told me he had passed the escort & the prisoners in the road an hour before. Hey were all sitting down and he could not imagine what they were doing, but the prisoners seemed to be very much more [?eager] to get on than the escort. I can't help thinking that the watches & the point of a bayonet will have had a great deal to do with the halt.

Your affectionate son,

Tom

Tom captures an escaped prisoner -of-war, Lur XXXXXXXX (he provides the character of Horstberg in Major Tom's War and again I do not know what became of the man, and wish to avoid distress). He takes this letter (translated by Bärbel Barelmann) from him:

8th January 1918

Dear parents and brothers,

It is writing day again. I am sitting in the warm and cosy writing room, smoking and thinking about what to write. I really have nothing new to write about. It is always the same old thing: I live in very good conditions. Thank God! I have already written it about ten times but you can't emphasize it enough because your image of a prisoner of war camp, at least an English one, is completely wrong. I used to think the same. You will be surprised when Lür will tell you later about his life during his

imprisonment. You will be completely overwhelmed and ask yourself 'Why have we been so frightened on his behalf? But unfortunately you are.

You believe that we do not have enough to eat, that we are not warm enough, have to work very hard etc. Nonsense!

I repeat again and again: I am having a wonderful time. Every day I meet English people, can communicate well with them and learn a lot – which, of course, is a big advantage for me. You won't believe if I tell you how very pleasant the English are.

You will say that you can well believe that Lür, the old chap and officer, is fine but what about little Karl? O, my dearest ones! Only this morning I spoke to a comrade who used to be in Karlchen's company and is now a member of mine. 'In the 56th company everything is fine', he said. 'I would like to be there again'. Why? Because in Kalli's (Karlchen's) company, you will probably know it from his letters, nothing can be wished for: accommodation, kitchen, washing and baking facilities, sports club, canteen, etc.

That is why I will rather ask Kalli first before I order him to be sent here. But I am convinced that he will agree to be together with his brother and have a good time together with him – and until then everything will be perfect here as well.

In the end I'd like to say it again: we are both in a very good condition. Nevertheless, we hope for peace and am looking forward to seeing all of you at home soon.

With best regards

Yours Lür

I will write again/more in 8 days…

8. Retreat of the 5th Army

P57

21st March 1918

From the evidence of prisoners it was clear that the enemy had made an enormous concentration of troops & intended to attack on a 50 mile front on the 21st March 1918. The line, as held by the 24th Division, ran roughly east of LE VERGUIER & 1000 yards East of MAISSEMY. My collecting posts were 1. A railway cutting due East of VENDELLES, 2. SOYECOURT Farm and 3 the bridge at VERMAND. My prisoners collecting cage was at POEUILLY.

At 4.30 Monday the 21st March an intense bombardment was opened by the enemy and a lot of heavy stuff was sent into D.H.Q.(BOUVINCOURT), one of my traffic controlmen losing his arm.

I at once moved out my battle posts and went up to POEUILLY, where I established my H.Q. and left my sergeant major, who turned out an absolute rotter, in charge.

I rode up first to SOYECOURT, there being a dense fog & the enemy putting a lot of shells into the valley on my right, searching for a battery there. From SOYECOURT I rode to Post No 1, which was in charge of a boy called Rudge, of the Middlesex. I had an observation post close to LE VERGUIER but he told me he had withdrawn it because of the intense shelling. I was not sure if it was a case of cold feet, so I went up with him to have a look and came under heavy shell fire, both high explosive and shrapnel. A party of the Northants were digging a redoubt & a subaltern and a private were killed, & several men wounded in a few seconds. Their coolness was a marvel to me, but I decided the place was too unhealthy for the observation post and went back.

The Queens made a heroic stand at LE VERGUIER, only falling back in perfect order when their flanks were left in the air owing to other units giving way. German officers told me long after that the losses inflicted on them by the Queens were enormous.

I told Rudge to move back to VENDELLES if the shelling got very bad, and then I rode back to my third post at VERMAND. When I reached the village I saw a lot of shells

falling in it & a stream of wounded men coming up the hill in some confusion. I left Golden Rod [his horse, presumably] *outside the village & went down to the bridge, where I learned that the enemy had got right on top of the 1st North Staffords in the fog and wiped them out. There was also an ugly story of two companies of the 3rd rifle Brigade having put up their hands. Anyhow, the enemy had broken through as far as MAISSEMY (one of my traffic controlmen was wounded here) & was pouring on VILLECHOLLES, a mile from the bridge. Col. Green of the Middlesex with a few men was digging in south of the bridge. I stood on the bridge and help up the fugitives (mainly Gunners) with my revolver & lined the bank north of the bridge and made them dig in, but the moment I went back to the bridge, they bolted. A very gallant sergeant of the North Staffords, named Atkins, apparently the sole survivor of his regiment, fell in by me on the bridge and did splendid work holding up stragglers, though he was staggering with fatigue. He said that, after a heavy gas bombardment, the enemy rushed the trenches in the fog & that the British fought back to back until overwhelmed by hordes of Germans. Stamer the adjutant of the Regiment and a subaltern also stopped to help, but Stamer was badly wounded and the boy was too weak to stand, so I sent them off to the dressing station.*

Eventually we collected more men & again lined the bank. I put two police corporals in charge with orders to shoot anyone who tried to run. I waited 4 hours on the bridge, when Chevalier G.S.O. of the Division came and said that the line was now holding. Col. Green said I was no longer wanted and as the flood of stragglers had ceased, I decided to go to my H.Q.

While on the bridge I was hit in the hand by a bit of high explosive and a small bone was broken. [Later] *Stamer was given the Military Cross and Sergeant Atkins the Military Medal. I now rode back to POEUILLY & dined with the Field Ambulance, after having my wound dressed, the place being heavily shelled all the time.*

After dinner I was rung up by Mackenzie, G.S.O.1, to go back to D.H.Q. at once. I got on Golden Rod and trekked back to BOUVINCOURT where I found the wind vertical. G.S.O. 1 told me that the 66th Division on our left had broken badly &, as our flank was in the air, we were coming back. Accordingly I withdrew my posts to BERNES, FLECHIN & POEUILLY & went myself to HANCOURT where I got a little sleep in a cellar.

The letter which follows, sent to Evie, is a longer version of this summary for the period.

22/3/18

I saw more fighting yesterday than I have ever seen and I have had some narrow squeaks. Of course I can't tell you much, but I got a microscopic scratch on the back of my hand from H. E. – honestly nothing. They insisted on putting a tetanus serum into me which means being reported a battle casualty & I'm afraid the info may reach you that I have been wounded before I can write. I have had 1 hour's sleep in the last 24 but I am very well and carrying on with my work as usual. You will have seen from the papers that the enemy has retreated. He began to be exact at 4.30 yesterday morning. I got my watch posts out and then rode round them. I had an O. P. in front of my left post and, when I got to the post, I found that the O. P. had been withdrawn because of heavy shelling. I wasn't certain that the men weren't cutting it and went forward to see & came under the most terrifically heavy shelling. A working party was working there and their officers & one man were killed by a direct hit in front of me so I shambled back to the post, dodging shells all the way. My next post was peaceful & quiet, but when I got up to the third I met a lot of people wounded & wounded coming back. I got down to the one bridge over the river & found the enemy had driven a wedge into the line. It was unpleasantly done. I pulled out my revolver and held up the mob at the Bridge, sorted out some men around them with what rifles and ammunition I could collect & made them dig themselves in along the river. A Colonel with a few men of his Regiment was doing the same thing lower down & when I had got my group settled in I reported to him & was told I must just hold on and do the best we could. The Bosche put down some H. E. To try to blow up the bridge without success & that was when I got my silly little wound.

For 4 hours we sat there, just mopping up what stragglers we could. I watched the infantry digging in along the ridge in front of us. My dear, I take off my hat to the stretcher bearer & to a young captain badly shot through the neck, hardly able to stand, went to help me pull the men together on the bridge.

About 4 the welcome news came that the line was holding. The Colonel man was very decent & said that I had done a good job of work and I could shove off on my

other business. I am an utter coward I'm afraid. There was no cover & I simply loathed it.

Yours

Tom

Let Laura and Aunt H know

At noon on 22nd I was again sent for by G.S.O.1 who told me that the 73rd brigade was to fall back on the BOUVINCOURT – TERTRY road, the 17th & 72nd Brigades falling back fighting through it. I was to get all transport clear of ESTREES crossroads at once. The police worked splendidly and all was clear by 4pm, though VRAIGNES was blocked for a short time owing to the 24th Divisional Ammunition Column being smashed by bombs from a German aeroplane. The drivers were all Indians and the way they behaved in spite of heavy casualties was splendid. 11 mules and 10 men were killed.

The cavalry had been dismounted and sent into the line to support the 66th division. Their led horses were collected round VRAIGNES with no attempt at concealment and attracted enemy aircraft a good deal. Having cleared ESTREE crossroads I rode to the east side of BRIE bridge where D.H.Q. halted for the night, the brigades being at MONCHY-LAGACHE, TERTRY and MERAUCOURT. I posted a guard on BRIE bridge over the SOMME and caught about 30 stragglers. The 19th corps sent a cove called Fenwick to help me who turned out worse than useless.

At 4am on the 23rd March, G.S.O.1 sent for me and said that the position was most critical and that I must get all the wheels across ST CHRIST bridge. The fact that I had spent over 6 months in this part of the country with the 4th Cavalry Division was of great help to me controlling traffic. As I passed the BRIE bridge I found that both the up and down bridges were blocked by a broken-down lorry and a damaged 60 pounder gun respectively, but as the A.P.M 19th Corps was supposed to be controlling the situation I did not interfere. I pushed on to ST CHRIST bridge which I found quite clear, and I sent Fenwick to the main road to divert all traffic to this bridge. By these means I got two brigades of Cavalry and three batteries of R.H.A. across at the trot, and I had all my wheels over by 11am, the enemy having never shelled us once. 300 of the Middlesex covered the crossing. They had no

ammunition and no food. I stopped a passing ammunition lorry and unloaded 40 boxes of S.A.A. The Cavalry canteen had been left as it stood and I sent a part into the village with two empty limbers which they filled with tinned food and I was able to give the men a full meal.

I now began to realise how utterly inadequate the 5th army's plans had been for a possible retreat. Not one tree was felled across the road: not a single crossroad was blown up. ST CHRIST bridge itself was not destroyed though there was ample time to do it, and it was eventually by this bridge that the enemy crossed the SOMME. Our huts, ammunition dumps, canteens, and railways were all left for the enemy to take over as they stood. What trenches had been dug were 6-inch scratches (as if dog-tired men could be expected to deepen them!) The whole thing was a great contrast to the thoroughness of German preparations for their retreat in the spring of 1917.

Having done my job at the SOMME, I rode on to MARCHELPOT. The 8th Division took over the river and the 24th Division went into support, D.H.Q. being between CHAULNES and HALLU. All servants and odds and ends were armed and sent up to dig trenches. Everyone was very depressed.

I forgot to say that there were a few civilians left in ST CHRIST, and I had great difficulty in evacuating them. The French were most callous and did nothing to help their countrymen in distress. The civilians in VRAIGNES absolutely refused to go. This village had been left undamaged by the Germans in their retreat of 1917 and I think that these civilians must have been German agents.

On the 24th of March the 8th and 20th Divisions allowed the enemy to cross the river in the fog, and the 24th Division were again moved up to block the gap. From this point onwards we were fighting entirely on the old SOMME battlefield of 1916, the road being in very bad order and the fields quite impassable from old shell-holes and trenches and wire.

D.H.Q moved back to ROSIERES and I spent the day between CHAULNES and LIHONS regulating their traffic, which was very heavy. ROSIERES was just clear of the old battle area and I got quite a good billet there with a bed, the first I had seen since the battle began. At 9.30 pm a battery rattled through at a fast trot, followed by a mob of transport galloping and men of labour units running and

yelling that the Uhlans [presumably a German colonial fighting force, much feared for brutality] were among them. This put the wind up the civilians and they all ran out screaming that it was a rout. Chevalier (G.S.O.3) and I got into a car and went round and quieted things down, finding the same story everywhere: a small officer with a dark moustache had ridden through on a motorbike shouting that the line was broken and the Uhlans were behind him. I am certain this man was a German agent, as they did the same thing during the Italian retreat. In the end, this thing had a good result, as people were so ashamed of themselves, that they would not stampede later on when they would have had plenty of excuse.

An extraordinary yarn, which I think must also have been started by the Germans, was spread through the army at this time that we have taken LILLE and LENS and that the French 5th Army had driven in a wedge on our right, while the French 3rd Army was coming up behind us. When our men realised that these stories were untrue their morale suffered badly. Whoever spread the story should have been shot.

On the 25th March there was very fierce fighting round CHAULNES and HALLU. I stayed at ROSIERES with Advanced D.H.Q. the rest going back to DEMUIN. I put out strong collecting-posts and collected 200 stragglers, whom I fed, rested and armed. Stamp, the second in command of our machine-gun battalion helped me enormously. The night of the 25th – 26th was touch and go, as the enemy flung repeated assaults against our three Brigades, who kept on telephoning for artillery assistance. For about half an hour at midnight all communications ceased with the 17th Brigade and we thought they had been annihilated, but it turned out that the wire had been cut by a shell. We had a very close call at D.H.Q., as a shell fell in our courtyard, but luckily did not explode. [NB name which follows is obscured as I fictionalise this incident within Major Tom's War and make Tom the one who shoots him down] XXXXXX, the C.R.E., went off his head, and climbed up a tree with a rifle, with which he opened fire on Germans and British alike, until he was shot by one of our own people.

At daybreak on 26th March, Meyer D.S.O.2 & Stamp went with me to the old French trenches at ROSIERES-VRELY-WARVILLIERS-ROUVROY. Q collected spades & marched out my 200 men to ROUVROY & put them in the trenches under Lover and the Divisional Salvage Officer & Fenwick. Then I went back to ROSIERES & got

another 40 men & a young officer & took them to the line. This lad was in a blue funk & I had to talk to him very straight. In the fighting which followed, Olver handled his men very well & one of my traffic control men got the Military Medal. When I got back to VRELY I found out three Brigades falling back on the line selected for them, very tired, in good order and quite cheery. The best of the lot were the Middlesex. Col. Green, their C.O., was a dragoon & came from India with the Indian Cavalry Divisions.

An entrenching battalion was getting out of busses just behind the line. Most of the men were apparently just off leave as they were carrying brown paper parcels. Suddenly the enemy started putting shrapnel over, with low bursts beautifully timed. The Battalion scattered & began to run. General Morgan, I think, turned to me as I was the only mounted officer and asked me to stop them. I rammed in my spurs and old Golden Rod went like the blazes. I managed to head half the Battalion into ROUVROY but the rest broke past me into WARVILLIERS & I had to follow & ferret them out.

I found a lot of civilians in this village and had great trouble in getting them to leave as they could not realise that the enemy were at our heels. I sent the horses back to BEAUFORT, staying in WARVILLIERS myself. The morale of troops was fine: they found some old clothes in the village & dressed up in them dancing & singing & laughing. No-one would have thought that they had been fighting for their lives for 6 days and nights. I had 300 rations with me & I was able to feed a good many men. I & my Sergeant, Marhoff by name, a stout-hearted soldier, spent the night in a farmhouse with a very decent doctor named Buxton. We did ourselves pretty well, as there were plenty of rabbits and chicken in the farm & we also had plenty of warm straw to sleep on: further (more) the enemy left us alone & there was no shelling all night.

Early on the 27th Stamp came in to see if the farm would do as a billet for his men. This was the last I saw of him as I left soon after and he was killed on the same day in WARVILLIERS.

I now rode back to DESMUIN via LE QUESNEL. There was apparently a big gap on our right, as the enemy war balloons were right round us on that side. I saw a few French Territorials on the road, but there were no other reinforcements to be

seen. When I got back to D.H.Q. I had a great welcome, as my Sergeant Major who had made his way back to D.H.Q. without my orders, had reported me as killed. This warrant officer showed such cowardice throughout the retreat that he was reduced to the ranks by the Provost Marshal and was removed from the Corps of Military Police, and the last I heard of him was that he was carrying a rifle in the Shropshire Light Infantry as a private. I had a most enjoyable bath, the first since the battle began.

While I was at D.H.Q. General Gough, who commanded the 5th Army, arrived: he strode up and down and in a boisterous way smote General Daly G.O.C. 24th Division on the back and said it was all going splendidly and the French would be up directly. He was relieved of his command and to the great relief of the whole army Marechal Foch took over the supreme command.

I moved my collecting centre to DOMART for the night and picked up 400 stragglers, mainly from the Ulster and Irish divisions, the straggling by this time having become very bad. I think the main reason for this was that insufficient maps were issued to the troops & also because troops when falling back were not told clearly enough where to halt with the result that small bodies of men lost themselves & went walking until stopped by a straggling post. Practically all stragglers stopped by me had their rifles and equipment, but the odd thing was that they had hardly used their rifles at all. I suppose continued trench warfare had taught the men to rely on the bayonet & bomb & not the rifle.

On the 28th I moved back to DEMUIN, where I found things in a very critical condition, as the 66th Division on our left had run like stags & we were obliged to move back so as not to be left in the air. Col Kane of the Munsters asked me for all stragglers from the 16th & 36th (Irish & Ulster) Divisions and I gave him 116 men. He immediately killed a pig and a calf for them, but what happened to him after that I do not know.

I now got orders from D.S.O.1 to picket the main DEMUIN-MOREUIL road and to turn back all stragglers, but it was beyond me. They were streaming back by platoons and companies with their officers. Here I met the C.O. of a R.A.H. battery, whose name I don't know. He told me that most of his guns were out of action, but that in the fighting round CHAULNES his battery had caught the

Germans in mass formation at close range, and that his guns were firing into them over open sights and mowed them down in swathes. In my opinion this was the most critical period of the whole retreat. If the enemy had slipped his cavalry & guns on the afternoon of the 28th, nothing could have saved us.

I realised there would be a block at CASTEL bridge, and I withdrew my posts at 4pm. From then till midnight we worked at the bridge. The saddest part of the whole thing was the stream of panic-stricken civilians flying before the Germans with farm waggons and perambulators crammed with their belongings. There was no panic among the troops but it was a single way bridge with a steep way up from it, upon which overloaded civilian carts kept sticking and holding up the traffic. Furious gunners kept coming and saying their guns must be got across before anyone else, and all the time it poured with rain, and one had the sickening thought that the enemy might be on us at any moment. At last, I had to turn civilian traffic off the bridge to give free passage for the troops: one woman went on her knees in the mud in front of me and said " Monsieur, for the love of God let my waggons cross the bridge!" but though I knew the civilians would probably fall into German hands I had to refuse, as it was vital to get the troops across first. Towards 11pm about 500 men had passed me on the bridge all dead beat and hardly able to walk. I shouted out "What battalion is this?" and a man I knew answered out of the darkness "It is what is left of the 17th Brigade." By midnight the remnant of the Division was across the river and the civilian traffic was well in hand. I saw Massey of the Divisional Staff, and he told me that I must push on to the next river and get the transport over it. I got on Golden Rod again and road wearily to AILLY, passing what was left of our 73rd Brigade dead beat, lying on their arms in the mud in pouring rain with no vestige of shelter.

I reached AILLY at 2am on 29th and rode straight to the bridge, where I met a British staff officer. When I told him I had come to AILLY to get the transport across the bridge he laughed, and said that the worst was over, and I saw battery after battery of French guns, and columns of French infantry coming up the road in support. It meant that we were saved for the time being, and unless you have been retreating for 9 days, and are at your last gasp, you can't realise what that means. I turned in at an empty house, rolled myself up in the carpet and slept, with my head on my helmet, until 5. Then I got up and worked till midday getting

French guns across the river, after which I rode to COTTENCHY, our new D.H.Q., where we stayed until the 4th (of April), the Division still being in the line but there being no very heavy fighting. On the 4th, we moved to BOVES, until we were shelled out of it, and on the 5th the Division was relieved by the 58th Division, having been fighting continually since the 21st of March, and having won great glory and defeated 8 German divisions.

The diary includes Tom's military report on the retreat, and a note of congratulations issued to the Military Police by the Field Marshal Commanding-in-Chief.

There is also a note in French acknowledging the receipt of 20 francs for the loan of an area of grazing (for the horses presumably), plus a note in French from the Maire of St Aubert (nord) thanking Tom for helping them put the village back in order after the Germans had sacked it – there is particular mention of returning the furniture.

9. Looting

18.9.18

NB I have obscured two real names here purely because in Major Tom's War I use this scene with fictionalised versions of the men concerned, one as James Macbane of Lochdubh and the other as the Chaplain Griffin. As I have blackened both their characters in the novel and they are not one and the same as the characters in the book, I wished to avoid causing their descendants any distress.

My dear Mellor,

This is quite unofficial but I should like to let you know the present position with regard to XXXXXXX. The enclosed is a copy of my letter to the A.A. and the Q.M.G.

Colonel Collins saw the G.O.C. with my letter. He came back with the message that he would have to put XXXXXXX under arrest if he took the matter up officially, but he wanted it settled, if possible, by returning the things.

XXXXXXX and I then went to BETHUNE & saw KING the A.P.M. on the way XXXXXXX told me he had phoned to I think the 1st Army for leave to take the chairs and benches and that someone had given him leave to do so. He admitted having taken the other things without leave.

We saw KING & told him this & it was arranged that XXXXXXX should return everything today & tomorrow, going to KING's office where he would be met by a military policeman.

The French liaison officer MASERELL has now seen me & he is not satisfied with this arrangement & he wishes the things to be made over to the French Mission & not to be sent back to BETHUNE.

The G.O.C. is of the opinion that I have acted with an excess of zeal, but I quite fail to see what else I could have done.

Later

Col. Collins, Grindlay & I have seen MAZERELLES. The gendarmes have taken out a procès-verbale & are taking possession of all the property, so I presume the matter will now proceed.

I am very glad I talked the thing over with you this morning.

Yours sincerely,

T. H. Westmacott Capt.

D.A.P.M. 24th Division

Major J Mellor M.C.

[Attachment]

24th Division 'A'

Confidential

I think the following should be brought to your notice for such enquiries as you think best.

No. 100819 Cpl. STEVENSON A. 24th Division M.T.A.S.C. driver of lorry 30307 states that on 11th September he proceeded to BETHUNE with his lorry. Lieut EVANS and Major XXXXXXX of XXXXXXX being on the lorry.

He states that they stopped at a theatre in BETHUNE when the lorry was loaded with chairs and scenery. He took his load to the theatre at GOUY-SERVINS and then returned for a second.

No. 132705 L. Cpl. BIRD J. H., 24th Division M.T.A.S.C. states that on 11th September, he went from VERDREL to SAINS-EN-GOHELLE with lorry No 13231 where he picked up Major XXXXXXX. He took him to BETHUNE where he was told to go to a theatre.

He says that he took a load of seats, forms and a roll of carpet.

He says that he took his first load to SAINS-EN-GOHELLE, where he dropped some green covered chairs.

He says he went back to BETHUNE and picked up a second load and took them to the theatre at GOUY-SERVINS.

The Revd. XXXX Chaplain has two sacred pictures which he says were given him by Major XXXXXXX, who told him that he had taken them from BETHUNE.

Madame ROGET of billet No 4 SAINS-EN-GOHELLE has stated that the following articles were brought to the house by Major XXXXXXX on the 11th September and that his servant informed her that they had been brought from BETHUNE:

1 writing desk (Empire style)

1 chest of drawers; 1 looking glass

2 oil paintings (family portraits)

1 small carpet, 1 ossuary (reliquary)

1 clock (without frame), 1 arm-chair

1 table Louis XV; 1 table round

1 brass stock-pot (marmite)

6 dining-room chairs (covered with leather)

35 small pictures in frames; curtains, 2 or 3 rolls of paper, golden stars on a blue background, used in churches for covering the walls of the Holy Virgin's Chapel.

Both the Town Major and the D. A. P. M. BETHUNE say that no permission was given by them to remove property from BETHUNE.

T. H. WESTMACOTT, Captain, D. A. P. M. 24 Div.

(Copy to D.A.P.M. VIII Corps)

10. The Final Battle and the liberation of Bavay

P71

November 5th 1918

Here I am in the middle of a big battle and having a very interesting time. It is just after dawn and I am waiting for my breakfast. As you know from the papers the attack was launched yesterday. I was up at 6 and pushed my H.Q. forward to advanced D.H.Q. at SEPMARIES where I made a prisoners' collecting cage in the middle of the school. They began to come in almost at once, and the Division took 15 officers and 311 other ranks in the course of the day, representing 22 different units, which is a good sign, as it shows how mixed-up the enemy is getting. Some of them were fine fellows but a lot were children of about 15; there were some wounded among them and I made a captured German doctor look after them. I was struck by the callous way he did it. I sent the wounded to the dressing station. Before sending the prisoners to Corps H.Q I made them bury a dead horse and a few dead Germans, who were lying about, as the village had been badly knocked about in the fighting & was in a dreadful mess. Having got the cage in working order I went out on the roads where the traffic was very heavy, the enemy having blown up all the bridges behind him. I spent 4 hours at MARESCH bridge, where 3 roads met; it was only a one-way bridge & the blocks were dreadful. The Sappers were working very hard to widen the bridge & I turned on a party of prisoners to help. I don't think they liked the idea of being shelled by their own people at all and they worked so hard that they soon had the job finished. I got back to D.H.Q. about dark and had my tea. About 6 a message came in to say that a number of French citizens were in WARGNIES-LE-GRAND. This being my job I got in a car and went with Bourgeat, our interpreter, to the 73rd Brigade, our advanced Brigade, where I was warned that the fighting was still going on in WARGNIES, but I had no option and on we went along a road which was being heavily shelled, until we reached the H.Q. of the Northamptons, where the car had to stop owing to a big crater right across the road. We left the car here, the driver being very cool, while we walked into the village.

The Northamptons had dug in along one side of the road and the enemy were still at the other end of the village. We had a perfectly loathsome walk up this road as

it was being steadily shelled the whole time. It was pitch dark and we put on our gas masks. We searched house after house until at last we were answered in French from a cellar and there I found the Maire and a lot of old women and children. It was most touching. Bourgeat was the first Frenchman they had seen and they clustered round him and said "Mon Dieu, c'est un vrai Francais!" and all kissed him. Then the women kissed me with the tears running down their cheeks. Then the Maire advanced on me. He hadn't shaved for days and I was firm. I shook him warmly by the hand but more than that I couldn't bear. The poor things knew nothing of what was going on. There are 600 of them in cellars with food for three days. If I had pulled them out last night we should have had a lot more casualties, as we were still fighting in the village, so I ordered them to stay where they were, after screening all the doors and windows against gas. They had had a narrow escape in the Maire's cellar, as a British soldier had chucked a bomb, thinking the enemy were down there. Ten children have died of throat trouble which may be the result of gas, and the poor things haven't one gas mask among them, but it sounds like diphtheria.

Then the time came for us to go and the poor women prayed for us to stay, not as protection for them but because they feared we might be killed. In fact they got so weepy and sentimental that I had to chaff them, as I was getting a lump in my throat myself, and I said "Mesdames, je suis marie, et je ne peux dire a ma femme que je suis reste avec tant de jolies femmes dans un cave pendant la nuit." (The eldest was 92, and the youngest about 50, the Germans having carried off all the girls and young women). They all laughed and the situation was saved.

Then we started back down that nightmare of a road, there being heavier shelling than ever. It was worse than VERMAND on the 21st of March, and that was bad enough. However, we got through the barrage all right. Just before I reached the car I passed a British soldier just killed, so my luck was in. The driver was sitting in the car contentedly smoking a cigarette, although he had been under intense shell fire for more than two hours without cover.

On the way back, I found some of our heavy guns ditched and spent time getting the road clear. At last I got home about ten, and I don't think I shall ever hear the last of the dirty old Maire trying to kiss me. It is a great fight and we are doing splendidly.

Same day, evening.

We made another bound forward again this morning, and here I am billeted in WARGNIES-LE-GRAND, the village which I visited last night. I rode down the road which was so heavily shelled, and I saw such a lot of shell holes and dead horses sprinkled about. The Sappers are wonderful. They had a trestle bridge over the river ready for the lorries less than 12 hours after our people had driven the enemy out. I saw a curious thing at the crossroads which I passed last night in the dark. I saw a German machine-gun turned towards the enemy, evidently used by us against them. The German machine-gunner had fought out to the last, and he had been hit in the throat. He was lying on his back with his head propped up on an ammunition box, his right knee drawn up and his left arm raised towards the gun barrel as if he was making a last effort to stop our people from using it. A few yards away lay two of our dead. Col. Hebden, commanding the Royal Fusiliers, was with me and he said "By God! That was a brave man, and I shall see that he is decently buried."

At another place I saw 9 men of the Fusiliers, lying in a row, with German prisoners digging their grave. By the road I saw a gun and half a dozen horses lying dead in a heap. Oddest of all, I picked up a dead partridge, still warm, killed by the concussion of a shell. I saw a steel cuirass, with flaps to cover the thighs, but it was too heavy to carry.

Col. Prior, the C.R.E. took me right forward in front of our Advanced Brigade H.Q, but there was not very much doing except a little mild shelling along the road. It seemed to me that the enemy is running so fast that we can't catch him.

We get a great welcome everywhere from the civilians. Poor creatures, they have suffered great horrors under the heel of the Bosche! And how they hate him! Can you wonder? I don't!

I am being mercilessly ragged about the Maire who wanted to kiss me. The quaint thing is that the Germans turned out the real Maire and appointed the would-be kisser in his place. As presumably he is friendly with the Germans, I was quite glad he didn't kiss me.

The Germans have left this place in a filthy state like everything else, but I have cleaned things up and have got quite a good billet with a bed and a sound roof. All my men and horses are under cover, and we have found coal and can keep warm.

It is difficult to really realise what wonderful times we live in. I could not have believed unless I had seen it, that the same men who were driven back by the Bosche in the Spring could have so completely turned the tables in the autumn.

6 November 1918

To continue the chronicles of my doings, such as they are. I see from The Times that they have given the village taken by the Division so you know officially where I am. Is not the news wonderful? We have not moved today and I did some office work before going out. I had finished about 10 and I pulled out Golden Rod and a couple of men and sallied forth on business in torrents of rain and seas of mud. I found columns of guns and M.T. pouring up the long straight road – fortunately a wide one and there were no blocks. There had been some shelling and there were numbers of dead horses lying about too. When I reached Brigade H.Q. of the 17th Brigade, I found that the G.O.C. Luneau, the brigade French interpreter had moved a mile and a half up the road and there were bags of civilians. I left my horse under cover and trudged off in the mud passing a heavy battery just pulling off the road. The Bosche had got the range to a T and was plastering the gun position. They had got one gun in position off the road and were scratching their heads over the rest. The shelling was quite unhealthy and I paddled on through the mud until I reached a great crater on the outskirts of St WAAST where the Hun had blown up a crossroads and our pioneers (the Sherwood Foresters) were hard at work filling it up. Then I reached a level crossing in the village, also blown up, with our pioneers working at it. Then at last I reached the G.O.C. and I found Luneau, a very gallant priest, with no fear of death. We started visiting from house to house, at once, finding civilians in each house in the cellars. As the enemy was still in the village, no-one had time to visit the poor things and they were delighted to see us. Their courage was beyond description. They all made us drink coffee made of oats and in one place insisted on giving us chip potatoes. Then they sang the Marseillaise with tears in their eyes. I almost tried to sing myself but I had a lump in my throat like a pigeon's egg. All the time the enemy was pouring a tornado of shells all around. Two little girls of about 10 and 13 were like monkeys trying to run

out and look at the shells. They sang a parody of the Marseillaise made up by French and Belgian prisoners of war, not very complimentary to the Bosche. Their mother told me that she was always in hot water because the smallest girl would sing it in front of the enemy. It is quite impossible to describe their courage but one realises how and why the French people have set their teeth and stuck it all through the years. I asked the little girl for a kiss and I felt it an honour to get it. Three times we started to cross a broken bridge leading further into the village but we were driven back each time by the shelling. The we decided to go back to the horses as we couldn't see any more civilians this evening and we were again driven back three times by the barrage but eventually got through after a most interesting day. I hope we shall have the place by tomorrow and I have some more interesting things to tell you. The civilians tell me that the morale of the Hun infantry is very low and they are ready to surrender but that the gunners and machine-gunners are covering the retreat. Their discipline is bad and I was told that only last week a company murdered their Captain.

7th November 1918

Each day of this great battle is even more absorbing than the last. I got on Daisy at 9.30am and rode up to St WAAST, where I had such a gruelling yesterday. We drove the enemy out early this morning and apart from a little mild shelling all was peace. I met my friend Luneau, and he walked me off to see a man who he said was worth listening to. The man was 65 & was sent off into Belgium to work for the enemy, but he was released. He & another old gentleman and an old woman insisted on giving us lunch. We simply could not refuse and they gave us very good vegetable soup, sour bread, butter and cheese, chip potatoes and pancakes and coffee made of oats – each time a shell burst the old lady nearly fell off her chair, poor soul. The old man told us that two days ago he was coming back from MONS when he met a German Battery being hurried up in support. The two officers could not agree on the road & asked him the way. He got on a limber & took the battery six miles in the wrong direction and then wished them a polite goodbye – a plucky old chap!

I heard horrible stories of the way they treated women, whom they carried off: they were put in batches of 25 into a room, where they were made to strip for medical examination. They were put in a huge camp with nothing but open fields

for sanitary arrangements. I simply can't write down the horror of the Belgian nuns. They are brute beasts and I hope we shall make them pay to the uttermost farthing.

After lunch Luneau and I rode on to a town called BAVAY, a small place of about 4000 inhabitants, a little bigger than ROSS (on Wye?), about 3000 yards behind the line. I think we must have been the first mounted officers to ride in as we had 'pinched' the town out so to speak, the Guards Division having pushed past on the right while the 24th Division cut in on the left. In this way the enemy was forced to evacuate the town without fighting, though he continued to shell it as he fell back.

As we rode in people began to run out of their houses, regardless of the shelling & by tea time we reached the 'Grand Place' in the middle of town we were surrounded by a seething crowd of people simply delirious with joy. I had a little chocolate for the children but it did not go very far; Luneau was dragged off his horse & smothered with kisses. I was almost dragged off but I managed to stick on. They kissed Daisy all over & she stood with her ears cocked, letting them do what they liked. They kissed my boots and stirrups and hands, and lifted up babies to be kissed, all laughing and sobbing and shouting 'Vive la France! Vive l'Angleterre!'. They fished out French flags from somewhere and hung them out of the window. They begged for French newspapers and any news we could give them and all the time the Bosche was shelling the place and nobody gave a damn. As we dismounted at the house of the Maire, M. Derôme, a shell hit it and a splinter passed between Luneau and me. Rotten luck if I get done in with the end in view, won't it! Derôme was put in gaol for six months by the Bosche for feeding British prisoners of war so I reappointed him and told him to carry on. Then we started back and had another ovation and I was thankful that I could speak French. A man ran out and said that he had hidden a bottle of champagne all through the war, as he was certain that the town would be relieved in the end, and he said we simply must come back and drink it. We were again hauled off our horses and in we went to his house. Everyone who could crammed in and they filled our classes and then looked at me, I couldn't say much so I just said 'Mes amis, A la France, aux Allies, a la Victoire!' and they all shouted aloud. I shall never forget it to my dying day.

We were shelled a bit as we road home and the traffic tied itself in knots, but I felt too cheerful to mind anything.

8th November 1918

We have again moved forward, this time to the outskirts of BAVAY where I had such an ovation yesterday. I am billeted with all my men and horses in a huge factory which was used by the enemy as a barrack. It must have been used as a billet by a party of the North Staffords last night as, when I went in this morning, I found six of their dead still warm, lying in a heap by the gateway. I suppose an enemy shell must have caught them as they were marching out. One poor chap had crawled into a small room by the gate to die. I noticed that the Corporal was wearing the 1914 ribbon and three wound stripes.

Anyway this is a jolly comfy billet. I have a room with a big range in it and I am sitting by it now with a red hot fire with my boots off thawing out and drying after a long cold day in mud and rain. Now for my news of the day. A young Englishman was sent into me this morning dressed in civilian clothes, about 21 or 22 years old I'd say. His story was that he belonged to the 11th Queens and was taken prisoner in the Retreat last March. He escaped twice from the enemy and the second time as he had nothing to show who he was the Germans put him in a civilian gaol in Bavay. While he was on his way to be tried, he saw a French lady, Mlle Gautier, standing by her door and he asked her for some bread, which she gave him, but the escort took it away. After he was put in gaol she somehow managed to send him his dinner every day which was apparently the only thing which kept him alive. Eight days before we entered Bavay he escaped again and Mlle Gautier and her sister Mme Wambere hid him at risk of their lives. Wasn't it plucky of them? The whole town knew where he was hidden and not a soul gave him away to the enemy though they hunted for him everywhere. He said his name was Private Roland Lee-Warner. I couldn't quite make out if he was genuine, but as he seemed to be well-educated, I asked him what school he was at and he said he was at Rugby in the schoolhouse under Dr James. When I said I had been there too, he asked 'I wonder if you knew my brother Philip?' – I was at Rugby with Philip so I was quite satisfied as to his bona fides. We sent him off to Corps H.Q. in a car. He seemed to be the same happy-go-lucky kind of boy as Christian (another Cousin). I afterwards went with General Daly to the ladies' house where he

thanked them on behalf of the British Army for what they had done for a British soldier. They were recommended for British decorations, but I never heard if they got anything.

9th November 1918

On this day we attacked at FEIGNEIS and drove back a light machine-gun screen beyond the main MONS – MAUBERG road, the 77nd and 73rd Brigades being in the line. I rode up to FEIGNEIS who told me the last German had left the village at 4.30am. Except hat the railway had been blown up here were no signs of battle. The Maire said that the Bosche infantry were three days march ahead of us with no fight in them but that the machine-gunners and artillery were covering the retreat.

10th November 1918

We moved billets to REMETZ, a filthy hole. The 20th Division began to relieve us.

11th November 1918

I was woken up with the wire that hostilities would cease at 11am. There were no great demonstrations by the troops, I think because it was hard to realise that the war was really over. Very lights were shot off before 11am but that was all. Shortly before 11am, our divisional artillery let the Hun have it with every available gun. I have never heard such a row. A great contrast to the deathly silence which followed at 11am. The next time I heard British guns fire as a year later when the guns fired a salute across the Rhine in Cologne to celebrate the peace.

Before I stop I must mention two cases of great heroism by French women. My Division took HAUSSY near CAMBRAI when I was on leave. When they first stormed the place, the enemy drove them out with a counter-attack and we left a wounded officer of I think the East Surreys in the village. The place was full of civilians and a woman carried him into her cellar and hid him under some straw. There being half a dozen people in the cellar, soon some Germans came in and lay down The wounded soldier began to snore and the civilians at once started snoring too and kept it up until the Bosche left. When we finally took the place we found the officer quite safe. In the other case, a sergeant was badly hit in the

main street of HAUSSY and a woman ran out and was shot dead by a German machine-gun while in the act of picking him up.

For their work during the Battle, Luneau was given the DCM and Bourgeat was given the Military Medal by the British and the French gave me the Croix de Guerre.

11. The advance through Belgium

P85

Nov. 1918

Extracts from Tom Westmacott's letters to his wife.

On 21st November 1918 I received orders to report to the 2nd Corps as Assistant Provost Marshal, a great bit of luck as they led the advance through Belgium. I left the 24th Div. At MAISNY & motored through VALENCIENNES which was badly knocked about & MONS, quite an imposing town to HAL in BELGIUM, where I caught up with the Corps.

22nd Nov. 1918

Well now to continue. By great good luck I heard that King Albert was make his state entry into BRUSSELS today. I have a car and it was not very far away. All the roads were covered with flags and garlands & all the people were cheering whenever they saw a British uniform. Brussels is a fine city well laid out. It was simply crammed with people including a quantity of our returning prisoners of war, clothed in all sorts of clothes and having the time of their lives; jolly nice to see the Belgians treated them & fine to see the way they pulled themselves together & saluted whenever they saw a British officer. First we went to the Hotel-de-Ville, beautifully carved building, where we were told that the king was due at the Palace at noon, so off we went to the Palace, where we found a huge crowd collected outside the gates. Having as you know a good deal of cheek, I went inside the gates, the sentry presenting arms as if I was a general.

I only saw a dozen British officers in the city & we were allowed to do what we liked. There was a window with a wide windowsill giving a lovely view over the heads of the crowd so we climbed on to it. A flunkey in red plush breeches and white stockings told us to go away, but we just smiled affably and said "Bonjour Monsieur" and he gave us best. Then a fat Belgian soldier came with a gun & hinted that we were not wanted, but we just grinned at him and he too went away. There was a dense mob, quite uncontrolled, but very orderly. We had a long time to wait, but it was quite amusing. A lot of old gentlemen in top-hats & carrying about 50 richly

embroidered banners came up & made a line. They told me they were from the different guilds of Brussels.

Little parties of soldiers kept passing but the march discipline was perfectly laughable, except that of the British contingent who were as smart as paint. At last I saw a regular cloud of handkerchiefs being waved, and up came a troop – or rather a mob – of Belgian cavalry, followed by the king and queen, both on horseback. They looked a handsome couple. The queen was in bluish-grey and wore a little round hat – at least, it looked that colour to me. Anyway, she looked a topper. One of our princes was with them, dressed in Flying Corps uniform. The young Belgian prince, in a private's uniform, and his sister, rode behind. She sat her horse like a workwoman, as straight as a lance. Then followed a troop of cavalry, and we went away as a procession of troops has no attraction for me.

The crowd was huge, but the cheering was not like an English crowd. They bleated "Vive le Roi!" but it was a pitiful kind of noise. It was not a bit like one of our pageants, but it was homely and nice, as if the people were genuinely fond of their King.

General Plumer, the Army commander, Admiral Keyes, General Jacob (my Corps Commander) and a few Belgian and foreign officers rode behind. I wouldn't have missed it for a bagful of pennies, as I suppose it is the last time that a European monarch will ride in triumph into his capital after it has been so long under the heel of an invader. The crowds were nice to us and kept on saying 'anglais' but there was none of the rapture of the French at their deliverance. We four went to a cafe to get some lunch and the people said 'Vive L'Angleterre' and tried to sing 'God save the King' but it was very different from France.

23 Nov. 1918

A captured German prisoner-of-war has just told us a curious story. He was with the victorious enemy during our retreat in March, and he said that at one point the German advance was being held up by a British machine-gun long after the rest of the British had fallen back. The officer was sent forward with a white flag to call on the gun to surrender. When he reached it, he found the gun being worked by one British soldier, with his five comrades lying dead around him. He told the soldier that all the British were gone: that he had put up a magnificent fight, and that it would be no

disgrace to surrender. The soldier answered that unless he went back to the Germans immediately, he would open fire on him. He went back, and this solitary British soldier held up the German advance at this point for half an hour before he was killed. Unfortunately we could not discover the Div. or unit to which this fine soldier belonged.

24 Nov. 1918

We've been on the move again today. We passed quite close to Waterloo, so I slipped off the line of route and went to have a look. The Germans have not touched the lion of Mont St Jean. He stands on a very high mound. Made me puff going up but the view was well worth it and it was a clear day. At the foot of the mound is a big round building showing in panorama all the country which you can see from the top of the mound, each village and hamlet being painted in as they existed in 1815, with the names. The French cavalry are shown charging the guns and British squares. The Duke and his staff are shown beyond the infantry as they were in the battle. In the distance is shown the advance of the Prussians. When we had fixed the whole thing in our mind's eye, so to speak, we climbed up to the Lion and were able to piece together the whole battle splendidly. The farms of Belle Alliance and St Jean are still intact, but I couldn't quite make out the hollow road where the French cavalry came to such fearful grief. There were a lot of soldiers or course carving their names in the pedestal of the Lion. For once I think it's pardonable, as someday it will be interesting to know that Pte. Jock MacPherson of the Black Watch marched across the battlefield of Waterloo on the 24th November 1918, following up a beaten enemy.

Now here I am at WAVRES, where the people can't make enough of us. I have a charming billet in a doctor's house. Our mess is in the cure's house, such a dear old man: he got 14 days in gaol for playing his country's national anthem on his king's birthday, and his curate got the same for asking if the Crown Prince was dead. I can't tell you in a letter of the loathsomely indecent indignities which many parish priests had to undergo. The least was being marched stark naked through the priest's own parish. Civilians who refused to work were stripped to the waist and forced to stand in holes broken in the ice in the bitter winter of 1916 – 7.

In one case a priest was so brutally treated that Cardinal Mercier went to visit him and kissed his feet.

I had to break off here, as a procession with a band and torches and lanterns came down the street and I had to go and stand in the doorway, feeling an utter ass while everyone shouted 'vive les Anglais' and I yelled 'et la Belgique'. At 9.30 there is to be a dance in the Town Hall. I loathe dances, but fear I must go.

The whole place is illuminated and they have just serenaded the Corps Commander. Oh! I must tell you of the dear old nun who was looking at the Waterloo panorama by me that is all swords and cuirasses and flags and the pomp and glory of war. She said, 'Tell me Monsieur... is this war just like that?' Some people really do think so. I said 'No Madame! In this war, we dug in holes in the mud.' I think she thought I was a liar. Yrs, Tom

26th Nov. 1918

Yesterday, by going a little outside my area I managed to visit Louvain. Frankly I was disappointed. One has read so much of the sack of Louvain that I expected to see a perfect abomination of desolation. It is true that the library and church have been burned & some houses, but, after the towns & villages on the Somme, it is nothing.

There were crowds of cheerful people & shops & ordinary life. The Hotel-de-Ville is really a most beautiful building and I can't understand why the enemy spared it. I think that there can be no doubt that 600 civilians were murdered in cold blood, most of them by M.G. & rifle fire in the street. Most of them were lined up by the railway station & shot in batches and buried in a common grave.

I think that the real idea was to try to terrorise Brussels. As a matter if fact the Belgians kept their tails up in a most wonderful way.

Now for a little excitement. There are of course people scattered about who were friendly with the enemy. In the case of the women the playful Belgian has cut off their hair and marched them in their undergarments through their native towns. In the case of cafes and houses they have a regular Pogrom and gut the place. About 11 o clock last night I was called out and found that hooligans had already sacked 2 houses and started a third.

A frenzied Belgian Commissaire of police was tearing his hair & demanding a regiment to stop it. I have taken the measure of the Belgian civilian all right. He has been too cower by the enemy to be dangerous. I rolled up with an electric torch and two fat military police. The commissaire said 'but where are your soldiers and you have no arms!' I said 'Don't you worry sir, but show us the dog fight.'

We went to the cafe and I found a big crowd of civilians outside & some delighted British soldiers breaking the windows and a seething mob inside looting merrily and smashing what they could not carry away. I just went in and said 'get out, you pigs' & they went like sheep, but my word they had skinned this place, both upstairs and downstairs. I had a hatful of fun. The Commissaire was quite the finest opera bouffe that I have ever seen. He had a hat simply plastered with silver. He did not attempt to arrest anybody and it was not my job, but when a patriot came down the stairs with one pocketful of spoons & forks & the other bulging with crockery I asked him if he did not intend to do anything. He at once seized the man by the throat and made him turn out his pockets & thumped him on his head, shouting 'Bandit, voleur –r-r!'. Then he let him go. Having cleared the house, we went outside where he delivered a most impassioned harangue to the crowd, who did not take the slightest notice so I (said) 'Monsieur let me have a shot'. So I stood on the doorstep & said, 'Mes amis, you just go to bed. If you don't I will fire on you.' They went like lambs, which was as well as I only had my torch and my two M.M.P.

27 Nov. 1918

About 7.30 last night I heard that a mob of soldiers and civilians had gone off to a farm about two miles away with the intention of burning it. Warren of the traffic control squadron at one went off, collecting about 15 gunners and men of the Royal Scots as we went. The mob consisted of about 200 civilians and 30 soldiers and they had already reached the farm when we got there and had begin to loot. We at once charged the mob and cleared the house, but not before they had done a great deal of damage. We had great fun as the mob realised that I was the Provost Marshal, when they bolted as fast as they could run. One big buck Belgian tried to rush me with his head down, and I caught him a wipe across the mouth with my stick. I broke my stick and I felt his teeth go, and he fell all of a heap.

I thought he was dead, so I gave him another wipe with what was left of the stick and he jumped up and ran like a stag. We were only just in time as they were on the point of firing the ricks. The most amusing part of the whole thing was that the owner of the farm came to see me this morning, and thanked me for saving his farm. He told me that everyone was saying that he had paid me several thousand francs to save him. I think he meant it as a hint that he was ready to pay me, but unfortunately I was too honest.

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28/11/18

No addressee but presumably Evelyn.

I hear we are now allowed to say where we are and to describe our surroundings. I joined the Corps near Brussels at a pace called HAL & from there we moved to WAVRE, the place where ?grouchy attacked the Prussians just before Waterloo. Today, we have moved to HUY, a quaint old town on the Meuse, with an old citadel, built in 1500 on the hill above the Bridge.

Candidly I don't like all the pillaging business. The civilian authorities have just been to me and say that an organised band of roughs is burning and looting farms up the valley of Meuse between here and Liege. There are no local gendarmes to help and I certainly can't interfere in civilian outbreaks, unless I receive special orders to do so. Five women had their hair cut off in WAVRE yesterday night but, when the Belgians tried to strip them, some British soldiers at once stopped it.

This place is full of returned prisoners of war, British, French, Italian, Portuguese and Russian, about 1600 of them. I hope to get them off to ?Namur by steamer tomorrow.

I have had rather a long day of it on the roads & I don't feel very much like writing a letter.

Yrs,

Tom

Letter from Major T. H. Westmacott to his wife.

Dec. 13th 1918

I have seen a sight today which I shall never forget. There are three bridges over the Rhine at Cologne, known as the MULHEIM bridge, the HOHEN-ZOLLERN bridge and the suspension bridge. Our infantry began to cross the Rhine at 9.15am, the 9th Division by the MULHEIM bridge, and the 29th Division by the HOHEN-ZOLLERN bridge and the Canadians by the suspension bridge. Until 1.15pm they poured across in three dense columns. So as to do things really well, the German police were told to see that no wheeled German traffic was allowed in the streets, and they obeyed their orders to the letter. There were big crowds of Germans looking at us in spite of the rain, but they seemed more curious than anything else. I saw one woman in tears, poor soul, but bar that it might almost have been an English crowd. General Jacob, my Corps Commander, stood under a Union Jack by a big statue of the Kaiser, at the west end of the HOHENZOLLERN bridge, and took the salute of the 29th Div., one of the finest fighting divisions in the British Army, being the division which earned undying glory in Gallipoli.

The men marched with fixed bayonets, wearing their steel helmets, and carrying their packs. I wish you could have seen them: each man making the most of himself, and full of pride and élan. Then came the guns, turned out as our gunners always turn themselves out. Mind you, as the Division was fighting hard all through the last battle, and they have been marching steadily through Belgium and Germany for the last 30 days, but the horses were all as fit and hard as nails, and the buckles of their harness were all burnished like silver. The mules were as fit as the horses, and went by waggling their old ears as if they crossed the Rhine every day of the week. A German looking on said that the Division must have just come fresh from England.

It is difficult to remember what we were like last March and April, during the retreat of the 5th Army, and to find ourselves here as conquerors in one of the proudest cities of Germany.

Transcribing all the diary entries and letters has taken me many years, but it has made the conflict of the Western Front much more real for me and now I feel like I know Major Tom, a grandfather I never met.

I hope you feel the same way.

Best regards

Vee Walker

September 2018