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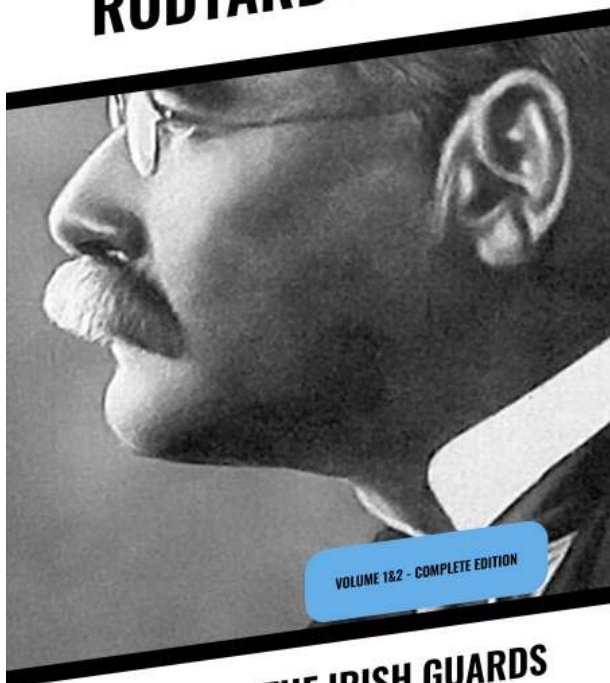
VOLUME 1&2 - COMPLETE EDITION

THE IRISH GUARDS IN THE GREAT WAR



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Rudyard Kipling

The Irish Guards in the Great War

Volume 1&2 - Complete Edition

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The Irish Guards in the Great War - I

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Introduction

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These volumes try to give soberly and with what truth is possible, the experiences of both battalions of the Irish Guards from 1914 to 1918. The point of view is the battalions', and the facts mainly follow the Regimental Diaries, supplemented by the few private letters and documents which such a war made possible, and by some tales that have gathered round men and their actions.

As evidence is released, historians may be able to reconstruct what happened in or behind the battle-line; what motives and necessities swayed the actors; and who stood up or failed under his burden. But a battalion's field is bounded by its own vision. Even within these limits, there is large room for error. Witnesses to phases of fights die and are dispersed; the ground over which they fought is battered out of recognition in a few hours; survivors confuse dates, places, and personalities, and in the trenches, the monotony of the waiting days and the repetition-work of repairs breed mistakes and false judgments. Men grow doubtful or oversure, and, in all good faith, give directly opposed versions. The clear sight of a comrade so mangled that he seems to have been long dead is burnt in on one brain to the exclusion of all else that happened that day. The shock of an exploded dump, shaking down a firmament upon the landscape, dislocates memory throughout half a battalion; and so on in all matters, till the end of laborious enquiry is too often the opening of fresh confusion. When to this are added the personal prejudices and misunderstandings of men under heavy strain, carrying clouded memories of orders half given or half heard, amid scenes that pass like nightmares, the only wonder to the

compiler of these records has been that any sure fact whatever should be retrieved out of the whirlpool of war.

It seemed to him best, then, to abandon all idea of such broad and balanced narratives as will be put forward by experts, and to limit himself to matters which directly touched the men's lives and fortunes. Nor has he been too careful to correct the inferences of the time by the knowledge of later events. From first to last, the Irish Guards, like the rest of our armies, knew little of what was going on round them. Probably they knew less at the close of the war than at the beginning when our forces were so small that each man felt himself somebody indeed, and so stood to be hunted through the heat from Mons to Meaux, turned again to suffer beneath the Soupir ridges, and endured the first hideous winter of the Salient where, wet, almost weaponless, but unbroken, he helped in the long miracle of holding the line.

But the men of '14 and '15, and what meagre records of their day were safe to keep, have long been lost; while the crowded years between remove their battles across dead Belgian towns and villages as far from us as the fights in Homer.

Doubtless, all will be reconstructed to the satisfaction of future years when, if there be memory beyond the grave, the ghosts may laugh at the neatly groomed histories. Meantime, we can take it for granted that the old Regular Army of England passed away in the mud of Flanders in less than a year. In training, morale, endurance, courage, and devotion the earth did not hold its like, but it possessed neither the numbers, guns, nor equipment necessary for the type of war that overtook it. The fact of its unpreparedness has been extolled as proof of the purity of its country's ideals, which must be great consolation to all concerned. But, how slowly that equipment was furnished, how inadequate were our first attempts at bombs, trench-mortars, duck-boards, wiring, and the rest, may be divined

through the loyal and guarded allusions in the Diaries. Nor do private communications give much hint of it, for one of the marvels of that marvellous time was the silence of those concerned on everything that might too much distress their friends at home. The censorship had imposed this as a matter of precaution, but only the spirit of the officers could have backed the law so completely; and, as better days came, their early makeshifts and contrivances passed out of remembrance with their early dead. But the sufferings of our Armies were constant. They included wet and cold in due season, dirt always, occasional vermin, exposure, extreme fatigue, and the hourly incidence of death in every shape along the front line and, later in the furthest back-areas where the enemy aeroplanes harried their camps. And when our Regular troops had been expended, these experiences were imposed upon officers and men compelled to cover, within a few months, the long years of training that should go to the making of a soldier—men unbroken even to the disturbing impact of crowds and like experiences, which the conscript accepts from his youth. Their short home-leaves gave them sudden changes to the tense home atmosphere where, under cover of a whirl of “entertainment” they and their kin wearied themselves to forget and escape a little from that life, on the brink of the next world, whose guns they could hear summoning in the silences between their talk. Yet, some were glad to return—else why should youngsters of three years’ experience have found themselves upon a frosty night, on an ironbound French road, shouting aloud for joy as they heard the stammer of a machine-gun over the rise, and turned up the well-known trench that led to their own dug-out and their brethren from whom they had been separated by the vast interval of ninety-six hours? Many have confessed to the same delight in their work, as there were others to whom almost every hour was frankly detestable except for the companionship that revealed them one to another till the

chances of war separated the companions. And there were, too, many, almost children, of whom no record remains. They came out from Warley with the constantly renewed drafts, lived the span of a Second Lieutenant's life and were spent. Their intimates might preserve, perhaps, memories of a promise cut short, recollections of a phrase that stuck, a chance-seen act of bravery or of kindness. The Diaries give their names and fates with the conventional expressions of regret. In most instances, the compiler has let the mere fact suffice; since, to his mind, it did not seem fit to heap words on the doom.

For the same reason, he has not dealt with each instance of valour, leaving it to stand in the official language in which it was acknowledged. The rewards represent but a very small proportion of the skill, daring, and heroism actually noted; for no volume could hold the full tale of all that was done, either in the way of duty, under constraint of necessity and desire to keep alive, or through joy and pleasure in achieving great deeds.

Here the Irish rank and file by temperament excelled. They had all their race's delight in the drama of things; and, whatever the pinch—whether ambushed warfare or hand-to-hand shock, or an insolently perfect parade after long divorce from the decencies—could be depended upon to advance the regimental honour. Their discipline, of course, was that of the Guards, which, based upon tradition, proven experience, and knowledge of the human heart, adjusts itself to the spirit of each of its battalions. Though the material of that body might be expended twice in a twelvemonth, the leaven that remained worked on the new supplies at once and from the first. In the dingy out-of-date barracks at Warley the Regimental Reserves gathered and grew into a full-fledged Second Battalion with reserves of its own, and to these the wounded officers and men sent home to be repatched, explained the arts and needs of a war which, apparently always at a stand, changed character

every month. After the utter inadequacy of its opening there was a period of handmade bombs and of loaded sticks for close work; of nippers for the abundant wire left uncut by our few guns; of remedies for trench-feet; or medicaments against lockjaw from the grossly manured Belgian dirt, and of fancy timberings to hold up sliding trenches. In due course, when a few set battles, which sometimes gained several hundred yards, had wasted their many thousand lives, infallible forms of attack and defence developed themselves, were tried and generally found wanting, while scientific raids, the evolution of specialists, and the mass of regulated detail that more and more surrounded the life of the trenches, occupied their leisure between actions. Our battalions played themselves into the game at the awful price that must be paid for improvisation, however cheery; enduring with a philosophy that may have saved the war, the deviations and delays made necessary by the demands of the various political and other organisations at home.

In the same spirit they accepted the inevitable breakdowns in the business of war-by-experiment; for it is safe to say that there was hardly an operation in which platoons, companies, regiments, brigades, or divisions were not left with one or both flanks in the air. Among themselves, officers and men discussing such matters make it quite clear how and why such and such units broke, were misled, or delayed on their way into the line. But when a civilian presumes to assist, all ranks unite against his uninformed criticisms. He is warned that, once over the top, no plans hold, for the machine-gun and the lie of the ground dictate the situation to the platoon-commander on whom all things depend and who sees, perhaps, fifty yards about him. There are limits, too, of shock and exhaustion beyond which humanity cannot be pressed without paying toll later. For which cause it may happen that a Division that has borne long agony unflinching, and sincerely believes itself capable of yet more, will, for no reason then apparent (at almost the

mere rumour of noises in the night) collapse ignominiously on the same ground where, a month later, with two thirds of its strength casualties, it cuts coolly and cleanly to its goal. And its fellows, who have borne the same yoke, allow for this.

The compiler of these records, therefore, has made little attempt to put forward any theory of what might or should have happened if things had gone according to plan; and has been scrupulous to avoid debatable issues of bad staff-work or faulty generalship. They were not lacking in the war, but the broad sense of justice in all who suffered from them, recognising that all were equally amateurs, saved the depression of repeated failures from turning into demoralisation.

Here, again, the Irish were reported by those who knew them best, to have been lenient in their judgments, though their private speech was as unrestrained as that of any other body of bewildered and overmastered men. "Wearing down" the enemy through a period of four years and three months, during most of which time that enemy dealt losses at least equal to those he received, tested human virtue upon a scale that the world had never dreamed of. The Irish Guards stood to the test without flaw.

They were in no sense any man's command. They needed minute comprehension, quick sympathy, and inflexible justice, which they repaid by individual devotion and a collective good-will that showed best when things were at their utter worst. Their moods naturally varied with the weather and the burden of fatigues (actions merely kill, while fatigue breaks men's hearts), but their morale was constant because their unofficial life, on which morale hinges, made for contentment. The discipline of the Guards, demanding the utmost that can be exacted of the man, requires of the officer unrelenting care of his men under all conditions. This care can be a source of sorrow and friction in rigid or over-conscientious hands, till, with the best will in

the world, a battalion may be reduced to the mental state of nurse-harried children. Or, conversely, an adored company commander, bold as a lion, may, for lack of it, turn his puzzled company into a bear-garden. But there is an elasticity in Celtic psychology that does not often let things reach breaking-point either way; and their sense of humour and social duty—it is a race more careful to regard each other's feelings than each other's lives—held them as easily as they were strictly associated. A jest; the grave hearing out of absurd complaints that might turn to tragedy were the hearing not accorded; a prompt soothing down of gloomy, inured pride; a piece of flagrant buffoonery sanctioned, even shared, but never taken advantage of, went far in dark days to build up that understanding and understood inner life of the two battalions to which, now, men look back lovingly across their civilian years. It called for a devotion from all, little this side of idolatry; and was shown equally by officers, N.C.O.'s, and men, stretcher-bearers, cooks, orderlies, and not least by the hard-bit, fantastic old soldiers, used for odd duties, who faithfully hobbled about France alongside the rush of wonderful young blood.

Were instances given, the impression might be false, for the tone and temper of the time that set the pace has gone over. But while it lasted, the men made their officers and the officers their men by methods as old as war itself; and their Roman Catholic priests, fearless even in a community none too regardful of Nature's first law, formed a subtle and supple link between both. That the priest, ever in waiting upon Death or pain, should learn to magnify his office was as natural as that doctors and front-line commanders should find him somewhat under their feet when occasion called for the secular, not the spiritual, arm. That Commanding Officers, to keep peace and save important pillars of their little society, should first advise and finally order the padre not to expose himself wantonly in forward posts or attacks,

was equally of a piece with human nature; and that the priests, to the huge content of the men, should disregard the order ("What's a casualty compared to a soul?") was most natural of all. Then the question would come up for discussion in the trenches and dug-outs, where everything that any one had on his mind was thrashed out through the long, quiet hours, or dropped and picked up again with the rise and fall of shell-fire. They speculated on all things in Heaven and earth as they worked in piled filth among the carcasses of their fellows, lay out under the stars on the eves of open battle, or vegetated through a month's feeding and idleness between one sacrifice and the next.

But none have kept minutes of those incredible symposia that made for them a life apart from the mad world which was their portion; nor can any pen recreate that world's brilliance, squalor, unreason, and heaped boredom. Recollection fades from men's minds as common life closes over them, till even now they wonder what part they can ever have had in the shrewd, man-hunting savages who answered to their names so few years ago.

It is for the sake of these initiated that the compiler has loaded his records with detail and seeming triviality, since in a life where Death ruled every hour, nothing was trivial, and bald references to villages, billets, camps, fatigues, and sports, as well as hints of tales that can never now fully be told, carry each their separate significance to each survivor, intimate and incommunicable as family jests.

As regards other readers, the compiler dares no more than hope that some of those who have no care for old history, or that larger number who at present are putting away from themselves odious memories, may find a little to interest, or even comfort, in these very details and flatnesses that make up the unlovely, yet superb, life endured for their sakes.

Mons To La Bassée

(1914)

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At 5 P.M. on Tuesday, August 4, 1914, the 1st Battalion of the Irish Guards received orders to mobilize for war against Germany. They were then quartered at Wellington Barracks and, under the mobilization scheme, formed part of the 4th (Guards) Brigade, Second Division, First Army Corps. The Brigade consisted of:

- The 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards.
- The 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards.
- The 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards.
- The 1st Battalion Irish Guards.

Mobilization was completed on August 8. Next day, being Sunday, the Roman Catholics of the Battalion paraded under the Commanding Officer, Lieut.Colonel the Hon. G. H. Morris, and went to Westminster Cathedral where Cardinal Bourne preached; and on the morning of the 11th August Field-Marshal Lord Roberts and Lady Aileen Roberts made a farewell speech to them in Wellington Barracks. This was the last time that Lord Roberts saw the Battalion of which he was the first Commander-in-Chief.

On the 12th August the Battalion entrained for Southampton in two trains at Nine Elms Station, each detachment being played out of barracks to the station by the band. They were short one officer, as 2nd Lieutenant St. J. R. Pigott had fallen ill, and an officer just gazetted—2nd Lieutenant Sir Gerald Burke, Bart.—could not accompany them as he had not yet got his uniform. They embarked at Southampton on a hot still day in the P.&O. S.S. *Novara*. This was a long and tiring operation, since every one was new to

embarkation-duty, and, owing to the tide, the ship's bulwarks stood twenty-five feet above the quay. The work was not finished till 4 P.M. when most of the men had been under arms for twelve hours. Just before leaving, Captain Sir Delves Broughton, Bart., was taken ill and had to be left behind. A telegram was sent to Headquarters, asking for Captain H. Hamilton Berners to take his place, and the *Novara* cleared at 7 P.M. As dusk fell, she passed H.M.S. *Formidable* off Ryde and exchanged signals with her. The battle ship's last message to the Battalion was to hope that they would get "plenty of fighting." Many of the officers at that moment were sincerely afraid that they might be late for the war!

The following is the list of officers who went out with the Battalion that night:

Lieut.-Col. Hon. G. H. Morris

Commanding Officer.

Major H. F. Crichton

Senior Major.

Captain Lord Desmond FitzGerald

Adjutant.

Lieut. E. J. F. Gough

Transport Officer.

Lieut. E. B. Greer

M. Gun Officer.

Hon. Lieut. H. Hickie

Quartermaster.

Lieut. H. J. S. Shields (R.A.M.C.)

Medical. Officer.

Lieut. Hon. Aubrey Herbert, M.P.

Interpreter.

No. 1 Company.

Capt. Hon. A. E. Mulholland.

Lieut. C. A. S. Walker.

Capt. Lord John Hamilton.

2nd Lieut. N. L. Woodroffe.

Lieut. Hon. H. R. Alexander.

2nd Lieut. J. Livingstone-Learmonth.

No. 2 Company.

Major H. A. Herbert Stepney.

Lieut. J. S. N. FitzGerald.

Lieut. W. E. Hope.

Capt. J. N. Guthrie.

2nd Lieut. O. Hughes-Onslow.

Lieut. E. J. F. Gough.

No. 3 Company.

Capt. Sir Delves Broughton, Bart.
(replaced by Capt. H. Hamilton Berners).

Lieut. Hon. Hugh Gough.

Lieut. Lord Guernsey.

2nd Lieut. Viscount Castlerosse.

Capt. Hon. T. E. Vesey.

No. 4 Company.

Capt. C. A. Tisdall.

Lieut. Lord Robert Innes-Ker.

Capt. A. A. Perceval.

Lieut. W. C. N. Reynolds.

2nd Lieut. J. T. P. Roberts.

Lieut. R. Blacker-Douglass.

Details at the Base.

Capt. Lord Arthur Hay.

2nd Lieut. Sir Gerald Burke, Bart.

They reached Havre at 6 A.M. on August 13, a fiercely hot day, and, tired after a sleepless night aboard ship, and a long wait, in a hot, tin-roofed shed, for some missing men, marched three miles out of the town to Rest Camp No. 2 "in a large field at Sanvic, a suburb of Havre at the top of the hill." Later, the city herself became almost a suburb to the vast rest-camps round it. Here they received an enthusiastic welcome from the French, and were first largely introduced to the wines of the country, for many maidens lined the steep road and offered bowls of drinks to the wearied.

Next day (August 14) men rested a little, looking at this strange, bright France with strange eyes, and bathed in the sea; and Captain H. Berners, replacing Sir Delves Broughton, joined. At eleven o'clock they entrained at Havre Station

under secret orders for the Front. The heat broke in a terrible thunderstorm that soaked the new uniforms. The crowded train travelled north all day, receiving great welcomes everywhere, but no one knowing what its destination might be. After more than seventeen hours' slow progress by roads that were not revealed then or later, they halted at Wassigny, at a quarter to eleven on the night of August 15, and, unloading in hot darkness, bivouacked at a farm near the station.

On the morning of August 16 they marched to Vadencourt, where, for the first time, they went into billets. The village, a collection of typical white-washed tiled houses with a lovely old church in the centre, lay out pleasantly by the side of a poplar-planted stream. The 2nd Coldstream Guards were also billeted here; the Headquarters of the 4th Guards Brigade, the 2nd Grenadier Guards, and 3rd Coldstream being at Grougis. All supplies, be it noted, came from a village of the ominous name of Boue, which—as they were to learn through the four winters to follow—means “mud.”

At Vadencourt they lay three days while the men were being inoculated against enteric. A few had been so treated before leaving Wellington Barracks, but, in view of the hurried departure, 90 per cent. remained to be dealt with. The Diary remarks that for two days “the Battalion was not up to much.” Major H. Crichton fell sick here.

On the 20th August the march towards Belgium of the Brigade began, *via* Etreux and Fesmy (where Lieutenant and Quartermaster Hickie went sick and had to be sent back to railhead) to Maroilles, where the Battalion billeted, August 21, and thence, *via* Pont sur Sambre and Hargnies, to La Longueville, August 22. Here, being then five miles east of Malplaquet, the Battalion heard the first sound of the guns of the war, far off; not knowing that, at the end of all, they would hear them cease almost on that very spot.

At three o'clock in the morning of August 23 the Brigade marched *via* Riez de l'Erelle into Belgian territory and through Blaregnies towards Mons where it was dimly understood that some sort of battle was in the making. But it was *not* understood that eighty thousand British troops with three hundred guns disposed between Condé, through Mons towards Binche, were meeting twice that number of Germans on their front, plus sixty thousand Germans with two hundred and thirty guns trying to turn their left flank, while a quarter of a million Germans, with close on a thousand guns, were driving in the French armies on the British right from Charleroi to Namur, across the Meuse and the Sambre. This, in substance, was the situation at Mons. It supplied a sufficient answer to the immortal question, put by one of the pillars of the Battalion, a drill sergeant, who happened to arrive from home just as that situation had explained itself, and found his battalion steadily marching south. "Fwhat's all this talk about a retreat?" said he, and strictly rebuked the shouts of laughter that followed.¹

The Retreat From Mons

The Brigade was first ordered to take up a position at Bois Lahant, close to the dirtier suburbs of Mons which is a fair city on a hill, but the order was cancelled when it was discovered that the Fifth Division was already there. Eventually, the Irish Guards were told to move from the village of Quevy le Petit, where they had expected to go into billets, to Harveng. Here they were ordered, with the 2nd Grenadier Guards, to support the Fifth Division on a chalk ridge from Harmignies to the Mons road, while the other two battalions of the Brigade (the 2nd and 3rd Coldstream Guards) took up position north-east of Harveng. Their knowledge of what might be in front of them or who was in support was, naturally, small. It was a hot, still evening, no

Germans were visible, but shrapnel fell ahead of the Battalion as it moved in artillery formation across the rolling, cropped lands. One single far-ranging rifle-bullet landed with a *phtt* in the chalk between two officers, one of whom turning to the other laughed and said, "Ah! Now we can say we have been under fire." A few more shells arrived as the advance to the ridge went forward, and the Brigade reached the seventh kilometre-stone on the Harmignies-Mons road, below the ridge, about 6 P.M. on the 23rd August. The Irish Rifles, commanded by Colonel Bird, D.S.O., were fighting here, and Nos. 1 and 2 Companies of the Irish Guards went up to reinforce it. This was the first time that the Battalion had been personally shelled and five men were wounded. The guns ceased about dusk, and there was very little fire from the German trenches, which were rather in the nature of scratch-holes, ahead of them. That night, too, was the first on which the troops saw a searchlight used. They enjoyed also their first experience of digging themselves in, the which they did so casually that veterans of after years would hold up that "trench" as a sample of "the valour of ignorance." At midnight, the Irish Rifles were ordered to retire while the Irish Guards covered their retirement; but so far they had been in direct contact with nothing.

The Battalion heard confusedly of the fall of Namur and, it may be presumed, of the retirement of the French armies on the right of the British. There was little other news of any sort, and what there was, not cheering. On front and flank of the British armies the enemy stood in more than overwhelming strength, and it came to a question of retiring, as speedily as might be, before the flood swallowed what remained. So the long retreat of our little army began.

The large outlines of it are as follows: The entire British Force, First and Second Army Corps, fell back to Bavai—the First without serious difficulty, the Second fighting rear-guard actions through the day. At Brava the two Corps diverged, not to unite again till they should reach Betz on

the 1st September. The Second Army Corps, reinforced by the Fourth Division, took the roads through Le Quesnoy, Solesme, Le Cateau, St. Quentin, Ham, Nesle, Noyon, and Crépy-en-Valois; the First paralleling them, roughly, through Landrecies, Vadencourt, La Fère, Pasly by Soissons, and Villers-Cotterêts.

At 2 o'clock in the morning of August 24 the Battalion, "having covered the retirement of all the other troops," retired through the position which the 2nd and 3rd Coldstream Guards had taken up, to Quevy le Petit, where it was ordered, with the 2nd Grenadiers, to entrench another position north of Quevy le Petit (from the third kilometre-stone on the Genly-Quevy le Petit road to the tenth kilometre-stone on the Mons-Bettignies road). This it did while the whole of the Second Division retired through the position at 4 P.M., the Battalion acting as rear-guard. Their notion of "digging-in" was to cut fire-steps in the side of the handy bank of any road. At nine o'clock that night the Battalion "came out of Belgium by the same road that it had marched into Belgium" through Blaregnies, past Bavai where the First and Second Army Corps diverged, and through La Longueville to Malgarni, where they bivouacked in an orchard "having been forty-four hours under arms." Here the first mail from England arrived, and was distributed by torchlight under the apple-trees in the warm night.

On the afternoon of August 25 the Battalion reached Landrecies, an unlovely, long-streeted town in closely cultivated country. The German pressure was heavy behind them, and that evening the 3rd Coldstream Guards on outpost duty to the north-west of Landrecies, on the Mormal road, were attacked, and, as history shows, beat off that attack in a night-fight of some splendour. The Battalion turned out and blocked the pavé entrance to the town with improvised barricades, which they lined, of stones, tables, chairs, carts, and pianos; relieved the Coldstream at 1.30 A.M., August 26; and once again covered the retirement of

the Brigade out of the town towards Etreux. The men were very tired, so weary indeed that many of them slept by the roadside while waiting to relieve the Coldstreams at Landrecies fight. That night was the first they heard wounded men scream. A couple of Irish Guards officers, sleeping so deeply that only the demolition by shell-fire of the house next door waked them, were left behind here, but after twenty-four hours of fantastic and, at that time, almost incredible adventures, rejoined safely next day. It was recorded also that one of the regimental drums was seen and heard going down Landrecies main street in the darkness, strung on the fore-leg of a gun-horse who had stepped into it as a battery went south. A battalion cooker, the sparks flying from it, passed like a fire-engine hastening to a fire, and men found time to laugh and point at the strange thing.

At Etreux, where with the rest of the Brigade the Battalion entrenched itself after the shallow pattern of the time, it had its first sight of a German aeroplane which flew over its trenches and dropped a bomb that "missed a trench by twenty yards." The Battalion fired at it, and it "flew away like a wounded bird and eventually came down and was captured by another division." Both sides were equally inexperienced in those days in the details of air war. All that day they heard the sound of what they judged was "a battle in the direction of Le Cateau." This was the Second Army Corps and a single Division of the Third Corps under Smith-Dorrien interrupting our retirement to make a stand against four or more German Army Corps and six hundred guns. The result of that action caused the discerning General von Kluck to telegraph that he held the Expeditionary Force "surrounded by a ring of steel," and Berlin behung itself with flags. This also the Battalion did not know. They were more interested in the fact that they had lost touch with the Second Division; and that their Commanding Officer had told the officers that, so far as he could make out, they were

surrounded and had better dig in deeper and wait on. As no one knew particularly where they might be in all France, and as the night of the 26th was very wet, the tired men slept undisturbedly over the proposition, to resume their retreat next day (August 27) down the valley of the Sambre, through Vénérolles, Tupigny, Vadencourt, Noyales, to the open glaring country round Mont d'Origny where the broad road to St. Quentin crosses the river. It was in reserve that day, and the next (August 28) was advance-guard to the Brigade as the retirement continued through Châtillon, Berthenicourt, and Moy to Vendeuil and the cross-roads west of the Vendeuil-La Fère road while the Brigade marched on to Bertaucourt. After the Brigade had passed, the Battalion acted as rear-guard into Bertaucourt. Here No. 2 Company, under Major Stepney, was sent to Beautor to assist a section of the Royal Engineers in demolishing a bridge across the river there—an operation performed without incident—and in due course joined up with the Battalion again. By this time, the retreat, as one who took part in it says, had become “curiously normal”—the effect, doubtless, of that continued over-exertion which reduces men to the state of sleep-walkers. There was a ten minutes' halt every hour, on which the whole Battalion dropped where it stood and slept. At night, some of them began to see lights, like those of comfortable billets by the roadside which, for some curious reason or other, could never be reached. Others found themselves asleep, on their feet, and even when they lay down to snatch sleep, the march moved on, and wearied them in their dreams. Owing to the heat and the dust, many suffered from sore feet and exhaustion, and, since ambulance accommodation was limited, they had to be left behind to follow on if, and as best, they could. But those who fell out were few, and the Diary remarks approvingly that “on the whole the Battalion marched very well and march-discipline was good.” Neither brigade nor battalion commanders knew anything of what was ahead or

behind, but it seemed that, since they could not get into Paris before the Germans and take first-class tickets to London, they would all be cut off and destroyed; which did not depress them unduly. At all events, the Battalion one evening forgot its weariness long enough to take part in the chase and capture of a stray horse of Belgian extraction, which, after its ample lack of manners and mouth had been proved, they turned over for instruction and reformation to the Transport.

From Bertaucourt, then, where the Battalion spent another night in an orchard, it marched very early on the 30th August to Terny *via* Deuillet, Servais, Basse Forêt de Coucy, Folembay, Coucy-le-Château, then magnificent and untouched—all closer modelled country and, if possible, hotter than the bare lands they had left. Thence from Terny to Pasly, N.W. of Soissons. Here they lay down by moonlight in a field, and here an officer dreamed that the alarm had been given and that they must move on. In this nightmare he rose and woke up all platoon-officers and the C.O.; next, laboriously and methodically, his own company, and last of all himself, whom he found shaking and swearing at a man equally drunk with fatigue.

On the 31st August the Battalion took position as right flank-guard from 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. on the high ground near Le Murger Farm and bivouacked at Soucy: So far, there had been little fighting for them since Landrecies, though they moved with the comforting knowledge that an unknown number of the enemy, thoroughly provided with means of transportation, were in fixed pursuit, just on the edge of a sky-line full of unseen guns urging the British always to move back.

Villers-cotterêts

On the 1st September, the anniversary of Sedan, the Battalion was afoot at 2 A.M. and with the 2nd Coldstream Guards acted as rear-guard under the Commanding Officer, Lieut.-Colonel the Hon. G. Morris. There had been heavy dew in the night, followed at dawn by thin, miserable rain, when they breakfasted, among wet lucerne and fields of stacked corn, on the edge of the deep Villers-Cotterêts beech-forests. They fell back into them on a rumour of advancing cavalry, who turned out to be troops of German infantry running from stack to stack and filtering into the forest on their either flank. Their first position was the Vivières Puiseux line, a little south-west of Soucy village: the Battalion to the right of the Soucy-Villers-Cotterêts road, and the Coldstream to the left on a front of not more than a mile. Their second position, as far as can be made out, was the Rond de la Reine, a mile farther south, where the deep soft forest-roads from Soucy and Vivières join on their way to Villers-Cotterêts. The enemy ran in upon them from all sides, and the action resolved itself into blind fighting in the gloom of the woods, with occasional glimpses of men crossing the rides, or firing from behind tree-boles. The Germans were very cautious at first, because our fire-discipline, as we fell back, gave them the impression that the forest was filled with machine-guns instead of mere trained men firing together sustainedly. The morning wet cleared, and the day grew close and stifling. There was no possibility of keeping touch or conveying orders. Since the German advance-guard was, by comparison, an army, all that could be done was to hold back as long as possible the attacks on front and flank, and to retain some sense of direction in the bullet-torn woods, where, when a man dropped in the bracken and bramble, he disappeared. But throughout the fight, till the instant of his death, Lieut.-Colonel the Hon. G. Morris, commanding the Battalion, rode from one point to another of an action that was all front, controlling, cheering, and chaffing his men. And so that

heathen battle, in half darkness, continued, with all units of the 4th Brigade confusedly engaged, till in the afternoon the Battalion, covered by the 2nd Coldstream, re-formed, still in the woods, a mile north of the village of Pisseleux. Here the roll was called, and it was found that the following officers were missing: Lieut.-Colonel the Hon. G. Morris, Major H. F. Crichton, Captain C. A. Tisdall, Lieutenant Lord Robert Inns-Ker, 2nd Lieutenant Viscount Castlerosse, Lieutenant the Hon. Aubrey Herbert, and Lieutenant Shields, R.A.M.C.

Captain Lord Desmond FitzGerald and Lieutenant Blacker-Douglass were wounded and left with the field-ambulance. Lieut.-Colonel Morris, Major Crichton, and Captain Tisdall had been killed. The others had been wounded and captured by the Germans, who treated them with reasonable humanity at Villers-Cotterêts till they were released on September 12 by the French advance following the first Battle of the Marne. Colonel Morris's body was afterwards identified and buried with that of Captain Tisdall; and one long rustic-fenced grave, perhaps the most beautiful of all resting-places in France, on a slope of the forest off the dim road, near the Rond de la Reine, holds our dead in that action. It was made and has been religiously tended since by Dr. Moufflers, the Mayor of the town, and his wife.

The death of Colonel Morris, an officer beloved and a man noticeably brave among brave men, was a heavy loss to the Battalion he commanded, and whose temper he knew so well. In the thick of the fight during a lull in the firing, when some blind shellfire opened, he called to the men: "D'you hear that? They're doing that to frighten you." To which someone replied with simple truth: "If that's what they're after, they might as well stop. They succeeded with *me* hours ago."

As a matter of fact, the men behaved serenely, as may be proved by this tale. They were working their way, well under rifle-fire, across an opening in the forest, when some

of them stopped to pick blackberries that attracted their attention. To these their sergeant, very deliberately, said: "I shouldn't mind them berries, lads. There's may be worrums in 'em." It was a speech worthy of a hero of Dumas, whose town Villers-Cotterêts is, by right of birth. Yet once, during their further retirement towards Pisseleux, they were badly disconcerted. A curious private prodded a hornets' nest on a branch with his bayonet, and the inhabitants came out in force. Then there was real confusion: not restored by the sight of bald-headed reservists frantically slapping with their caps at one hornet while others stung them on their defenceless scalps. So they passed out of the darkness and the greenery of the forest, which, four years later, was to hide a great French Army, and launch it forth to turn the tide of 1918.

Their march continued until 11 P.M. that night, when the Battalion arrived at Betz, where the First and Second Army Corps rejoined each other once more. No supplies were received that night nor the following day (September 2), when the Battalion reached Esbly, where they bathed—with soap, be it noted—in the broad and quiet Marne, and an ox was requisitioned, potatoes were dug up from a field, and some sort of meal served out.

The Diary here notes "Thus ended the retreat from Mons." This is not strictly correct. In twelve days the British Army had been driven back 140 miles as the crow flies from Mons, and farther, of course, by road. There was yet to be a further retirement of some fifteen miles south of Esbly ere the general advance began, but September 3 marks, as nearly: as may be, slack-water ere the ebb that followed of the triumphant German tidal wave through Belgium almost up to the outer forts of Paris. That advance had, at the last moment, swerved aside from Paris towards the southeast, and in doing so had partially exposed its right flank to the Sixth French Army. General Joffre took instant advantage of the false step to wheel his Sixth Army to the east, so that its

line ran due north and east from Ermenonville to Lagny; at the same time throwing forward the left of his line. The British Force lay between Lagny and Cortecan, filling the gap between the Sixth and Fifth French Armies, and was still an effective weapon which the enemy supposed they had broken for good. But our harried men realized no more than that, for the moment, there seemed to be a pause in the steady going back. The confusion, the dust, the heat, continued while the armies manoeuvred for position; and scouts and aerial reconnaissance reported more and more German columns of all arms pressing down from the east and north-east.

On September 3 the 4th Brigade moved from Esbly, in the great loops of the Marne, through Meaux to the neighbourhood of Pierre Levée, where the Battalion fed once more on requisitioned beef,, potatoes, and apples.

The Advance to the Aisne

Next day (September 4), while the British Army was getting into position in the process of changing front to the right, the 4th Brigade had to cover a retirement of the 5th Brigade between Pierre Levée and Le Bertrand, and the Battalion dug itself in near a farm (Grand Loge) on the Pierre Levée-Giremoutiers road in preparation for a rear-guard attack that did not arrive. They remained in position with what the Diary pathetically refers to as “the machine-gun,” till they were relieved in the evening by the Worcesters, and reached bivouac at Le Bertrand at one o’clock on the morning of the 5th September. That day they bivouacked near Fontenay, and picked up some much-needed mess-tins, boots, putties and the like with which to make good more immediate waste.

On the 6th they marched through Rozoy (where they saw an old priest standing at the door of his church, and to him

the men bared their heads mechanically, till he, openly surprised, gave them his blessing) to Mont Plaisir to gain touch between the First and Second Divisions of the English Army. Major Stepney, the C.O., reported to Headquarters 1st Brigade at 9 A.M. half a mile north-east of Rozoy. At the same moment cavalry scouts brought news of two enemy columns, estimated at a thousand each, approaching from the direction of Vaudoy. Nos. 3 and 4 Companies were ordered forward to prolong the line of the First Division, while Nos. 1 and 2 Companies "with the machine-gun" entrenched themselves on the Mont Plaisir road.

In the afternoon Lieutenant the Hon. R. H. Alexander, reconnoitring with a platoon in the direction of the village of Villeneuve, which was to be occupied, reported a hostile battery at Le Plessis had fired on the Battalion and killed 4 men and wounded 11. One of these, Sergeant O'Loughlin, died later. This was the Battalion's first fighting since Villers-Cotterêts, and they went into action while the bells of the quiet countryside rang for church. The battery was put out of action by our guns in half an hour, Villeneuve occupied without further opposition, and the Battalion bivouacked at Tonquin on the night of the 6th September. The enemy had realised the threat to their flank in General Joffre's new dispositions, and under cover of rear-guard and delaying actions were withdrawing north all along their line.

On the 7th September the Battalion made a forced march from Tonquin to Rebais, where there was a German column, but the advance-guard of the Brigade was held up at St. Simeon till dark and the Battalion had to bivouac a couple of miles outside Rebais. The German force withdrew from Rebais on the afternoon of the 7th, and on the 8th the Brigade's advance continued through Rebais northward in the direction of Boitron, which lay just across the Petit Morin River. Heavy machine-gun fire from some thick woods along the rolling ground, across the river, checked the advance-guard (the 3rd Coldstream) and the two companies of the

Irish Guards who supported them. The woods, the river valley, and the village of Boitron were searched by our guns, and on the renewal of the attack the river was crossed and Boitron occupied, the enemy being heavily shelled as he retired. Here the Battalion re-formed and pressed forward in a heavy rainstorm, through a flank attack of machine-guns from woods on the left. There they charged, while a battery of our field-guns fired point-blank into the thickets, and captured a German machine-gun company of six guns (which seemed to them, at the time, a vast number), 3 officers, and 90 rank and file. Here, too, in the confusion of the fighting they came under fire of our own artillery, an experience that was to become familiar to them, and the C.O. ordered the companies to assemble at Ferme le Cas Rouge, a village near by where they bivouacked for the night. They proudly shut up in the farm-yard the first prisoners they had ever taken; told off two servants to wait upon a wounded major; took the parole of the two other officers and invited them to a dinner of chicken and red wine. The Battalion, it will be observed, knew nothing then except the observances of ordinary civilized warfare. 2nd Lieutenant A. Fitzgerald and a draft arrived that day.

This small affair of Boitron Wood was the Irish Guards' share of the immense mixed Battle of the Marne, now raging along all the front. Its result and the capture of the machine-guns cheered them a little.

The next five days—September 9 to 13—had nothing but tedious marching and more tedious halts and checks, due to the congestion of traffic and the chaos in the villages that had been entered, sacked, defiled and abandoned by the enemy. The Marne was crossed on the 9th at Charly, where—the inhabitants said that the Germans detailed for the job had been too drunk to effect it—a bridge had been left ready for demolition, but intact, and by this means the First and Second Divisions crossed the river. The weather turned wet, with heavy showers; greatcoats had been lost or