

## **WORLD WAR 1 DIARY OF Gunner Alexander John McKee [pdf version]**

**NO. 26387 - 4/5<sup>TH</sup> Division Artillery Column, Australian Field Artillery**

**Alexander John McKee** was a remarkable man! His daughter, Lesly (McKee) Gorbach, has recently transcribed the World War 1 Diary of her father, and we include it in our McKee family website McKeeFamilyfromDonegal.com. Lesly has also sent some background notes on her father, which we include here to introduce his diary, and a picture of Alexander in WW1 uniform. This information is available on our website as HTML files, and it is also available as a pdf file for easier downloading, reading and printing.

***ALEXANDER JOHN MCKEE** - notes by daughter Lesly (McKee) Gorbach, June 2014*

*Alexander McKee was born in Orange, NSW, 23rd September, 1882, one of nine children.*

*After leaving primary school he was apprenticed to a plumber but was soon sacked for reading on the job. He then studied draughting and was employed by the CSR Company as a draughtsman in Fiji.*

*He later travelled to the U.S.A working on construction sites and studied Law at an American university. He considered taking out U.S. citizenship. However, when war was declared he came back to Australia and joined the A.I.F.*

*His war service, as described in his diary, was in France as a Gunner on field artillery, responsible for laying communication lines. His war diary has been recently transcribed by Lesly.*

*Towards the end of the war he was wounded in the upper right arm by shrapnel which caused him considerable pain from time to time during the rest of his life. He was sent back to England when he was wounded but after six months was deemed fit to return to France where he served until the end of the war.*

*Always a keen draughtsman he made many sketches of battle scenes during service and was interested in the architectural and historic aspects of buildings and scenes.*

*The diary details horrific accounts of battle scenes and loss of life and this affected him for the rest of his life.*

*After the war he stayed in London and studied civil engineering at the London Polytech and spent time visiting cathedrals and other historic buildings.*

*On returning to Australia he married Gweneth Madden and had two children, a daughter, Lesly and a son, Ian.*

*He continued his studies in civil engineering with the Institution of Engineers, Australia and qualified as an associate of the Institution. He then worked as a District Engineer with the Department of Main Roads, NSW, in a number of areas of NSW.*

*He retired in 1947 and, sadly, died shortly afterwards at the age of sixty five.*

*The diary gives a vivid description of the horrors and suffering of soldiers serving in France and concludes with some philosophical thoughts on the futility and waste of war and, rather optimistically, hopes for a better future with lessons learned from that war.*



We include three pictures here; one of Alexander John McKee, one of his transport ship, and one of Australian gunners firing howitzers in WW1.



## INDEX – WW1 Diary of Alexander McKee

- Part 1; Pg 4: Sept 14<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Sept 15<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – From Sydney on Transport Mashobra
- Part 2; Pg 5: Sept 16<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Sept 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1916 – Gambling, Rough Weather at Sea
- Part 3; Pg 7: Sept 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1916 – Sept 30<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Training, Sports
- Part 4; Pg 9: Oct 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916 – Oct 10<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Durban, South Africa
- Part 5; Pg 12: Oct 11<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Oct 18<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Capetown, South Africa, Drill, Sports Finals
- Part 6; Pg 14: Oct 19<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Nov 6<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – The Equator to Salisbury Plains
- Part 7; Pg 17: Nov 7<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Nov 14<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Artillery Camp, Tidworth, London Leave
- Part 8; Pg 20: Nov 14<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Dec 7<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – London Leave, Artillery Drill
- Part 9; Pg 23: Dec 8<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Dec 25<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Letter from Ossie, Training at Fort Wallington
- Part 10; Pg 25: Dec 26<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Jan 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Drill, Visit to Nelson’s Victory
- Part 11; Pg 27: Jan 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Jan 26<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Naval Yard, Comments on Armenian Massacre
- Part 12; Pg 29: Jan 27<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Feb 25<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Escorting Prisoner to Chelmsford
- Part 13; Pg 32: Feb 26<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Apr 24<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Arrival at Etaples Military Camp, France, Tests
- Part 14; Pg 39: Apr 25<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Apr 31<sup>st</sup>, 1917 – Arrival at the Front at Somme
- Part 15; Pg 41: May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1917 – May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – To 106<sup>th</sup> Howitzer Battery, 6<sup>th</sup> Field Army at Albert
- Part 16; Pg 44: May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Building for an Offensive at Armentieres and Arras
- Part 17; Pg 47: June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Heavy Fighting on the Armentieres Front
- Part 18; Pg 50: June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Heavy Fighting on Messines Ridge
- Part 19; Pg 52: June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Gas Attacks, Move to Ostend Front
- Part 20; Pg 56: July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Aug 15<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Repairing Communication Lines at Ostend
- Part 21; Pg 59: Aug 16<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Sept 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Front near Ypres
- Part 22; Pg 62: Sept 13<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Nov 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Arm Injured at Ypres, To Hospital at Chichester
- Part 23; Pg 66: Dec 1<sup>st</sup>, 1917 – Dec 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Medical Furlough – Salisbury, Canterbury
- Part 24; Pg 68: Dec 7<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Dec 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Medical Furlough - Oxford, London
- Part 25; Pg 70: Dec 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Dec 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Medical Furlough – York, Edinburgh, Glasgow
- Part 26; Pg 72: Dec 13<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Dec 17<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Medical Furlough – Aberdeen, Stratford
- Part 27; Pg 74: Dec 18<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Mar 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – Medical Furlough - London, to Salisbury with Ossie
- Part 28; Pg 76: Mar 21<sup>st</sup>, 1918 – Apr 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – Fit for Service, Signals Training at Sandhill
- Part 29; Pg 79: Apr 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1918 – May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1918 – Back to France- big German offensive at Amiens
- Part 30; Pg 81: May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1918 - Heavy Fighting around Rheims - with Americans
- Part 31; Pg 83: June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – Australian Attack at Albert
- Part 32; Pg 84: July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – Aug 15<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – Heavy German Losses - Australians Advance to Caix
- Part 33; Pg 88: Aug 15<sup>th</sup>, 1918–Sept 30<sup>th</sup>, 1918–Heavy Fighting, Germans Retreat to Hindenburg Line
- Part 34; Pg 91: Oct 1<sup>st</sup>, 1918 – Oct 9<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – German Reducing Plant at Bellicourt
- Part 35; Pg 93: Oct 10<sup>th</sup>, 1918–Dec 8<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – Rest at Amiens, German Surrender –Some Reflections
- Part 36; Pg 98: Dec 9<sup>th</sup>, 1918 – Jan 27<sup>th</sup>, 1919 – Appointed Instructor, Then to Calais and London

## **PART 1: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **From Sydney on Transport Mashobra**

**Sept 14<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

Embarked on Transport Mashobra on above date, for the Great European War. Reflections not very cheerful. There are about 500 lads and soldiers aboard and most of them seem cheerful and resigned with the future. It is sad to reflect that many of these irresponsible boys will find war a terrible reality and their friends on the launches near our transport, for we are just moving out, have seen their faces for the last time. It is well to see them cheerful and hopeful for it is a state of mind which anticipates success.

I am not as cheerful as they, for I detest the name of war. I am going into this war because civilization calls for every man who is able to carry a gun, for every man to lend his aid in destroying the "spawn of iniquity" that engineered this, the most infamous war for many centuries.

The Transport is now moving out to sea and all hands are getting ready to settle down. The weather is rough and I expect to experience some sea sickness.

I kept a good lookout at Bronte Beach for some of the family but could not distinguish any shapes on the beach.

**Sept 15<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

Day calm contrary to expectations. Today was one of idleness which certainly was one of loss for many of the lads owing to the gambling fever that has seized them.

Everybody seems to have the spirit of gambling; even the officers and non commissioned officers, in some cases, ventilate their desire to have a few shillings on the various games.

The Australian is a most incorrigible gambler and sportsman. He has only one peer in gambling and games of chance and that is the Chinaman. It is this gambling kink in the Australian nature that undoubtedly makes him a good soldier and also, outside soldiering, fair in his final judgement.

The Australian also has no peer in the use of vile language and profanity. He stands alone in this "art". Strangers who do not understand that profanity is just a vulgar habit, quickly contracted among Australians, would certainly place them among the most depraved people in the world. There is absolutely no meaning behind much of the profanity used. In many cases, among the younger lads, it is nothing, more or less, than bravado and in nearly all cases it is due to a lack of suitable and expanded vocabulary of words, or contracted habits. It is surprising how quickly the most careful person will unconsciously use profanity after listening to it continually.

It is certainly true that many of the lads are from good families and would not use such profanity referred to in civil life. Soldiering, undoubtedly, ennobles some men and depraves others. The process is now going on if one can judge from the amount of gambling and the profanity.

Aside from the bad language and gambling the lads are an excellent lot of companions in the "greatest cause" that ever inspired men.

Tomorrow, we have been informed that duties begin, so we are making the most of today.

## **PART 2: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Gambling, Rough Weather at Sea**

**Sept. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

The usual life aboard ship was the order of today, except that among the soldiers gambling was very high. During previous two days sixpence was about the limit in the games, today it was quite a common thing to see sixpence replaced by the pound and five pound note.

The usual thing will occur at the end of the voyage – about 6 men will have all the money aboard.

Late today the adjutant of the ship confiscated a roulette machine and all the money in the "bank". It is understood that the money will go to the comforts fund aboard. There is no doubt that the gambling is having an immoral effect on the men and has a tendency to destroy comradeship. Gambling is against the rules of the ship and is against all military orders. The officers will do wisely to stop it altogether. – The sea was calm today.

**Sept. 17<sup>th</sup>, 1916 - Sunday.**

Church Service was held today by the Church of England Chaplain. I thought he would refer to the gambling aboard but he did not. Evidently he has been aboard a transport before and knows his soldier charges well and realizes the uselessness of preaching to them. The gambling today was extremely high, in fact the ship was turned into a gambling den. Some of the youngest lads had their wings "clipped" badly and some of the seasoned gamblers lost and won heavily. The more I see of this gambling the more I think it harms the high purpose which undoubtedly guided most of the soldiers here to enlist. If the officers of the ship would only enforce the rules of the ship it would be welcomed, strange to say, by most of the men but such a fascination has gambling where there is little to do that even the best chaps drift into the games.

The day was calm and warm and I spent my hours reading magazines from the Red Cross library.

**Sept. 18<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

The usual routine work was the order of the day, with the exception of boat drill. Every soldier aboard was either allotted to a boat or a raft. I was allotted to a raft. The rafts are made to hold 18 men but only 9 men have been allotted to each. I always understood that people got on top of the raft but this is not the case. Each person hangs onto a rope handle attached to the side of the raft and remains in the water. Just how long a person could stop in the water of the cold North Sea if our transport was torpedoed it would be difficult to say – probably from 10 to 15 min.

Gambling is now automatically ceasing on board on account of the fact that most of the money aboard is in the hands of a few men. (I refer to the soldiers' money).

### **Sept. 19<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

The weather is very rough today – Troops are forced to remain below. A big sea got in on the troop deck last night and as some of the artillery chaps discarded their hammocks and slept on the floor, they were very surprised to be awakened by the water floating under their blankets. They expressed their dissatisfaction in a most versatile manner and in language which they are very proficient in the use of. The latter part of the day was used in giving a lecture by the adjutant on "Notes from the Front" concerning artillery work and a lecture was also given on Fire Drill.

### **Sept. 21<sup>st</sup>, 1916**

The weather still very rough but shows signs of calming down. The usual order of drill was the programme for today. I did not go on parade as I was told off as a piquet to guard a section of the ship. The troop ship is portioned up and policed by soldiers told off for that work. Just as the case would be if the ship was a military camp. When the ship gets into the "danger zone", that is the North Sea or the Mediterranean as the case may be, the duties of picquets are very important and responsible and great danger to all on board may result by not keeping a good lookout. However, it will be sufficient to "cross the river" when we come to it. The speed of the ship today (24 hours) was 270 miles.

### **Sept. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1916**

Today was fairly calm except for a slight swell and roll of the ship. An incident of interest occurred early this morning, about 4am. The troop deck was rather close for sleeping and some of the boys opened the port holes when they went to bed. A heavy swell came on about 4 am and, without any warning, a big body of water shot through the ports right along the weather side of the ship – the bunks and hammocks being on the same level as the port holes - Well the less said about the language used by the chaps who were startled out of their sleep by the worst dowsing they ever got, the better. It was enough to make the devil himself thoughtful. There were caps, boots, socks, overcoats and blankets floating around everywhere. No doubt the chaps who were dowsed had

some cause to be offended. I got my share of the water and I must say there are some occasions when it is almost wicked not to swear.

Lectures today were given by the adjutant on "Notes from the Front". A general medical inspection was also made of all the troops aboard. There were only 2 or 3 cases for segregation.

The distance travelled during the last 24 hours was 279 miles.

## **PART 3: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Training, Sports**

**Sept 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1916**

This day was of great interest to all aboard in as much as it was washing day and judging by the amused interest taken by the Commandant and officers of the ship at the manner which some of the chaps handled the soap it certainly seems reasonable to conjecture that efforts will be made to induce the military authorities some instruction in this important art before we are discharged from the army. There were lots of tubs and buckets and water was plentiful. Some of the chaps will no doubt make a good job of their linen and shirts – but I am sure some of the chaps will have great difficulty in telling their white goods from their khaki.

Some started with their socks and dungarees first and finished with white linen handkerchiefs. However most of the chaps will be able to see the soap more gracefully and know more of the "science" of "washing" before they march into Berlin.

The day was calm and warm and was such a day as would make any "washerwoman" smile and "drink her tea" with a large percentage of satisfaction.

The distance travelled today by the good ship was 283 miles.

**Sept. 24<sup>th</sup>, 1916 - Sunday.**

The speed of the ship today was 297 miles for the last 24 hours. It is the highest speed since the ship left Sydney. The sea is beautifully calm today, there is hardly a ripple and no roll to the ship. It was an ideal day for Church parade and as we had the Infantry Band to play the hymns and other music the service was more of a success than on the previous Sunday. The service was the ordinary prescribed Church of England service and the sermon was more of a talk to the soldiers about "our sinful ways". I noticed that a good many of the chaps were very sleepy and "mournful" during the service.

**Sept. 25<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

The speed on the 25<sup>th</sup> was 290 miles and on the 26<sup>th</sup> was 291 miles. The weather is very fine and the sea is calm. There is hardly a speck of white foam to be seen.

The troops have been practising the Morse code signals the last two days with flags and instruments - also some semaphore practice has been going on.

Contrary to expectations the trip up to the present time is anything but monotonous owing to the fact that the men are kept busy with parades and drills and in other ways.

**Sept. 27<sup>th</sup> 28<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Speed on the 27<sup>th</sup> was 288 miles and on the 28<sup>th</sup> 292 miles.

A full kit inspection occurred today 28<sup>th</sup>, the idea being that the Commandant of the ship would see that each man has the full equipment which was issued to him by the military authorities. A good deal of petty thieving has been going on and the C.O. is determined to stop it. It will be a sorry day for the first thief who is caught.

Another entry of interest on the 28<sup>th</sup> was the fact that one of the men had to be washed! Judging from the amount of water that went into the bath, it was a good one. There is one commendable thing that the authorities aboard attend to and that is the absolute cleanliness of every department aboard.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> nothing of interest occurred. The weather is calm and warm.

**Sept. 29<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Speed today ending 12 noon was 296 miles.

Today it was piquet duty on the top deck near the bridge. The weather is getting rough again and a fair sea is running and all portholes are closed making our deck very stuffy.

A lecture was given by the officer commanding today, on a new explosive shell. The lecture was preceded by physical exercises.

**Sept.30<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

Today a series of sports began after parade. A great deal of amusement was caused by items in the sports contests such as the "treacled bun competition" in which competitors had to eat a very syrupy bun suspended by a string. It is much more difficult to eat the bun than one would imagine.



Other competitions were very good and as the sports are going to continue for some time after parade hours are over, that is 4pm, there ought to be some very good entries of different kinds of sport. The boxing matches are expected to be very good.

The speed today was 286 miles.

## **PART 4: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Durban, South Africa**

#### **Oct.1<sup>st</sup>, 1916 – Sunday**

The speed travelled today, ending 12 noon was 309 miles – a record so far.

Church Parade took place today and a sermon was preached in an interesting manner by our chaplain.

Some cases of mumps have been discovered aboard today and it s quite possible that we may be quarantined on reaching Durban.

A wireless message was received by our ship today of large British successes and of the capture of a big bag of prisoners. The wireless came from the Mauritius Islands. We are now approaching them.

#### **Oct. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1916**

Great interest was taken today in the boxing tournament. A very good stadium was erected on one of the hatches. The light weights and the feather weights fought first and considerable boxing talent was brought to light. The Artillery chaps won nearly all their bouts. There was only one bout which had a tendency towards brutality and that was in the first of the heavy weights but the referee stopped the fight in the first round. The boxing tournament will be continued each day until all entries have completed their bouts.

The morning was devoted to washing and considerable improvement was shown in this art over last week. No doubt it is because the chaps are apt learners.

The speed today ending noon was 316 miles.

#### **Oct. 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> 5<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Usual routine aboard from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Oct. 6<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> 1916.**

Transport reached Durban, S.A. at 12 noon on October 6<sup>th</sup>. A very friendly welcome was extended by the ladies of Durban and all the troops must have enjoyed themselves immensely. The Y.M.C.A. was especially attractive and the Wesley Hall ladies went to a great deal of trouble to make the men enjoy themselves. The real pleasure came in looking around Durban which is a most beautiful city of 60,000 people including some 40,000 Kaffirs. The environs of Durban are particularly attractive as most of the streets are wide and the houses stand back in well kept gardens. There has been a good deal of attention paid to the laying out of the city, as all the streets are wide, regular and well kept and excellently made. The public buildings are very fine and impressive and the parks are large and well kept.

The chief sight is the beach which must be seen to be properly appreciated. Large sums of money must have been spent on the gardens and sea walls and buildings for the use of bathers and sight seers near the beach.

The Zoo is also a sight worth seeing and a trip through the residential district by tram could not be forgotten.

The troops have behaved themselves admirably since arrival and it is well worth while making an entry to this effect, as I understand, from some of the people here, that on previous occasions troops have not behaved themselves creditably to Australia and some restrictions are placed on our freedom on this account. Unfortunately all have to suffer for the actions of a few.

The order was given to troops on leave to fall in at the Town Hall at 10pm and it speaks highly for the class of men in this transport that there were only about 2 absentees and they turned up later on.

The chaps soon made friends in Durban, especially with the girls, although it was noticeable that the people generally permitted no liberties to be taken by the men. I am afraid that a good many Australians are not quite civilized yet and are too free and personal in their manners. This defect makes them wear out their welcome wherever they go.

**Oct. 8<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Sunday.**

Our transport finished coaling Sunday morning early and we left Durban about 7am for Capetown. After the glorious time we had yesterday all the chaps were so tired that they slept most of the day. The route march taken yesterday from the ship to a whaling station down the coastline, no doubt tired the men and the march up from the wharf landing to the City Hall – a distance of about 2 and a half miles was rather of a tiring nature. However the people were so kind and so many facilities were given us to enjoy ourselves that all hands were made happy.

Service was held today at 4pm instead of the usual 11 o'clock service.

There are now a large number of cases of mumps aboard. 5 cases went into the ship hospital today. The troop deck is being properly fumigated.

A large vessel is now on the port side of our ship as I write this. This ship left Sydney about the same time as our transport. It appears to be a race between the two ships to Capetown.

### **Oct.9<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

The usual routine was the order of today except that for a number of the troops it was washing day. Preparations were being made for a fumigation of the ship as a big epidemic of mumps has broken out. 15 cases occurred today and 5 the day previous. There are in hospital a very large number of cases. Part of the ship has to be taken over to accommodate the large number of cases of sickness.

The heavy weight champion-ship boxing contest was brought off today between an Artillery chap and an Infantry chap. As both competitors were professionals in civil life, a great deal of betting was done on the turn. 150 pounds at least changed hands. The match was a real hard fought battle and great interest was taken in it by every one aboard. The Artillery chap won, after a hard battle, on points won.

The speed of the ship, up to the time at present – 12 noon and from the time we left Durban was 356 miles.

### **Oct.10<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

The weather was very rough today and high seas are running. No parade took place today on this account.

The fumigation of the ship and all the hammocks took place.

The ship passed the Birkenhead monument at 5pm today.(This monument was erected to the memory of a wreck of a ship by that name). During the last 24 hours the ship has slowed down and stopped for one hour in order to reach Capetown by the morning and not during the night. A vessel is now on the port side of our ship and refuses to give her name but it is anxious to know the name and number of this transport (A47). Her actions are at least unfriendly. By her colours it is assumed that she is Dutch. The speed today was 256 miles.

## **PART 5: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Capetown, South Africa, Drill, Sports Finals**

**Oct. 11<sup>th</sup> 1916**

We landed in Capetown at about 7am and went ashore at 11am for a route march. We were not fortunate in seeing all Capetown owing to the fact that the authorities would not permit leave being granted on account of cases of meningitis breaking out aboard and our ship being full of mump cases. We marched up to the Capetown cricket ground where a very nice light lunch was prepared for the troops by the ladies of Capetown. We cast off about 5pm after the ship had waited one and a half hours for "strays" who had failed to return. Unfortunately 17 men were left behind. The result will be 80 days detention in a military prison without pay! They will also be drafted into new units after their detention is up. It seems to be a very serious offence to miss a transport in a case of this kind.

Altogether a very enjoyable time was spent in Capetown and the best sights of the city were seen.

Table Mountain which lies at the back of the town is a most imposing sight. The whole city lies round the harbour in a semi circle and is clouded in a mist or haze. The city cannot be seen or appreciated properly until you get right down into the town. Table Mountain is really a great table and slopes down into the sea so that the city is on a fringe of land only. Back of the mountain the suburbs begin.

I would class Capetown Harbour with Botany Bay. Like Durbin Harbour a great sea wall has been built out as a breakwater, which makes the harbour largely artificial. The approaches to the harbour and city are not very attractive either. The suburbs lie back of Table Mountain and cannot be seen from the harbours. There are some fine residences and streets in this portion of Capetown.

(Note from Lesly - Dad has spelt harbour as "harbor" throughout, possibly due to his seven year sojourn in the United States but I have spelt it as we do in Australia, "harbour".)

**Oct. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

The weather was very fine today and sea calm. Our ship is now passing into the danger zone and the glass of all portholes is being painted black and other preparations are being made to make it hard to distinguish the vessel at night.

A number of cases of "red plague" have been brought to light today and the cases were isolated in a part of the ship.

A full dress parade and inspection of kits took place today and all blankets, hammocks etc. were fumigated in the ship's dry steam fumigator and nice and wet they were when they came out.

### **Oct. 13<sup>th</sup> 1916**

Today a continuation of preparations to disguise ship and make it invisible against submarines.

More cases of measles have broken out today and have been isolated. The electric lights on the ship have been removed from their sockets so that the ship will show no light at sea.

The speed of the ship today up to noon was 289 miles.

### **Oct. 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> the finals in the previous sports events were run off, such as the finals of the potato race, sack race, treacled bun competition and the various boxing bouts. All the finals were mostly won by the Artillery chaps. The usual routine was observed aboard on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. On the 16<sup>th</sup> the ship passed the island of St. Helena but no outline could be observed at the distance the ship was away.

Today, 16<sup>th</sup>, all hammocks were again fumigated. The weather has been calm the last few days and is getting very warm as the ship is now approaching the "line". No more cases of disease or mumps have been reported lately and it appears that such cases have fallen off.

### **Oct. 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

The weather on the above two days was very calm and warm.

We are now, the 18<sup>th</sup>, opposite the Ascension Island but not within sight of it.

The last two days have been devoted to practice in gun drill and in tying practice of regulation knots for service at the front.

Lecture and notes on "Conduct under Fire" and in action was given us by our O.C.

Preparations are still going on aboard to prevent light at night escaping from the ship. All porthole lights have been painted black and canvas has been stretched along the decks to further check light escaping.

In a few days time our ship will be escorted by Japanese cruisers and not a light of any kind will be permitted to show from the ship after dark.

On the starboard side of the ship – As I write these notes on deck there is a mirage of an island about 5 miles away. The trees and land and beach are quite distinct and clear.

## **PART 6: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **The Equator to Salisbury Plains**

**Oct 19<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

We crossed the line today between 4.30pm and 6pm and as the occasion was a special one, the day was given over to the usual festivities! The usual custom of “Father Neptune coming aboard” was dispensed with on account of a couple of fatalities occurring on this troopship on a previous occasion.

Every man aboard, though, was ducked with buckets of water, even to the officers and chaplain. The method adopted was for about 30 men to fill buckets and tubs with water and any man who was not drenched with water was captured and carried to an open space and dowsed from all directions till the vessels were empty.

At the present time everybody seems to be tired and sunburnt. It might be interesting to put on record that the chaplain took his ducking like a porpoise and apologetically explained that surfing was one of his sidelines. The weather is still very close and sultry but I have felt very much warmer in Sydney. The sea is also very calm and like a pond.

A full dress parade took place this morning including an inspection of kits, uniforms etc.

**Oct. 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1916.**

The above days have been very close and humid and nothing unusual has occurred. A few cases of mumps have been reported and the usual routine work has been going on, interspersed with a few lectures and some physical drill. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Saturday, the final items of the sports were finished up, such as the final items of the physical drill competition etc. The Infantry, in this case, won first prize and the Artillery, second. Today, Sunday, Church Parade was held.

**October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1916.**

We are now running along the coast of French Senegal and approaching Dakar, the capital. It is expected that we reach this town about 12 on 24<sup>th</sup>. The weather is still very close and oppressive. The sea is like glass and looks very warm and is infested with sharks. A good deal of sport has been derived the last few days shooting them with rifles.

The ship now presents a very weird appearance at night as nearly all the lights have been removed and all portholes are now secured at night. We have passed into the danger zone and no matches or lights are allowed to appear on deck whatever. A "lookout" is constantly in the "crow's nest" of the vessel. We passed several ships today.

### **Oct. 24<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

Our transport arrived at Dakar (French Senegal) at 9.30am and sailed again at 4.30pm. A 4" naval gun was taken on and fixed to its emplacement at about 3pm. The gun has a commanding position on all sides of the ship. A gun crew was taken on at Dakar and will sleep near then gun and always be in attendance. We all feel now more protected against submarines and enemy craft.

Dakar is a very much larger town than I expected and the buildings round the harbour are finished in white, with red tile roofs and present a very neat appearance. Some of the buildings look stately, especially the Governor's palace and a Roman Catholic Institution on high ground, and other public buildings. There is a magnificent beach of fine sand which extends as far as the eye can see round the harbour, which is very large, and owing to the haze which prevents one from seeing far, the extent of the harbour could not be made out.

The mouth of the harbour is an artificial one and is very narrow. Two heavy sea walls converge from the land on each side of a small entrance and form a good protected harbour. The landscape is an attractive one as there is an abundance of foliage all around.

The only British ships in the harbour were H.M.S. Highflier (cruiser) and a White Star liner from Capetown. There were also a number of Foreign ships coaling at this time. The people here are of course African natives and French people. We did not have much to do with either and the only welcome we received was one shot from the Fort commanding the harbour. Very strict orders were again issued today against lights of any kind at night and nothing that can float is to be thrown overboard for submarines to track our course. We have also been ordered to wear our life belts continually during the night and during the day. The weather is oppressively hot and as I understand that it is winter here at Dakar the conclusion is forced on me that there is only one place hotter when the summer comes around.

### **Oct. 25<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

Today we had naval practice with the naval gun installed yesterday. The day was started by putting on our life belts and all hands have been instructed again to continually wear them. At daybreak we passed a Japanese cruiser at the end of her beat. There are now two other steamers accompanying us, so as to have the protection afforded our transport. The weather is now getting rough and cold.

**Oct. 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

I went to the ship's hospital on 27<sup>th</sup> with mumps. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> I felt generally out of sorts and suffered with earache and a headache and can only take soft food and gruel. The weather got very rough on the 26<sup>th</sup> and has been very rough since; things are anything but comfortable aboard now. The crockery will not keep quiet and the hospital beds seem to have acquired the knack of turning over and landing patients on their heads in the middle of the night. The absence of any light aboard after dark increases our discomfort.

**Oct. 31<sup>st</sup>, 1916.**

At the time of writing these notes we are well on our way across the Bay of Biscay and the atmosphere aboard seems to be charged with energy in anticipation of passing or sighting submarines and we have been informed that the appearance of one would not be unexpected. We are all in readiness with life belts on. I moved out of hospital into the convalescent portion but must say that I don't feel any too well yet – probably on account of the heavy seas rolling.

**Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916.**

Early this morning about 7am our transport was met by two British destroyers, one of which was No.37 "The Aereal". Later in the day another destroyer passed us and a mine sweeper at work. A mail boat on the starboard side is also being escorted by a destroyer. A semaphore message received today from "The Aereal" reads, "Prepare to disembark at 8pm". All preparations have been made to land today. I am still in the ship's hospital and expect to go to a convalescent home when we reach shore.

**Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1916.**

Landed at Plymouth about 2am without any mishaps. The Harbour seems to be full of destroyers and auxiliary vessels. All hands disembarked from vessel this morning. The hospital patients, including myself, were sent up to Devonport Military Hospital and placed in an isolation ward. Everything in the hospital seems to be quite comfortable and the food is very good.

**Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup> 1916.**

Still at Devonport Hospital. The weather is very cold and the rain and wind is blowing like a hurricane. We expect to be discharged from hospital on Monday.

**Nov. 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Put in very quiet days on these dates reading and lying around. The weather is still very boisterous.



**Nov. 6<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Left Devonport hospital today for Salisbury Plains and arrived at 4pm at Perham Downs Receiving Camp where blankets and food tickets were issued. Tonight I attended a lecture on Asia Minor in the Y.M.C.A. Hut and I have never heard a more absorbingly interesting lecture in my life, nor a more harrowing tale of atrocities and horrors committed by the Turks on the Armenians. According to the lecturer, Mr. Williams, one of the greatest authorities on Asia Minor, the population at the time of Christ was 75 millions, it is now 17 millions. Since the war millions have been massacred and whole districts wiped clean out. Nameless horrors have been committed on the Christians which could not be recorded here. I was under the impression that Asia Minor was a large desert but its economic value is such that it could easily maintain a population of 100 million people. It is vastly rich in coal and iron deposits and is rich in oil, also in gold and other minerals. Its agricultural possibilities are tremendous.

The secret of the German Berlin to Bagdad Railway and the strenuous attempts to get dominion of the East is now apparent. The nation that gets Asia Minor will be independent of the British Fleet, said Lord Cromer. He also said that the Armenian people were the cream of the intellect of the Eastern world. I never realized that the Turk was so unspeakably cruel and his rule so blighting over other people until I heard this lecture.

## **PART 7: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Artillery Camp, Tidworth, London Leave**

**Nov. 7<sup>th</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> 9<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Still at Perham Downs Receiving Camp today, the 9<sup>th</sup>, to join my Unit at the Artillery Camp at Park House, Tidworth.

Tidworth is a large permanent Military Camp. The buildings are large and spacious and must be roomy enough to house thousands of troops. The receiving camp is now full of returned soldiers from the Somme battlefield in France and their talk seems to be very bitter. As the Conscription issue came on before they left France their hardships there seems to have embittered them against the issue – consequently they voted No.

**November 10<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> 12<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Nothing of importance has occurred on these dates. A good deal of drill has been the order. On the 10<sup>th</sup> leave was granted for 4 days leave. I will spend my leave in London. On Sunday the 12<sup>th</sup> the first large church parade that I have attended took place. After the service the Colonel in charge of the "Southern Command" inspected the troops. The Colonel is the youngest man of his

rank I have seen. He is little more than 30 years of age. On the 11<sup>th</sup> I received the first letter from home since I left.

**Nov. 13<sup>th</sup>, 1916. London.**

I arrived in London today at 11pm. From Park House Camp, Salisbury on the 4 days leave mentioned in my last entries. The day was fine but not very cold. I had a good deal of time during the afternoon so I strolled down through the world famed Piccadilly and was amazed at the amount of traffic and the number of people.

At night, accompanied by a companion, I went to a "Revue" at the Criterion Theatre on Piccadilly and after the show was over we came out into the densest fog I have ever seen. It was impossible to see an object a yard away and it was impossible to follow footpaths or streets since all lights are out on account of the fear of raids.

I can now quite understand a person wandering round and round a block, thinking he was following a straight line. Buses and vehicles had all stopped. "A few" were moving but were continually running on the footpath and dangerously close to shop windows. If it were not for the chain of police with their electric torches it would be absolutely out of the question for a vehicle to move at all. We were lucky indeed to find our way back to our hotel. If it had not been for the chain of police we, no doubt, would have wandered round London all night.

The police system of London must rank among the most comprehensive and efficient in the world. The officers directing the traffic are a fine and intelligent type of men and most courteous towards inquiries. They certainly are walking information bureaus as far as train and tram departures and streets are concerned.

I never witnessed anything like the traffic as there is around Piccadilly; it is wonderful how there are so few accidents and how women manage to move about. The streets and city look very gloomy and dark now.

**Nov. 13<sup>th</sup>, 1916 (Repeated)**

I landed in London today at 11pm from Park House Camp on 4 days leave.

After dinner I started out for Piccadilly and roamed around the best part of the afternoon. At night I went to a "Revue" with a companion and after the play came out into one of the densest fogs I have ever seen. It was impossible to see an object a yard away. I can now understand people getting lost in a London fog. The traffic had all stopped except one bus which could not keep off the footpath; it was being passed from one policeman to another who were directing it along its route with torch lights. I hung on to the rail of the bus and just followed it blindly; it was going my way.

Luckily for myself and companion we met a postman who was going near our hotel or we would have got hopelessly lost, as did a number of people tonight.

London is now pitch black at night. No lights can be seen from above by aircraft. The traffic around Piccadilly is something to amaze one and if it were not for the efficiency of the police the traffic could never carry on.

**London, Nov. 14<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

I visited today some of the chief treasures of the English people viz. the Tower of London, St. Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and the Albert Memorial. The first in order was the Tower of London of which volumes have been written. The Fortress was built by William the Conqueror and used as a residence by the early English kings and for many centuries as a prison for aristocratic and Royal prisoners only. No commoners were ever confined there. It is rather pathetic to go through some of the dungeons where such famous prisoners as Jane Grey and Sir Walter Raleigh were confined and read the sorrowful messages written on the walls. Sir Walter Raleigh wrote his history of the world in his dungeon not more than 12'x12' and very badly ventilated it is. In the Beauchamp Tower Lady Jane Grey was confined and on the wall of her dungeon she wrote the words "Jane – the Queen". The block and axe are still to be seen and the spot where her young life was ended is marked out and preserved to show what English intolerance was in those times. The dungeon was situated that she witnessed the bringing in on a cart of her headless husband.

There are many objects of great interest in the Tower such as the Traitor's Gate and a very grim looking gate it is. The small chamber in which the two princes were murdered by their uncle, the Duke of Gloucester. The opening in the wall can be seen (now built up) which was made by order of King Richard to facilitate carrying out the crime of their murder. The bodies of the princes now rest in Westminster Abbey side by side.

Another object of interest in the Tower is the Armoury and the old Hall where parliament used to meet. In the Armoury there is to be seen every form of armour for 1000 years and every form of spear and pike through the ages and the exhibit of ancient guns shows the stages of development of their branch of warfare. There are many other objects of interest in the Tower which must be seen to realize their hugeness and aged appearance. The walls are black with age and in many places the stone work is corroded away especially in places exposed to the air. The corroded appearance is only superficial and does not endanger the masonry.

After visiting the grim old tower one must acknowledge that it is a privilege to live in these days.

The next place to visit was St. Paul's Cathedral and the foremost thing that struck me was the vastness and silence, and the mighty dome 350 feet high. It was so high I could not see the top as it was dark at that height. It must be impossible to hear well in this church as the building is so large. The carving round the famous organ is so exquisite that it must be the only thing of its kind in the

world. The architecture of the interior has been raved over since the days of Christopher Wren, the architect. Well might he say that the only monument he wanted was “To look around”. He is buried in one of the crypts of then interior and just a plain tablet to mark his grave. He was so appalled at his work that he sat in the interior of the church and gazed up and around every day till his death.

Many famous men like the Duke of Wellington, Lord Nelson and Lord Roberts and Lord Wolseley and many other historical figures are buried here. An object of great interest is the gun carriage on which the Duke of Wellington was carried to his tomb. It cost 18,000 pounds to build and weighs 18 tons. It is a most elaborate and grim affair and was built of the guns captured by him in various wars.

St. Paul’s Cathedral cost five million pounds to build 250 years ago. Its cost today would be more like 10 million as a vast amount of toil would be involved in the interior sculpturing and the delicate stone traceries of the arched roofs and ceilings. Such a work would not be attempted today as labour would be too high.

## **PART 8: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **London Leave, Artillery Drill**

The third visit was made to Westminster Abbey and here indeed are the “tombs of the mighty”. All the kings and queens are buried here and over their crypts is their banner and crest. The chapels of some of the kings are most imposing and the delicate tracery of the stone arched.....(?) shaped roofs is very beautiful. King Henry V11 chapel is a magnificent work of art even though the stonework is showing superficial decay. Here is buried Queen Mary and Elizabeth – one over the other. It was Elizabeth’s wish that since they could not be friends in life they at least should be friends in death – hence they are buried together.

Many great men are buried here, such as Gladstone and many poets and writers like Charles Dickens. Many of the men buried here are now lost in antiquity and with Latin inscriptions over their tombs do not excite much interest but the dead of modern times will always excite interest in their fame and last resting place. Westminster Abbey is over 1000 years old. It was started in 956 by King Alfred and finished by Edward the Confessor and one of the chapels in the Abbey is a monument to his effort. It would take an able pen to describe his chapel, or any part of the interior. The stonework of Edward’s chapel shows signs of decay and extreme age but no signs of rupturing.

The underground vaults and arches of the Abbey are still in a good state of preservation. The thing that impresses one most in these ancient structures is their immense proportions and their look of hoary age. One could spend a month in the Abbey and then not see everything of historical importance and a reflective mind would ponder on the vast amount of treasure spent on the

structure and the pomp, emptiness and impressiveness of it all. Already many of the figures buried here are now memories and many of them “forgotten memories”.

It is in the Abbey that our kings and queens are crowned.

The next place of interest I visited was the Albert Memorial, a monument that cost over 150,000 pounds to build. Queen Victoria paid half the amount. This memorial is chiefly noted for its statuary round the base – The life size sculptured figure of every man who has achieved fame in the realms of peaceful arts surrounds the beautiful base. No figure is there that represents war or strife. It is a most imposing monument and the greatest in Great Britain. All that sculptured work was done voluntarily and gratis.

The following places of interest were also visited. Viz. Parliament House, including House of Lords and House of Commons, London Bridge, Thames Embankment, Buckingham Palace, Hyde Park, West End, Downing Street and Government Buildings and Dog Burial Ground.

### **November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Today was spent in visiting the Zoological Gardens and it exceeded my expectations. Some very rare specimens are here of different animals and reptiles. I saw the first Orangutan and huge Boa Constrictor. The snake must have been 30 or 40 feet long and in parts 8 inches in diameter. There were a number of specimens of the large species of snake, and the monkeys. Nearly every known Animal, Reptile and Bird is to be seen at the Gardens. The Aviary is a place of great interest and most of the “cockies” from all parts of the world are there – Many of them quite educated and affable. Cages are out of the question and have been dispensed with for all the tame “cockies”.

Many of the bears and goats etc. roam around and climb over a great artificial structure built of reinforced concrete. It is a faithful attempt to let them feel at home in their captivity. This great structure is also a masterly piece of engineering.

### **Nov. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

This is my last day of leave in London and it was filled by visiting the National Art Gallery and National Museum. Most of the treasured works in these places are either placed in secure places or covered up with sand bags to protect them against aerial raids.

I also visited London Bridge, Tower Bridge and the monument erected at Pie Lane to commemorate the end of the Great Fire of London. The Great Fire started in Pudding Lane and died out in Pie Lane two miles away.

The Party on leave in London, including myself, returned to Park House camp after assembling at Waterloo Station at 9.40.

**November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1916.**

Started drill and duties again today and have been told off as guard at the Post Office. The day is fine but intensely cold owing to a cutting wind that is blowing.

**Nov. 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>. 1916.**

Nothing unusual has occurred on above days. The usual routine is being followed for this camp – Reveille at 6am, Breakfast at 7am. Parade 8am, Gun drill 8.30am till 12am. Dinner 12.30pm . Parade 2pm, Gun drill 2.30pm till 4.30pm Tea 5pm. Lights out 10pm.

There is so much routine and parade work that things are getting deadly monotonous and to cap things, a colonel has been appointed who is a fair horror. He roars and swears and spits fire like the very devil. I have only seen one face like his before and that was on a bull pup. I'm afraid the only way to save his life is to get him to leave camp. He has "towled" the officers up till they all look dizzy.

During the last few days the weather has warmed up and some snow has fallen.

**Nov. 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>. 1916**

Nothing of importance has occurred on these dates. The usual drill is being gone through day after day with clocklike regularity. The weather is still very cold and a cold wind is blowing hard.

**December 1<sup>st</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup>.**

The same routine as stated above is still being observed.

**December 6<sup>th</sup>.**

Today the first death occurred among the unit of artillery I am attached to. It was a case of meningitis and a particularly sad case too as the chap who died seemed to be popular and died in great pain. A firing party is now being drilled to act as a party at the military funeral. One or two other cases of meningitis have occurred also.

Today our whole camp at Parkhouse was removed to Lark Hill, the greatest camp in England. This camp is a very much better camp than the previous one.

I saw the first German prisoners today, some of them seem to be a very good type, while others are very sorry looking specimens. There are about 150 prisoners employed in manual work around the camp. Their hours and food is very much the same as the troops' food.

**December 7<sup>th</sup>.**

We are settled down again at Lark Hill and began the usual drill according to regulations.

The weather has changed somewhat and rain is now falling. It is still very cold and unpleasant.

## **PART 9: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Letter from Ossie, Training at Fort Wallington**

**December 8<sup>th</sup> 1916**

I received the first communication from my brother Ossie on this date, having failed to locate him since arrival in England, the meeting was rather a welcome one as I was informed at the base in London that he was in France on the Somme and I had been somewhat anxious of his luck during that terrible struggle.

Nothing unusual has occurred in this camp since my last notes. The usual drill exercise is going on.

**December 9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>.**

The usual drill on these days went on. The weather is still cold and snow is falling.

A bad abscess started to develop on my face on the 16<sup>th</sup>. It was probably due to impurities left in a filling which was done by the dentist in the last camp.

**December 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>.**

A good deal of my spare time and attention was taken up on the above dates with abscess. It burst on the 19<sup>th</sup> to my great relief and I am now able to return to duty from which I was absent from 16<sup>th</sup>.

**Dec. 20<sup>th</sup>**

Left Lark Hill at 8am today for Fort Wallington and arrived at F.W. at about 2.30pm. There are about 80 of us sent to F.W. for special Gun training and by the looks of our quarters for sleeping we shall have very much more comfort than in any of the other camps so far.

When our Unit of 80 left Lark Hill there was snow on the ground but here at Fort W. the weather is much warmer though it is raining hard.

This Fort is not a name only but a real Fort with heavy brick walls and arched brick roofs and the usual passage ways. The best part of the Fort is well below the ground and hidden from view at sea. It is said that the largest gun in England is here – a gun that could reach Calais from the Fort emplacement.

It is only 8 miles to Portsmouth by tram and one and a half miles to Fareham. The return fare to Portsmouth is only seven pence.

**December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1916.**

Today is very wet and miserable and a bad day to see our new home to advantage. However the Reveille call went at 6am and we all tumbled out of our blankets for parade and a route march. Dismissed again for breakfast at 7.30am. Fell in again at 8.45am for drill for the day.

The usual method at this training Depot is to make the work as interesting as possible by changing the work from hour to hour.

First there is “physical jerks” and then a route march and lastly to complete the morning some gun drill. The afternoon is usually divided between gun drill, lectures and route march.

Discipline in this camp is very much stricter than in any other and the penalties for military crimes is very much more serious than heretofore.

It is only fair to state that the food is good, well cooked and the huts are warm and sanitary. There ought to be very little sickness in this camp. This state of affairs could not be said of our previous camps. In fact in parts of Lark Hill the deaths were sometimes 5 a day.

**Dec. 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>. 1916.**

I have nothing of importance to chronicle on these days except that the drill is fairly vigorous and my feet are sore from route marches etc. The weather has been more cheerful and some sun has actually been seen at times. I think the men will enjoy their sojourn here.

**Dec. 25<sup>th</sup>, 1916 – Christmas Day. Fort Wallington.**

Today began with 6 o'clock parade and dismissal for breakfast. Ham only for breakfast. At 9am all the men fell in again and paraded to church where a very good Xmas sermon was presented in the C. of E. and we marched back to the fort for Xmas dinner which consisted of boiled mutton and pudding – not bad considering that there are “no turkeys or fowls in England”. At least I haven't seen any so far.



The afternoon of Christmas Day was spent in Portsmouth. This town is a very old one if judged by parts of the residential district. It is the chief naval port of England and from what I can learn has a population of about 250,000, not including Gosport, a town within a mile and reached by ferry. The chief places of interest are the old ship "Victory", Nelson's Flagship. It is a queer looking old tub judged from these times and the hotel where Nelson spent his last few days before leaving for Trafalgar.

Portsmouth is not quite the city that one would expect, being as it is a Naval town. It is quite modern in every respect particularly round the beaches which have beautiful promenades and approaches and the Piers reaching out from the beach to deep water.

The parks and public buildings are well kept. The town hall is quite modern and compares favourably with Sydney town hall. The streets are well kept, the main ones are wide and clean.

The older city streets of Portsmouth are narrow and the buildings are small: but great progress has been made to widen streets and put up modern buildings. None of the shop buildings or Public buildings go to height. The highest building is probably 6 stories.

Another sight in Portsmouth is the boom chain across the mouth of the harbour to keep out submarines and a grim reminder that a great war is on.

## **PART 10: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Drill, Visit to Nelson's Victory**

#### **December 26<sup>th</sup> – Boxing Day.**

I had a full days leave on this day in Portsmouth and surroundings. I intended going across to the Isle of Wight but was advised not to on account of the lack of activity and the difficulty in getting a boat across. However, I had a good look around the environs of Portsmouth and came back to Fareham to go to a concert given by the Y.M.C.A.

#### **December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1916**

Back to drill and parades again and started at 6am and this is the part that hurts after well spent holidays. However New Year is closely approaching and there may be two more days in which to celebrate a release from drill.

#### **December 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 1916**

There is nothing of importance to record on the above dates. The usual drill on guns, marching and special parades were the order of the day.

**Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1917**

New Years Day is not recognised as a holiday in England, consequently all hands went on parade as usual and went through the usual drill.

At night a very good concert was given to Australian soldiers by the "Nobby" people of Farnham, chiefly by Captain Power. The concert and supper afterwards were very good and during the night a telegram was received from King George wishing us a good time etc.

**Jan 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917**

An imitation battle was gone through on this day in which all the men at the fort took part. The Artillery gunners acted as infantry. The plan resembled a real battle as we were marched out about 10 miles guided by aeroplanes. We were hidden in hedges and ditches and Cavalry came along for the purpose of rounding us up and capturing us, which they partly did. All modern means of warfare were used such as telephones with wires spread out for miles and the different methods of signalling and despatching messages to H.Qtrs. The object of the outing was for the benefit of the officers and their training. We were very tired when we got back.

**Jan 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Usual parades on these dates.

**Jan 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

On this date a treat was given to a picked party of Australians by Sir Graham Barr, a retired admiral. It consisted of a trip first to Nelson's old ship: "The Victory" and next to the Naval Docks at Portsmouth.

The trip to the "Victory" was particularly interesting on account of its history and the part it took in the action of Trafalgar. The ship is kept in particularly good repair and the interior is arranged as Nelson left it, even such a part of the furniture in Nelson's cabin as his desk still remains undusted inside to this day. The ship is entirely built of wood of very heavy construction. The decks are very low and on every deck, there are four decks, there is a row of guns, such as were used in those days, on the starboard side and also on the portside. Her full compliment of guns is 104 22 or 32 pounders.

A small brass plate marks the place on the top deck where Nelson fell shot through the back. From here he was carried down three flights of steps to the cockpit and the old lanterns still burn and light up the spot where he died in the arms of Hardy. Flowers are strewn on the spot which makes it appear like a grave and very solemn and realistic does it all seem in the dim light of the ancient lanterns.

Nelson's cabin is a very large and roomy place at the stern which has a square formation and consists mostly of windows. The only way to imagine the style of the vessel is from a picture of the vessels of the Spanish Armada.

A small museum is kept on board in which most of the letters and state documents are kept under glass, which were written by and to Nelson. A lot of other things of interest are kept here connected with the battle of Trafalgar.

A very fine exhibit is Nelson's last prayer – a very inspiring document and a classic of its kind.

The "Victory" is very small and insignificant compared to a dreadnought of today but the fact will never change that it remains to remind us of one of the decisive turning points in the world's history.

## **PART 11: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Naval Dockyard, Comments on Armenian Massacre**

The next trip was made to the Naval Dock. This place is a huge concern and it would be impossible to go completely round it in the time at our disposal. The chief matter of interest was a visit over a large submarine of a modern kind. The principle on which it worked is as follows. There are two tanks on the sides which appear to be part of the hull. When submerging these tanks are gradually filled and when rising, the water is forced out by compressed air of 2000 lbs per square inch (which is contained in cylinders). The engines used are Diesel, which only operate on the surface and cannot be reversed. When the vessel is under the surface electric motors are used for driving purposes and the electricity is stored by means of batteries. These motors are used also for reversing purposes. The interior is very compact and there is very little room to move about on account of the amazing amount of machinery and electric switchboards etc.

The periscope is a very important and interesting part of the vessel. It can be raised or lowered and looks like a 3" dia pole above the water. It is really a tube with a system of prisms which pass the view of surroundings to the observer on the deck below. The whole interior is so complicated and compact that it would be difficult to get a grasp of all the details in the short time allowed for the visit.

In the fore part of the vessel, the torpedo tube is situated. I did not see the tube as it was covered in. An Aerial gun is fastened to the deck above and is just covered over when the vessel submerges.

Jan 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>.

No changes of importance have occurred since writing the last notes except that the weather has got decidedly colder. It is almost impossible to keep the feet warm. A slight change has also occurred in the order of drill. Route marches have been cut out and in place, company drill and physical drill followed by lectures on the theory of gunnery.

It is now quite likely that a draft from our number will be sent off to France any time, especially drivers as I understand there is quite a shortage through casualties and in other ways.

The last great war loan is now being raised during these days. (It is to be hoped that it is the last) and the millions seem to be coming in quicker than they can be counted. The loan is unlimited.

Reports are coming through Neutrals that the conditions in Germany and Austria are simply appalling. Hunger is stalking everywhere. It is to be hoped that the Germans will soon be starved into submission and accept the Allies' terms. The terms are indeed of the strictest nature and include the driving out of Europe of the Ottoman Empire and the bringing to an end of the Ottoman massacres in Asia Minor. The terms also include the undoing of many historical crimes such as the division of Poland by Napoleon and Bismarck's crime regarding Alsace and Lorraine. Provinces torn away from weak nations by strong ones are to be handed back! The various races are to be welded to their parent races.

Many other far reaching changes are bound to occur, such as the breaking up of the Austrian Empire and the complete control of the Berlin to Bagdad Railway. This railway ought to be called the "Railway of Death" as it certainly is the heart of German ambition and world domination. Undoubtedly the aim was to dominate the East and menace India and Egypt and link up later with Peking. The railway passes through the most important of Eastern countries and connects the granaries of Asia Minor with Berlin. Germany would without doubt forgo all her colonial possessions and gains in Europe if she could retain Asia Minor as it is estimated that this country would be capable of feeding the whole population of Germany. Hence her connivance and probable engineering of the Armenian massacres. The intention was to rid the country of much of the Armenian population so that a "New Germany" could be planted there after the war. The systematic massacres of the Armenians by the Turks for centuries has depleted Asia Minor to such an extent that the race is dying out. The population was 75 million at the beginning of the Christian Era. These wholesale massacres and Turkish misgovernment has deprived Turkey of any right to remain in Europe.

The country of Asia Minor will, in all probability, be taken over by England and France and the Armenian people will be given a chance to live and die peacefully.

If there is any truth in the reports coming through of the sinking state of Central Powers this war should end up soon, probably before the spring offensive begins. If it does not end before the spring the bloodiest struggle in the world's history begins.

**Jan. 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 1917.**

My notes concerning routine work and mode of living on above dates are the same as recorded in my previous notes from Jan. 9<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>. The weather is still painfully cold and a cutting wind is blowing. There is no snow but the ground is hard and frozen. Many of our men are feeling the cold very much. The first batch of gunners have gone through their practical and theoretical task in gunnery and laying(?) very creditably and will be sent to Lark Hill to be drafted off to France in a few days.

Examinations took place on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>. I am a late arrival at the fort and did not go through the test.

## **PART 12: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Escorting Prisoner to Chelmsford**

The only war news of importance that has interested the public were President Wilson's proposal to the Allies and the German Allies that peace should be founded on a "No victory" basis and that Poland should be made free and independent. The proposal was received by England in good humour but will not be entertained. Germany received the proposal with contempt and fear judging from her press accounts.

The attempt of the Seebruge torpedo flotilla (German) to escape from that rapidly freezing harbour and its interception by the British fleet caused some interest. The destruction brought about by the B.F. to the German flotilla has not been made known yet.

Nothing also of particular interest has occurred in the above days.

**Jan. 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 1917.**

Nothing of great importance has occurred on the above dates except that Gun Drill practice has been intensified for the reason that a number of men in the number that I am attached to are to be drafted to France in a few days.

The weather has now moderated somewhat and the wind has died down. It is still icy cold.

**Feb. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917**

On these dates a great stir was created throughout England, and for that matter the entire world, by the declaration by Germany of the renewal on a vast scale of her "U Boat" piracy. The declaration involves all neutrals in that they are forbidden to trade with England, France or Italy except at specified times and under German orders. In other words the British Isles are now blockaded and the area along the French Coast, around Italy and the Mediterranean is also closely blockaded (on paper by Germany). Needless to say this bombastic and truculent avowal by the Huns has created such a storm throughout neutral countries that it is likely to overwhelm her. The smaller neutral countries seem to be waiting the lead of America and it seems likely that America will declare war on Germany if one can judge by their press warnings.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 35 Gunners of my section were warned to be ready for draft to France – they will leave on 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb.

**Feb. 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>.**

There has been no change during the above days in the daily routine of gun drill. It has been the same as recorded in my last entries.

There have been some political developments during the last few days particularly from 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. on and (illegible word) in particular the development of the German "U" Boat menace and the attitude towards it of the U.S. Today, 13<sup>th</sup>, news has been received in England that the American Ambassador has arrived in Switzerland and that diplomatic relations have been completely severed between the two countries. The general opinion in England is that America cannot avoid hostilities with Germany. It also seems, from reports coming through of German "U" Boat methods that a definite attitude has been adopted by Germany to force America into the war. A few days will tell whether the world's history is going to be definitely marked by America joining the Allies.

Reassuring information has just been given out to the public by British statesmen, like Lord Curzon and Sir Edward Carson, that great progress has been made by the British Navy in capturing and destroying "U" Boats. It is confidently believed that the menace will be absolutely overcome in a week or two.

**Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

No new entry on this date is necessary as the work is unchanged and covers the same ground as previous entries.

### **Feb. 15<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

On this date a Battery Director class was selected - 8 men in all . I was lucky enough to be one of the 8 selected. The theories and angles of battery fire will be taken up. Later in the day an A.1 Class of gunners was formed, that is what were considered the best gunners were selected. I was also put into this class. This class will be the first draft of gunners from the Fort as competent to lay a gun.

The first American boat was sunk today.

### **Feb 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup>**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> I was ordered to proceed from the Fort to Chelmsford, Essex, as an escort with a prisoner who was found guilty by a Court-martial for stealing a registered letter containing ten pounds from a comrade. His sentence was 12 months hard labour and was reduced to 12 months detention in a military prison.

This trip, although a disagreeable duty, contained features of interest in that it was the first time I have been inside a gaol to watch the methods of handling prisoners. The prison in peace time is a county gaol but at the present time it has been entirely taken over by the military authorities. It is used for all serious military crime cases and death sentence cases. In my opinion no Australian ought to be sent to an English military prison but dealt with by the Australian military authorities, as it is the severity with which the prisoners are dealt with leaves a rankling hatred in an Australian breast which time could not soften. Our prisoner was first received at the gate and then passed into a courtyard, sealed by great iron gates from which it would be impossible to escape. He was kept in the courtyard two and a half hours when the receiving Sergeant Major took possession of him. First of all he was made to give up his money, watch, razor, and other prescribed articles – take off his military equipment, as he is no longer a soldier but will be dismissed from H.M. Service with ignominy at the end of the sentence. Next, an iron gate was opened and the Sergeant Major told him to lift his kit bags and the order, “Double” was roared at him. At the same time he was pushed through the gate with considerable force and made to run across a space of 50 yards (the prison yard) to his cell where he was stripped, searched again and locked in his cell for 24 hours. At the end of that time he will wear his “prison uniform” and be made to conform to the prison regulations etc., which, in the main are - a certain number of hours each day “double marching” with full kit bags on and other equipment. Everything is done to the double - there is no walking in a military prison.

A considerable amount of time each day is used in bag making and such like work. Each morning the prisoner is up at 5am. A razor is given him for 7 minutes with which to shave. Some exercise is indulged in for an hour and his work for the day begins. He is in bed at 8pm with “lights out”. The prison life is very monotonous and mind destroying. One prisoner, a week previous to above date, took advantage of his “7 minute shave” and committed suicide by cutting his throat with the razor

to escape the deadly monotony and discipline. His sentence was only a short one – I understand it was 28 days.

I felt extremely sorry for our prisoner as he was a Corporal and a married man, having a wife and children in Melbourne. He seemed to be very depressed as his allotment to his family is stopped and it is again a case where the innocent must suffer for the guilty.

Chelmsford is 28 miles the other side of London and I had two and a half hours in London and a considerable part of the day was spent in Chelmsford, a town of about 20,000 people and somewhat ancient looking. I arrived back at Fareham late the same night.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> nothing of importance has occurred either personally or in the political situation noted in my last entries.

### **Feb 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

The weather during the last few days has moderated a good deal and seems inclined to be warmer. It has been raining now for two days. All the snow has melted and disappeared.

### **Feb.21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

The usual drill has been going on as usual on the above days. There has been no change in the routine.

On 28<sup>th</sup> I was sent by the Camp doctor to an ear specialist at Alexandria Hospital at Portsmouth.

The specialist report was that I had a slight chronic deafness and I am receiving treatment for same. There is no great change in the political situation reported in my previous entries.

## **PART 13: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Arrival at Etaples Military Camp, France, Tests**

### **Feb 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> 1917**

No change on these days has occurred in our drill routine.

We expect to be passed out as A.1. Gunners in a few days and will be sent to Lark Hill to be drafted to France.



The political and war situation is now interesting in as much as Kut-el-Amarna has been recaptured on the 26<sup>th</sup> with a large number of Turkish prisoners. The German Front (West) is now interesting also as the enemy has been forced back 2 miles on a 11 mile front. Large batches of prisoners are being taken also.

The American situation is unchanged and the opinion is now general that she will not come into the war.

The weather is now warm and sunny.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> the A.1. Gunners were put through a gun test and passed out for service and draft to France. As I am among above gunners I expect to leave some day this week.

### **March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1917**

There has been nothing of an eventful nature to set down. There are still rumours that the "passed out gunners" will be going at any time now to France. There is also some talk that the whole of Fort Wallington is to be taken over by the Australian Artillery to train "details". To lend colour to the rumour an inventory has been taken of the whole Fort and Hutments, which has been shared by "conscripts" of the Tommy Artillery. There is certainly something in the wind.

On 7<sup>th</sup> (about) a new Major took charge of all the Australian details here and his presence has been apparent from the changes he has effected already. He seems to be very strict and severe in all cases where discipline is concerned. A little strictness in this camp won't do any harm as there was a certain amount of slackness under the last O.C.

The political situation during the last week was marked by some important events such as the fall of Bagdad on 11<sup>th</sup> which marks the end of German dreams in the East and the danger to India and Egypt.

Another important event is the arming of all American ships by the U.S. against "U" Boats. The series of successes by our armies in France during the last 14 days has been great news. The first German withdrawal took place during the last 2 weeks and it seems that our forces have kept them moving since. It is expected that Bapaume will fall anytime now. Altogether the war situation looks very hopeful.

### **March 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> a Zeppelin raid took place over the country I am situated in but no damage was done to property or life. One of the Zeps was brought down near Paris by gunfire. England just at present is rejoicing over the fall of Bapaume on 17<sup>th</sup> which is considered one of the greatest victories of the war.

Since writing my last entries a great revolution has been going on in Russia which culminated in the abdication of the Czar and his Line. Insidious German influence for the last 2 years with the Czaritza, a German princess, at the head, has been at work and these dark forces have so paralysed the efficiency in the conduct of the Allied cause, as far as Russia was concerned, that the upheaval was just in time to save the great name and fame of Russia.

There is no doubt now that Russia will put every ounce of her strength into "the bloody business of war".

The situation on the Western Front never looked better than it does today. The whole of Bapaume Ridge now is in the hands of the Allies and there is now open fighting on Plains to the Rhine.

The war outlook in the East is very healthy and hopeful. The Forces of Darkness are beginning to recede.

Nothing of a personal nature is worth entering here since the 15<sup>th</sup>. The usual routine work is going on.

### **March 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

On March 19<sup>th</sup> I visited an old ruin known as Porchester Castle. The castle is situated at Porchester Town about 3 miles from Portsmouth. The history of this old ruin shows that it is an old royal castle and was used as a country home by our kings and queens from Edward III down to the time of Elizabeth. James II was supposed to be the last Royalty to use the castle as a residence. The architecture of the ruins is shown to be both Roman and Norman. The earliest construction is supposed to have been begun by the Romans. The outer walls, now in ruins, were supposed to have been built by Edward III, or repaired. The first foundations and tower date about 300 A.D. The tower was extended to about 5 floors by Edward or Stephen and in an arch stone entrance to the tower can still be seen the Coat of Arms of Edward III. The Eastern Portcullis and gate was built by the Normans and is in very good repair.

A very fine chapel in one corner Eastern of the enclosure is still used as a place of worship. The whole is built of stone and the roof, also of stone, shows signs of Norman architecture. It was built largely by Stephen.

The main entrance to the church and stained glass windows are pointed out to visitors as marks of interesting early English architecture. The church is very beautiful inside and is kept in very good repair.

The walls of the castle enclose a space of about 9 acres. The walls are from 5 to 10 feet thick and in some places 15 feet thick. The castle is approached by three gates all in good repair. The moat is still to be traced around the outside walls but in places it is now filled up.

One point of great interest is the secret stone stairway in one corner of the tower which leads to the top. The small openings in the tower walls and also in the enclosure walls can still be seen. These openings were used for defensive purposes.

The castle must have been impregnable for many centuries but now is in ruins. Up to the battle of Waterloo it was kept as a sort of prison for probably half a century. A number of French prisoners were kept here during the Napoleonic Wars. 8000 were confined after the battle of Waterloo.

A good many interesting relics are still round the district and in the museums made by the French prisoners of this time.

On March 20<sup>th</sup> there is nothing of particular interest to enter.

### **March 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1917**

Fort Wallington.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> all the men of the A.I.F. were moved back to Camp 18 at Lark Hill. The men were ordered to be ready at 5.30am to entrain but through some mess on the part of the transport officers the men did not entrain till about 4.30pm in the midst of a terrific snow storm. I was told off as one of the baggage guard and unfortunately for the guard we had a very rough time of it. It was snowing when we left and snowing and blowing a cold wind when we arrived at Lark Hill. The weather for the last 3 days has been very cold and miserable. It could not be much worse in France and I hope to get notice to leave for France as soon as possible to escape the sloppy muddy conditions that exist here.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> all the Unit has been busy getting the camp into a fit condition to live in.

There is some talk today, the 24<sup>th</sup>, of moving camp again.

### **March 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

There is no news of interest to enter on 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> as most of the men were engaged upon fatigue work round Camp 18. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the whole Unit, including myself, were moved back to Camp 26, Lark Hill. I understand that this camp is known as a clearing camp for men who are on draft for France. We expect to be sent off any time now within the next two weeks.

The men are not receiving any drill but are engaged upon, seemingly, a lot of useless fatigue work. The weather is still very cold and rainy and the grounds used for Parades is muddy and miserable for the men.

There is nothing of particular importance to chronicle with regard to the political situation except that America seems to be nearer coming into the war.

### **March 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup> 1917**

The same routine was engaged in on the 28<sup>th</sup> 29<sup>th</sup> as mentioned in the previous entries – Parades and Fatigues in the mud and rain. I will never think of Lark Hill except with a horror of the mud and slush and cold winds and sweat. In the Parades which have been inflicted upon the men at this camp since we came here on 21<sup>st</sup> March, the routine has been as follows - 6.45am Reveille and “fall in”. The men were then kept standing in the mud and slush until duties for the day were told off and a roll call made which lasted over 30 minutes. The men were then dismissed for breakfast and hut cleaning. The next bugle went at 9.5am for the work of the day. Another roll call and wait in the mud for 30 minutes for no particular reason in the world! The parade is then marched round to Camp 21 from Camp 26 to form up in another parade before the Commandant – A bugle call was then blown and our battery doubled off back to our own camp parade ground. All this time we have been standing and wading through mud and cursing Bill the Kaiser and the name of war and all it stands for.

After some more delay and standing around the men are dismissed to their duties. At 12.30pm all the men fall in again and wait again in the mud – finally we are dismissed for dinner. At 2pm “fall in” again blows and the same 30 minutes wait in the mud is enacted and a march around from Camp 26 to Camp 21 and doubling back again to our own parade ground. At 4.30pm we fall in and wait again in the mud and cold and are dismissed to prepare for tea. The time is then our own until 9.30pm when we retire to prepare and recuperate for the next day. “The weary are at rest – at last”.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of March my name was read out for the next draft to France and I have been fitted out with one complete suit and underwear and I am in complete readiness to move out at the shortest notice. On the 31<sup>st</sup> the usual parade in this camp was gone through. It is quite possible that we leave April 2<sup>nd</sup> at night for France.

### **April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917**

Nothing interesting to enter for April 1<sup>st</sup> but on April 2<sup>nd</sup> I walked over, with some companions, to Figeldean to see the “Old Village Blacksmith” and the “spreading chestnut tree” both of which are mentioned in Longfellow’s poem, “The Village Blacksmith”. There is nothing unusual to see except a large chestnut tree close to the door of a low lying roof and insignificant looking blacksmith’s shop. The walls are built of old brick and the usual signs of a blacksmith’s shop are to be seen

outside in the way as old tyres and scraps of iron are lying around. The whole place is rather disappointing. As usual, in such places, names are written everywhere.

Nothing unusual occurred on April 3<sup>rd</sup> except all the men on draft, including myself, were put through a two day gas school. We used the usual gas masks and respirators as each man was exposed in a gas chamber for 2 minutes, with a chloride gas density of 1 in 600. The usual gas cloud or gas shell is 1 in 10,000 so that the gas chamber was a good test.

On Thursday, April 4<sup>th</sup> I left for Etapes, France with a draft of Artillery. I est the route to be via Folkstone.

Private add. Pacific Street, Bronte, Sydney, N.S.W.

### **April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917. Bologue, France.**

On March 4<sup>th</sup> a large number of A.I.F. soldiers, including the unit of Artillery, to which I am attached, left Lark Hill for France at 6pm. We entrained at 10.10pm from Amesbury and arrived in Folkstone at 4am. On the 5<sup>th</sup> and marched up to the military barracks and rested for about 4 hours. The military barracks consists of a large number of very fashionable houses taken over by the Imperial Govt. for a period of seven years. Folkstone is considered as the most fashionable seaside resort in England and the residential portion, including the Barracks, stands up well on high ground and overlooks a long boulevard skirting the coast for a couple of miles. This position is kept in parklike condition and is sprinkled with bandstands and has every appearance of a hugely patronised seaside resort.

At 10am we went aboard a transport, "The Onward" and arrived in Bologue about 12.15pm and marched through the streets to the English Military Barracks or Camp. There is nothing striking about Bologue, it looks a good deal like an old English city of about 50,000 people. The French people seemed pleased and at least amused to see the Australians passing through their city in their usual light hearted way , singing and whistling.

### **April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917 – Good Friday.**

The troops left Bologue about 11pm, including Artillery, Infantry, and entrained for Etaples, 1.45pm was the time of arrival. Etaples Military Camp is one of the largest for Expeditionary troops in France and is more in the nature of a "rest camp" although the final passing-out training happens here, before going up into the firing line. New troops are generally here about two weeks and then move to the Front.

As much of France that I have so far seen seems to be very pretty and thickly covered with factories. In these parts around Etaples the industries are mostly cement and tile factories. The population is not really French but more Flemish in type.

Etaples Camp is a general camp for all kinds of Expeditionary Forces including English, Irish, Scottish, N.Z., Australian and Canadians and is a very complete concern.

### **April 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

A general medical and kit inspection took place today – The food seems to be very good here and plentiful, more so than in England.

Nothing unusual occurred on the 8<sup>th</sup>, Sunday, except the first religious service was attended by the troops to which I belong, in France.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> I went through my rifle shooting test. There is still the gas test and the “Bull Ring” test with guns of 18 pounds type. The weather is now fine and bracing.

The new events of the war are not outstanding enough to chronicle here so I have omitted any war news in my last entries.

### **April 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

The gas test referred to in my last entries occurred on the 10<sup>th</sup>. The 1<sup>st</sup> test consists of chlorine & phosgene gas in trenches, dugouts and in the open. These gases come in the form of clouds and in gas shells. Gas masks must be worn as the gases are very deadly. The second test is with tear gas or Lachrymatory gas, usually in trenches; this gas is sweet smelling but very smarting on the eyes. We did not wear masks in this test.

On 11<sup>th</sup> my first experience occurred in the “Bull Ring” but there is nothing unusual to note here about that experience except that a blinding rain, snow and sand storm was raging and it was extremely cold. I won't forget the experience because this day, the 11<sup>th</sup>, is the day on which the Red Cross trains and motor ambulances were passing us all day with the wounded from the great offensive near “Vimy Ridge” in which over 11,000 German prisoners were taken. A number of the wounded had died on their way down to Etaples and it was sad to see them being rapidly buried in the military graveyard adjoining the “Bull Ring”. They were carried down from the hospitals covered with a Union Jack and buried in the sand. There are thousands of graves in this graveyard, marked only by a small wooden cross with the name on it. It gave me a most depressing feeling when I first saw this cemetery and I think of the causes which make such a gruesome sight possible. I suppose that later on I will get used to such things and realize less the small span that separates most of us here in this encampment from the honour of having a similar tragic little wooden cross placed over our bodies too to help complete the regularity and symmetry of a military cemetery.

**April 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

There is little of importance to enter on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> except that I was still attending the "Bullring" but on the 14<sup>th</sup> a gun test was given to all gunners attending and most of them were passed out and classified. I understand that I classified with the rest and was passed out.

On the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> nothing of importance has happened personally, except the routine mentioned in my last entries.

Matters of a military/political nature on these days have probably been of great importance in the world. – The French have made a great advance on a 25 mile front and over 10,000 prisoners have been taken. The great advance has only just begun and great things are expected in the next few days from the French. The British are also continuing their great advance round the coal areas at Lens and the number of prisoners to date is 14,000 and the advance is only in its infancy. These actions by the British and French are very critical for the Germans, as accounts coming through seem to show that their organization and morale is rapidly crumbling.

The weather just at present is very rainy and uncomfortable.

**April 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

I am still at Etaples on the above dates but nothing of a personal nature has occurred worth entering here.

As far as the military situation on the above days is concerned news is continually coming through of tremendous British and French bombardments and continual batches of prisoners are being captured in large numbers. No great event has happened during these days that has been given out to the "public".

The weather has been fine and bright.

## **PART 14: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Arrival at the Front at Somme**

**April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Today is Anzac Day and is practically a holiday for all soldiers of the A.I.F. During the afternoon at Etaples Anzac sports took place on suitable ground in the Bull Ring and adjoining the cemetery. The funerals and "Last Post" were the only things that reminded us of war. The day was otherwise perfect. Football matches took place between N.Z. Forces and our own A.I.F. The N.Z. team won the rugby match 26 to nil. Other sports were indulged in such as foot races and the like. The

Y.M.C.A. erected a canteen of a temporary nature for the supply of refreshments free to all the men. The day was a perfect summer's day and the sports were very successful.

### **April 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

I left Etaples on the 26<sup>th</sup> for the "line". The time of leaving was about 7am on 26<sup>th</sup>. There were about 400 men in the draft with my Unit included. About 3pm we arrived at Albert and detrained for our camp. (I forgot to mention our mode of travel) – Since I have been in France I have always travelled in an open horse-box car, built to carry either 40 men or 8 horses. Usually there are about 30 men. As far as I could see, Australian soldiers always travel this way – British and French soldiers, when I saw their troop train, were in a suitable 3<sup>rd</sup> class carriage. I have not seen the whole of the Front and cannot speak for the method of carrying troops in other sections of the war line. It did seem to me that A.I.F.s were not particularly well transported in comparison with other troops.

On arrival at Albert I got my first glimpse of "Hun destruction". The town is literally shattered to pieces; hardly one house or home remains whole. It looks as if a great earthquake had swept over the city and shattered it to pieces. The outstanding feature of the town of Albert was its cathedral, an edifice of about the same dimensions as Christchurch in Sydney, NSW. This fine edifice is now utterly destroyed and is mostly a mass of red brick of which it is built. Some of the walls remain standing and the great tower, surmounted by a great Madonna with a child in arms still remains, though all of it is badly shorn by shell and shrapnel. The great Madonna has been bent over to one side by French engineers to prevent it being an aiming point for German artillery. It looks perilously like falling and so also does the tower. Most of the church which remains will have to be taken down as the walls are so badly fractured. The Hun seems to have a particular antipathy to churches and delights in destroying them.

I am now in the town of Fricourt, or at least what was the town. Nothing remains but masses of brick and stone and one wall of a church.

The vicinity of Albert and Fricourt is literally covered with old trenches, shell holes, wire entanglements, dugouts and other devilries of war. The country round about is torn and shattered till it looks like a desert for miles. The mud must have been awful in the winter time! It is bad enough now.

### **April 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

On the 29<sup>th</sup> there was very little of interest to enter except that I was told off as a piquet over a number of mules that had come in. The mules gave very little trouble during the night, though usually it is far safer to be up among the guns in action than among mules.



On 30<sup>th</sup> I went for a ramble over the Beecourt Woods sector of the Somme Front. This part of the Somme is simply a series of entrenchments and strong dugouts. The country is torn up and wretched looking. It is well sprinkled over with crosses over the graves of British soldiers, mostly of the 34<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Divisions. Some of the names are on the crude crosses – many are unknown. The battlefield is a grim and scarred looking sight and would sadden one if there were not worse fields to see further ahead.

An object of very great interest on this part of the Somme is an immense mine crater over 90 yards in diameter and 80 to 90 feet deep. It is said that 250 tons of explosives were used here to blow up Fritz's main trench system. At the bottom is a grave of a German soldier with a rude cross over it. The feet of the soldier are still above ground. The battlefield is still littered with ammunition and "duds" although it has been salvaged.

**April 31<sup>st</sup>, 1917**

Still with the B.A.C. on this date. Nothing interesting to enter.

## **PART 15: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **To 106th Howitzer Battery, 6th Field Army, at Albert**

**May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> 1917**

On the above dates, although still with the B.A.C. (or Battery Ammunition Column) I still had considerable leisure to roam about the battle field of last winter and early this spring, viz the field that lies between the Aisne and Somme and the famous Sausage Gully.

Sausage Gully is a natural fortification in itself and consists of a long steep ridge, miles long and undulating fields slope back from the steep ridge behind in which the Germans had their dugouts and trenches. Terrible fighting took place in this gully as it is absolutely covered with shell holes and line after line of parallel trenches and wide barbed wire entanglements. The trenches are battered to pieces but the horrible looking wire entanglements still remain and it will entail difficult work removing same when peace comes over this beautiful country again.

Every yard from Albert to Baupaume seems to have been fought for and terrible loss of life is indicated by the number of "roadside" cemeteries and rude wooden crosses sprinkled over the battlefield where the dead had fallen.

It will take a year to fill up the craters and trenches and place the land in condition for cultivation as the trenches and holes are so large and the soil formation of chalk is not suitable as soil. All this part of France seems to have its subsoil of chalk with only a skin of good soil on top.

Irrespective of the desolation all around and through the valley the land is beginning to look green and in places beautiful and trees are sprouting which have been passed over by the shell fire. In many parts nothing remains of trees but battered stumps; some stand up whole but dead through shell shock. (On the 3<sup>rd</sup> I located my brother, Ossie).

### **May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917. "Albert"**

Late at night of the 4<sup>th</sup> I was warned to proceed up to the front with others and was put on the strength of the 106<sup>th</sup> Howitzer Battery of the 6<sup>th</sup> (Field Army). Our party left the B.A.C. Detail Camp at 9.30am of the 5<sup>th</sup> and arrived at the Battery Camp at 5pm (about) after a 20 mile walk. The day was a sweltering hot one and no tears were shed when the end of the journey came in sight.

On the way up I passed through Pozieres and Baupaume. Nothing remains of Pozieres but a mass of bricks and dugouts built of the wreck of bricks and timber which once made up the town – one would have to be told that Pozieres was once a town.

Baupaume is a much larger town than Pozieres and has, even now, the appearance of being rather a pretty town before the "beast" left his mark upon it. It is now shattered and torn up and is still being shelled at intervals by the long range guns of the enemy. Baupaume probably had a population of from 7 to 10 thousand people – no one lives there now of the civilian population on account of the intermittent shelling. The roads approaching the town are always being shelled on account of the supply wagons passing through our lines.

### **May 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> 1917 (Cambrai Baupaume Unit)**

I am now camped in beautiful woods above Baupaume. The woods are occasionally being shelled and at short notice we have to move to a safer spot.

As usual the "Hun" has passed through these woods and has littered the roadways with felled trees and in many other ways has destroyed numerous beautiful straight up trees.

At the top of the woods (Veluch) is the remains of a beautiful chateau owned by some French Baron. The woods are owned by the same person. My battery is well sheltered here from aeroplane attack as it is difficult to see the large number of horses, mules and supply wagons and ammunition dumps owing to the foliage and height of the trees.

Aeroplanes, however, are continually over us searching and a continual aerial bombardment is always going on to drive Fritz's aeroplanes back to his lines.

The bombardment at night at times is awful; it is impossible to sleep. British 12" guns are most cunningly planted all over the woods and it is impossible almost to locate them. I have been walking along in a quiet part of the woods and right under my feet there would be a tremendous

crash that makes the ground tremble - It is a 12" gun or heavy howitzer starting up its day's work. At night (at least my first night here) when all the guns go off together I nearly jump out of my skin – the whole country shakes and vibrates.

There has been a good deal going on of an important nature on the various Fronts the last few days - The French and British armies have taken a good many prisoners - about 8000 all told and advanced considerably. Nothing of an outstanding character has occurred in the war theatre.

### **May 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> 1917**

There is nothing of an outstanding character to enter on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. The usual shelling went on overhead mostly with the view of reducing each others trenches and disabling guns – But on the 11<sup>th</sup> the shells began to land all around our camp and one lucky H.E. shell knocked one of our 60 pounder guns out. (The guns withdrawn later to a safer position). Another lucky Fritz shell landed in the middle of one of the huts – and the hut is hard to find; the clothes and canvas of the hut and socks and shirts etc. are now up in the trees round about. The trees look like Christmas trees. Shells landed all round the quartermaster's store but did not hit it and one shell landed eight feet off a mule and driver and they marvellously escaped injury. The shells were landing in the middle of the horse lines but luckily they had been taken out to water about 15 minutes before the shelling commenced. No one was injured and the only damage done is a large number of craters left in our camp and along the roadways and gun pits.

There have been a large number of aerial encounters between Fritz's planes and our own. All day long Fritz's planes are being shelled by aerial guns and our own planes are being shelled by "Fritz".

On the 12<sup>th</sup> the 106 Howitzer Battery received orders to move away from this front – the Cambrai Baupaume Front – to some other position. We are now getting ready to move out and all the guns of our Battery have come in from the pits.

### **May 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> 1917**

The whole of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army moved away from the Cambrai Baupaume Front on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Heavy shelling went on the previous day but very little on the 13<sup>th</sup> although aircraft reconnaissances and shelling were active on the part of Fritz.

Our first stop for the night was about two miles from Baupaume at a rest camp. Early next morning on the 14<sup>th</sup> the various Brigades of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army continued their journey and arrived at Bavlincourt village where they are now billeted in Barns and frowsy looking cottages and houses. The first stage of the journey was a distance of about 15 miles and the second stage about 18 miles.

The country through which we passed is really beautiful and charming. Everywhere is green fields set off by large clusters of trees, giving a most delightful effect. I can understand now why

Frenchmen speak of their country as “La Belle France”. The village in which I am billeted could not possibly be more charming to the senses. It is like a wonderful park untouched by the rude Hun and his shells. The trees and hedges that grow here are unlike the trees and hedges of any other country – they are more beautiful.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> all hands were generally employed building horse lines and tending them and also placing everything in condition for the convenience of such a big body of men.

The weather is quite warm probably about 85 degrees. Generally there is a shower of rain each day so that at times the weather is muggy.

## **PART 16: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Building for an Offensive at Armentieres and Arras**

**May 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 1917.**

There were no events of unusual interest to enter on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> and the usual camp work went on but on 19<sup>th</sup> General Birdwood reviewed the 6<sup>th</sup> Artillery Army. On the 19<sup>th</sup> I succeeded in locating my brother’s battalion at a village 8 kilometres from Barlincourt - From his friend Cluney I learned that he was wounded late in April at Bullecourt and is now in hospital either in France or England. I was grieved to learn of the death of his friend, “Tommy Thompson” who was killed in one of the actions at Bullecourt. It will be a sad affair for his family.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> the 6<sup>th</sup> Army entrained at Edgehill Siding near Buire-Sur-Aisne for an unknown destination. Later – The 106<sup>th</sup> Howitzer Battery arrived at Baileule near Armentieres (about 8 kilometres away) about 2.30am and detrained the whole Battery in about 2 hours and arrived at our military camp on the boundary between Belgium and France about 4 kilometres from Stenewerke. A beautiful stone paved roadway runs along the boundary, shaded by big spreading trees – the effect is very fine.

There are indications of immense activity up on this Front – endless batteries of guns are continually passing along to the “gun pits” at night. Balloons are continually going up for observation and the bombardment is increasing day and night.

**May 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1917.**

The last two days were spent in getting the camp into shape and in dismantling the guns and putting them together again. – The guns go into action tonight, the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Nothing else of importance to enter except the supplies coming up are bewildering – There is a continual stream of motor lorries with food supplies etc. incessantly passing along the main road. There is also great activity in the air.

The whole of the 6<sup>th</sup> (Army) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> (Army) are now here at this camp including the various Batteries attached to them.

The weather is still warm and close.

**May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 1917.**

The 6<sup>th</sup> Army, including my battery, viz. 106 Howitzers, left the rear wagon lines on 26<sup>th</sup>. We are now camped only a short distance behind the Armentieres Front.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup> The right and left Sections of our battery moved up to the lines and general preparations were being made to get all guns and firing battery wagons etc. in order. There is nothing unusual to enter for any of these days except that a good deal of aerial activity is taking place and continual aerial fights are taking place in the air, one or two being brought down by air guns.

**May 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

On the 27<sup>th</sup> I was made (temporarily) a permanent main and aerial and gas guard and my duties are to (with the help of field glasses) warn, by means of a whistle, the approach of gas or aeroplanes of the enemy.

Nothing unusual on the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>. On the 27<sup>th</sup> the Italians had a great victory on the Carso(?) capturing over 9000 prisoners. There are at present about 60 British guns on that Front.

**May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917.**

Today, it is expected that the great bombardment is to commence. The preparations that have been made indicate that it will be one of the most terrible since the war began. For over six miles between Armentieres and Arras there is nothing but dumps of shells for from 18 pounder up to the 15 inch naval guns. There are literally millions of shells and a standard gauge railway line runs almost up to our guns. The guns are wheel to wheel and dumps of ammunition are two miles in advance of the guns in front. The uncertainty of the time that the struggle begins has made "Fritz" very nervous and he is sending up "flares" all night, fearful lest our guns are creeping up closer. Today 5 days rations have been taken up to the guns and the main road through Armentieres has been closed to all traffic. It doesn't follow that the bombardment is only going to last 5 days but experience has shown that 5 days provision in food for the gun crews, on account of the enemy barrages which prevent food being taken up, is necessary.

**May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1917**

I am still fulfilling my duties as an aerial and gas guard and up to the time of writing nothing unusual has occurred – “there has been an ominous silence”.

There is one subject that I have neglected to mention in my previous entries since being in France, and that is the home life of the peasant or farming classes. The home life of the peasants is anything but charming – their ramshackle farm houses are built of mud and sticks and straw, at one time probably charming but now in a bad state of repair and filthy inside and outside. Their unsanitary homes are set amidst the utmost charm of their beautiful green fields and gardens. All effort seems to have been spent in tilling the soil and making the fields and landscape beautiful.

One plan seems to be followed in the design of their homes - A courtyard is first laid out with a large shallow pit in the centre. Round the courtyard all the buildings, stables, stalls, fowl houses, piggery, barns etc., closely compact, are built. All the refuse from the house, stables, barns etc. is thrown into the centre of the courtyard and there left to rot from year end to year end. This refuse is used as manure on the fields and gardens. The courtyard is entered by a big solid gate and everything belonging to the farm is enclosed at the end of the day, including carts and wagons and horses.

The peasant people themselves, while quiet and inoffensive and courteous, show little sign of any culture. I have been rather disappointed in them. The women are gentle and courteous but could be noted for their absence of any style and comeliness except in the case of some of the younger girls.

9pm – Later - Since making the above entries an exciting incident has occurred. A large observation British balloon has been brought down in flames by Fritz right over our heads. Several attempts had been made during the afternoon by enemy aeroplanes to fire the balloon on account of it observing the enemy placing his big guns: Our aeroplanes hovered round the balloon keeping the enemy away and when they thought that Fritz was properly bluffed they flew off to “supper” and “bed” and then Fritz came over, flew round the balloon several times firing explosive bullets at it, while in the midst of a veritable hail of shells from our aircraft guns. It was the gamest thing I have seen Fritz do so far. The observers came down in parachutes as soon as the shells started to fly. They brought their instruments and photographs safely with them to ground.

**June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Nothing unusual or eventful has occurred on above days. There has been quite a lot of enemy activity in the air and the men have had some narrow escapes from falling shells from our own air guns which had been firing at the enemy aircraft on the 3<sup>rd</sup> – One jagged piece, about 6 inches by 2 inches, gave me about 2 feet clearance, which is certainly near enough to be comfortable.

The great offensive, contrary to expectations, is still hanging fire and Fritz has taken advantage of the respite and has started an offensive of his own. - Several of our ammunition dumps have been blown up and batteries shelled – up to the present 5 men have been hit, of our adjoining battery – 3 men were killed.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> the enemy sent Tear Shells or Lachrymatory gas over amongst us and we “wept blinding tears” till it blew over. Today, the 5<sup>th</sup>, we will be prepared for his gas.

## **PART 17: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Heavy Fighting on the Armentieres Front**

**June 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> 1917.**

Nothing unusual to enter for the 5<sup>th</sup> except that I was ordered to proceed up to the front line. The bombardment mentioned in my last entry has not come off on the 5<sup>th</sup>.

On the 6<sup>th</sup>, with a new crew of gunners, I left our forward wagon lines and arrived at the gun pits about 1pm. Everything was quiet until 2pm when the enemy began to pour in shells all round our battery and the order was given to move away to the flank as fast as we could. It was the most windy experience ever I felt as shrapnel and high explosive shells were flying around dangerously near. The shell fire got worse towards night and several times we had to get away from our guns to escape the shells. At 8pm Fritz started to put over gas and we took to our gas helmets. As we had to stand to all night, as the belated big stuff was to start at 3am and the infantry were to go over at 4am on the 6<sup>th</sup>, I must say it was a most awful time for the next 8 hours or so, during the time which the gas lasted. We worked our guns at break neck speed with gas masks on and the perspiration filled the mask and dulled the glass eye pieces very soon.

From 3am on the 6th we kept up the continuous rain of shells until morning, supporting the infantry in many places. On the 7<sup>th</sup> it was a succession of gunfire action by us and clearing out to our flanks for our lives to escape Fritz's shells.

It is now about 9pm and the gas shells are beginning to come over – so I must don my mask. I am standing to again tonight. The big bombardment has been a big success so far from Armentieres to the sea. Already about (crossed out) prisoners have been taken and great advances made. Up here in this position “Ploegsteert” Fritz put over 100,000 or so gas and H.E. shells on Sunday night the 2<sup>nd</sup>. The shells and shrapnel are again flying round so I must clear out until it slackens down. I should say a man's life is worth about twopence up here now - many dead are lying nearby along the roads and in the fields.

Early in the night, about 10pm on the 7<sup>th</sup>, just as we had all turned in for the night, Fritz began to rain over our position large shells with a vicious explosion, alternately with gas shells. I had selected for the night what I thought was a safe position from the lumps of shell flying around. I was just dozing off to sleep when the Fritz shells started to arrive. All hands were not long getting half a mile away where we slept in the open all night. I find later, after I left, a shell, also a gas one, lobbed right on top of the billet I was in. I am beginning to take an interest in Fritz after that experience.

### **June 8<sup>th</sup>. 1917**

About 3pm on this date we all passed through an awful experience. I came away from the gun about 2.30 and was just finishing my dinner with the sergeant and 3 others when a large 5.9 shell landed about 6 feet away in the adjoining gun pit, where gunners were on duty. The explosion was terrific and as there were shell dumps there and exploded by the 5.9 shell, those on duty had little chance of escape. One gunner was burnt to a cinder and another badly wounded in the back and legs. The sergeant and men with whom I was having dinner were all badly wounded with the flying shell.

I providentially escaped with a few clouts of flying earth and a violent shaking but not otherwise scratched. There were about 9 casualties altogether. Shells, at the time this occurred, were flying everywhere and I have passed through a most terrifying experience as one didn't know where to turn to escape flying shells.

Later – The last part of our ammunition has been exploded and one gun has been blown out. Our gun pit positions are now total wrecks and what is left is being hauled out tonight to new positions. All hands have been working on the new gun pits which are now finished and one of the guns is in place.

Later in the night the teams that came up to haul out the guns were badly shelled – 3 men wounded – two since have died, 3 horses were also blown to pieces.

### **June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1917.**

All hands are working hard all day on the new gun pits under shell fire.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> the enemy is still shelling our old gun pits and they will soon be nothing else but churned up earth and ruins.

The shelling by the enemy is so great that we have again fled for our lives. The casualties amongst other batteries have been very heavy and the men are fast approaching the "windy" stage. I slept out in the open on the night of the 9<sup>th</sup>, or at least tried to sleep, but most of the time was spent



dodging and listening for shells of all kinds including the treacherous little gas shells. Nights like these could safely be called “nights of terror”.

**June 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 1917.**

There were periodical shellings all day by the enemy, some of the shells coming dangerously close, but the night of the 10<sup>th</sup> was a most frightful experience. A great bombardment and barrage fire was put up by our artillery about 10pm on the enemy and when it stopped our men went over and stormed the enemy trenches. After they had done their work, which was successful, Fritz seemed to go utterly mad and put over thousands of shells of all kinds, high explosive, gas and shrapnel shells: it utterly unnerved me.

It was a pitch black night and I was on duty to sleep with my gun in the pit but when I heard the shells landing near me I got out and started to move away to a flank but wherever I moved shells were landing. When I ran in one direction they were in front and on the side of me. I made for the opposite flank and it was just as bad. All this time I was running and stumbling and falling over wire and crater holes. All hands were doing the same as myself. At last I lay down flat amongst the bursting shells and gas and trusted to Providence and luck. I hope that, in good time, the Kaiser and all his devils will have to face the same hellishness as our gun crews went through this night.

The only casualties on this date were two men and about 3 mules in my own battery. One of the men had his head blown off while on horseback. We found them later on one of the main roads. The wounded man was brought in and his leg attended to. Four of us carried him on a stretcher about a mile and a half to the nearest receiving station about 2am in the morning and called up an ambulance which after an “endless time” arrived. About 4am I rolled my weary frame up in a wet blanket, with clothes on, and slept till about 9am. The volume of shelling had died down about this time.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> Fritz began about 10am, after breakfast, to get vicious again and one high explosive shell burst near us and mortally wounded three of our men. We did the best we could for them and carried them down to the clearing station. One of them, on my stretcher, died just as we carried him into the station. There is very little chance after being struck by the jagged pieces of shell cases of living through it.

I have too many Providential escapes from death, as dealt the men here in this suicidal flank sector of the Armentieres front, to enter them all here but one H.E. shell that landed near us at dinner time quite made me sick. Sometimes I wonder what God can be doing with all this terrible destruction of life going on and why He is allowing madmen to run enemy nations.

I haven't the returns of the great drive yet so cannot enter them here. There are about 7,000 prisoners so far.

## **PART 18: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Heavy Fighting on the Messines Ridge**

**June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

The position we are now in has become dangerously untenable and early in the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>, about 1.30am, our battery began to move out to new positions into what is known as the "Hoop Lines", arriving at about 3pm. The battery was placed behind some shrubbery and all hands turned into some billets which were built by the enemy sometime ago. They consist of heavy walls of well packed sandbags and iron cupolas. A great deal of enemy shelling is still going on, particularly along the roads.

The billets in which we are resting have been struck twice this morning with high explosive shells and from what I can see this new position is just as dangerous as the last one.

A great many gas shells were sent over by Fritz last night before and after 12pm and as the night was again pitch black and the shells have the trick of coming right on top of one before they explode. I was on "gas guard" while the worst part of the shelling was going on and, as it is part of "gas guard's" duty when gas starts to come over to go round and wake every man up, the position is not a happy one as one's natural inclinations are to hide in as deep a hole or drain as possible. Fritz is a terrible enemy and is far from beaten yet.

**Later - 13<sup>th</sup>**

A great aerial fight took place over our billets this morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> – very early – 9 Fritz's aeroplanes fought 5 of our Battle planes and were defeated and fled after a good deal of machine gun fighting.

**June 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

One thing I have often observed among our men when in great danger and in the presence of death, which may lurk in the next shell, is their cessation of any great levity and discussion of women almost ceases. A certain cheerfulness and resignation is never absent, even at the most critical danger, among them.

It has been comparatively quiet on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> except that shells are continuously going over our positions. The enemy has not located us yet. There is also a good deal of aerial activity and many air fights.

There are also a good many enemy balloons up in front of us observing and we are trying to be very careful and not be observed much.

Later - I am sitting in my dugout at present 8pm and a great strafing of the enemy is going on by our artillery. It has been going on for about 30 minutes and is now dying down. The enemy is beginning to send over his shells and the thing that strikes me about them, as compared with our own, is their horrible tearing noise, like a fast circular saw. It is like all things German, horrible to hear and terrible in its effects, as if inspired by Satan alone. The ring of our shells through the air is bad enough but nothing so fear inspiring as German shells.

There is one other matter that I have not touched upon in my entries since I have been in the new position and that is the state of the villages and towns that are within view of our dugouts. - If you could imagine a brick house that had been dynamited from within and the tiles blown off the roof, partly broken woodwork of roof and great parts of the walls blown out, then you have an idea of what German shells have done to the farm houses and villages of France. The villages within sight are practically modern brick ones and consist of rows of 2 and 3 story houses with tile roofs – but now are ruins only. This is the Satanic side of war.

### **June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

It has been comparatively quiet today except for the usual daily exchange of shelling; the roads in front of us have also been shelled and a few casualties to the adjoining battery have occurred. Later - Ammunition arrived at about 12 noon and, unfortunately for us, the enemy began shelling and got two more of our men and one horse. The shelling was so severe that the wagons had to be turned back to the dump.

### **June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

At present I am sitting in a bit of a dugout on the roadside to escape from the shells. I've been trying for about 2 or 3 hours to deliver some letters to headquarters but at present I dare not move or it may be the wrong direction. I wonder will the wretched Huns ever cease their shelling and rest for an hour from their murderous work – The British rest often during the day and night but the enemy seems never to rest.

We are preparing to move out of these positions again, to Messines Ridge.

Later - The left section of our battery left "Whizbang" farm, or the last position, at about 12 midnight and arrived at the Messines Ridge at about 2am. We passed through the dreaded Ploeg Street position which the enemy has been consistently shelling ever since we left. Needless to say we galloped through and it is a remarkable thing to us all that we arrived without any casualties. The nearest to an accident was a wizbang shell which passed in front of our lead horses' noses.

### **June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Early this morning there were 7 men killed by a shell, a few yards in front of our guns, while we were peacefully sleeping after the effort of moving down here to Messines Ridge. The poor chaps belonged to a Pioneer gang repairing the road in front of us.

I never felt so dirty in my life as I feel at present – I have been unable to take my clothes off for over two weeks and it seems impossible to get a change of linen at present. This military life is a fine healthy life - in Fiction only.

**June 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 1917.**

I have nothing unusual to enter for the 18<sup>th</sup> – The usual shelling of our position still goes on with enemy shrapnel and H.E. shells . On the 19<sup>th</sup> the shelling is very much worse than it was on the 18<sup>th</sup> especially enemy shrapnel . There was one casualty today – one of our signallers was taken away with shell shock in a collapsed condition.

I have neglected to mention anything of Messines Ridge and what the great mine “lately exploded” did to it. For miles along the ridge one sees nothing but turned-up earth, and over the ridge, where the Germans were entrenched, there is nothing but ruined trenches and dugouts. Some of the dugouts are built of solid concrete 8 and 9 feet thick on top, but were shattered to pieces with our heavy shells. Wrecked guns and debris of the enemy lie everywhere. The loss of German life must have been appalling as it is hardly possible to turn up the soil anywhere without finding the body of a German. Many of the bodies of Germans still lie over the ridge unburied as do many a brave Australian. The battlefield is being gradually cleared up and salvaged(?).

On the 19<sup>th</sup> a great aerial fight took place overhead and one of our machines was brought down by having its wing blown off - Another was set on fire but managed to right itself and put the fire out in midair, coming safely down afterwards.

## **PART 19: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Gas Attacks, Move to Ostend Front**

**June 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1917**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> two of our balloons were brought down by enemy aeroplanes over our heads by explosive bullets , one of our aeroplanes was also destroyed; except these entries nothing unusual has occurred.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> a shell lobbed a few feet from my dugout early in the morning. It was a lucky escape for me.

The usual shelling is going on all the time, including today the 21<sup>st</sup>. I moved out of one dugout on account of the danger of getting a direct hit with one of Fritz's shells, as mentioned above, into a safer dugout and late last night a shell lobbed closer still giving me quite a shaking. I am beginning to think that our battery is a "registered target of Fritz's" at night and will make sure this time by moving a distance from the battery to sleep.

### **June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1917**

Tonight all hands are ordered by the Major to leave their dugouts and go back to some Infantry trenches to sleep, on account of the severe shelling round our gun pit and dugouts. Some have landed dangerously close and there are indications that our battery is now a night target for the enemy.

Later - One of the most miserable nights I ever spent was on the above date. The bottom of the trenches were wet, narrow and uncomfortable and to add to our discomfort, Fritz sent over hundreds of gas shells on our trench positions, the gas was stifling and we had to wear our gas helmets all night. Needless to say there was no sleep for us but a continual wander around to avoid being hit with shells or pieces.

About 500 rounds of ammunition arrived about 12 midnight but the shelling was so bad that the drivers dumped it off about 300 yards from the guns and cleared out for their lives. It would have been suicide to try to come up to the guns. Unfortunately about 3am on the 24<sup>th</sup> we were called out of our trenches to "lump" the shells up to the guns while the shelling and gassing was going on. "It is a wonderfully calm life soldiering".

### **June 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

I was lucky today, the 24<sup>th</sup>, to get a chance to go down to the advanced wagon lines for a rest, arriving about 4pm in the afternoon. I am perfectly content today, 25<sup>th</sup>, among the trees and green fields and quietude of the wagon lines - Only occasionally big shells come over here amongst us.

Later - All the gun crews were forced to evacuate the guns today from 2pm onwards till about 11pm at night, on account of the enemy barrage. It was impossible to get anywhere near the guns for hours. Ammunition wagons were turned back as it was mere madness to try to reach the guns. The shelling died down somewhat after 11pm. There were 17 casualties in the battery adjoining us but none, so far, in our own. Two of our aeroplanes were brought down tonight (25<sup>th</sup>) by the enemy and destroyed.

### **June 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Our Battery left the Front wagon lines on the 26<sup>th</sup> and arrived at the rear wagon lines without mishap of any kind. It is intended that we remain here for about two weeks for a spell.

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> all hands were engaged in the overhaul of our guns and attendance of the horses and mules including other Battery duties.

The last 3 or 4 nights the enemy has been indulging in the practise of dropping bombs on our camps and horse lines and on the towns round about. The other night a bomb dropped on a church while the people were attending service and 17 were killed. Various other places and batteries have suffered.

### **June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

I am still at the rear wagon lines and nothing unusual has happened so far.

### **July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1917.**

The usual routine work has been going on these days interspersed with some sports on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the way of hurdle races and various other sports amongst the various batteries etc. Prizes were also given for the best turned out gun team – most of the prizes were won by Tommy gun teams.

The last 3 nights the enemy still continues his practice of dropping bombs at night perilously near our lines. A Fritz aeroplane was brought down overhead today, the 3<sup>rd</sup>. The pilot was shot dead and the machine tumbled to the ground.

### **July 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> 1917**

Still in the rest camp near Baileul and the usual routine work has been going on. There is nothing of an unusual character to enter. Enemy aerial bombing has been going on almost every night and the town of Baileul has suffered some destruction in life and property.

### **July 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> 1917**

The whole of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army, 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and 12<sup>th</sup> Army left the rest camps, where they had been out for a fortnight's spell, on the 12<sup>th</sup> and arrived at Hondeghev about 15 kilometres from Baileul and camped till about 4am on the 13<sup>th</sup> when we proceeded on our journey the next day, the 13<sup>th</sup>, and arrived about midday, at the next stage of our journey, at a town by name Wormhaut and rested again till 4am on the 14<sup>th</sup> and proceeded to Shyvelde – here all the armies are resting waiting for further orders. The different stages of the journey were distant about 15 kilometres apart.

The only attempt to bomb our arrival was on the 14<sup>th</sup> early in the morning about 3am. The enemy aeroplanes came over and dropped several bombs around our camps but were eventually driven off by French and Belgian aeroplanes.

### **July 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

A good deal of aerial bombing has been going on the last few days especially in the early mornings of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>. It seems as if the enemy was trying to destroy a great aerodrome close to our camp at Shyvelde – no damage or losses have occurred so far on account of the large number of our own planes in the air all the time and the numerous aircraft guns which get to work very rapidly when the enemy is sighted.

### **July 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> 1917**

Late at night on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> the centre sections and right and left sections went up into action near Ostend. From what I can learn an attempt is going to be made to take Ostend from the land and sea and there is to be no specified amount of enemy territory to take. The attacking armies are to move straight on. We are expecting to have great losses in the near future as the ground is all open country and there are no trees to speak of.

I am still in the wagon lines and will not be going up with the gun crews at present but it is quite possible that I will be in the next relief.

Later - Late at night I was ordered up to the Front – the Ostend Front – to act as a signaller during the “stunt”. I left the rear wagon lines at about 11.30pm on a bicycle with the intention of following the cook’s cart to the gun pits but unfortunately I lost the Cook’s Cart about half way and as it was raining very hard I decided to wait till daylight after having been fortunate enough to find a warm bunk in a French Soldiers’ dugout.

### **July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

About 5am I was on my way to the gun pits after having had a good breakfast with the Frenchies and arrived at our position about 9am. I was very tired and sleepy but had to turn to and assist in running telephone lines from O.P. to the guns.

It was lucky for me that I could not continue my journey last night, the 18<sup>th</sup>, as the road was shelled badly at a point of time I would have passed and Fritz was attacking also, which made it worse. It was comparatively quiet when I continued on in the morning.

I am now “set up” in a concrete dugout and comparatively safe.

Later – Fritz has begun, late tonight, to shell round my dugout but so far he has done no damage.

## **PART 20: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Repairing Communication Lines at Ostend**

**July 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 1917**

Our communication lines have been badly broken by the enemy shelling and all the signallers have had their hands full repairing and getting them working again under fire.

On the 21<sup>st</sup>, in the afternoon between 2 and 6 pm Fritz put over round my dugout scores of heavy shells – two 5.9 shells hit the dugout I was in, on the top and side, but did not destroy it. It is now 2am on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and Fritz is still shelling the road where my dugout is. The place is crowded with Tommies who have taken shelter from the gas and shells. I can't help thinking, while I look at them, what a war weary, tired and sad looking lot of men they are. They are on their way up to the trenches and some of them – very likely – will get “knocked” before they reach their trenches – such is war and those men who do get “knocked” will rest – and they will have little to sorrow about as there will be no more shells and gas to terrorize and mutilate their minds and bodies over the “Line”.

**July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1917**

The enemy has begun to put over a new and very deadly gas which smells like mustard and garlic and penetrates our gas helmets quite easily, so easily in fact that our helmets are little more than useless. This new gas was sprung suddenly on our trenches the other side of Nieuport and the dugouts close by Nieuport with deadly effect to us. Our ambulances have been going continually from 4am on the 22<sup>nd</sup> till the night of the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The gassed cases must have run into thousands and many of the cases are fatal; the men suffered horribly.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, from 1am till about 4am all our artillery put over a violent bombardment on the enemy probably to revenge our gassed men. The enemy has been very quiet since.

Later – 23<sup>rd</sup>. The enemy started about 10pm and put over on us one of the most violent bombardments I have yet been in. Several shells landed almost on the “doorstep” of our dugout and two large ones hit it. The dugout is now full of dust and shell fumes. It is now 2am of the 24<sup>th</sup> and the shelling is dying down. The signallers, including myself, are about to start out to put down new communication lines as they have all been destroyed by the enemy.

Later – 4am 24<sup>th</sup> - We had to run all new lines practically as the old ones were chopped to pieces. The casualties were not very heavy during the last 24 hours.



**July 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

From 6pm on 24<sup>th</sup> till 5am on the 25<sup>th</sup> I spent in the O.P. or observation post, that is a post nearest the enemy lines and from which the best view of our artillery fire can be observed. The O.P. was located in a high, but wrecked, building in Nieuport. It was a weird experience, sitting in the darkness with shells flying all round and now and again striking your post. One large shell struck the wall about 2 feet from my head and the concussion almost stunned the Officer and myself. Early in the morning Fritz gassed the place with his new gas and we had to don our gas helmets for about 3 to 4 hours. Unluckily for us we struck a bad night as the town came in for a terrible enemy shelling for some hours.

Our communication lines were destroyed again and had to be repaired this morning early. I intended mentioning the state and appearance of the country up in this new sector. I believe that 6 weeks ago, previous to the beginning of May, the French troops occupied our positions and there was hardly a crater hole to be seen, nor a tree damaged. Today there is nothing else but desolation all round; roads destroyed, craters every few feet apart, trees shorn off about half way and stripped naked. The groves of trees look as if some mighty force had shorn them of every limb and stripped them to the ground. - You would hardly imagine what desolation and ruin can be brought about in a few hours of shelling.

The town of Nieuport and Westend, near Ostend, are in absolute ruin and totally deserted by civilians.

Later - There were three casualties the last two days. One lad was killed instantly by shell pieces through the head and throat - the other two cases were wounded only.

**July 25<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Again I spent the day in the O.P. (observation post) and some successful registering of shots was done on the enemy lines. The town of Nieuport was again being strafed while I was in the O.P. but all the shells passed overhead. On the 27<sup>th</sup> one of our guns was knocked out but no casualties so far.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> nothing eventful occurred – one or two small “stunts” occurred during the nights.

**July 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 1917**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> July Fritz gave us a great strafing for about an hour and then sent gas over. Nearly everybody is sick.

About 8pm on the 31<sup>st</sup> a great British Bombardment along a few miles of front began, including our own part of the front. It was awe inspiring to hear it. The enemy has been extremely quiet since.

**August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> 1917**

There is nothing unusual to enter for Aug 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> but on Aug 4<sup>th</sup> from 12 pm (the 3<sup>rd</sup>) till daylight 6am I had a busy time at the O.P. (observation post). Fritz sent over again a lot of gas and H.E. shells. Two H.E. shells hit the O.P. and we all vacated for a time. I got a little gas on my last trip to O.P. and am still suffering with a sore throat and lungs. I hope I won't feel any additional effects for this trip.

Later - One man was wounded badly last night (Aug 4<sup>th</sup>) by shell piece. From 9pm till 6am (Aug 5<sup>th</sup>) our battery position and dugouts got a terrible strafing from Fritz. One gun was blown out and some of the dugouts were hit. My dugout had its window knocked in by shell concussion. There is only one casualty so far.

**August 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

During the last four days there has been a succession of stunts, some of them very intense and must have been discouraging to Fritz. On the 8<sup>th</sup> about 1am an intense barrage was put over on the enemy and a large party of our men raided his lines, bringing back some prisoners who, by the way, look well fed and sleek.

Our position has been getting its fair share of shelling and as I write this at 4am a great deal of gas is being sent over with the H.E. shells.

I am still engaged in my duties as a signaller.

**August 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

A terrific amount of shelling on the part of the enemy has been going on the above days and a large number of casualties has been passing through as a result.

Since the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> there has also been a series of large stunts at night with both gas shells and all other calibres. These stunts must have caused the enemy terrible inconvenience.

The enemy's shelling at times is so severe that life is very insecure.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> a number of enemy planes dropped some very heavy bombs on our positions but did little damage.

Later – the 15<sup>th</sup> - The enemy began to strafe our gun positions and dugouts about 9pm on the 14<sup>th</sup> and kept up a terrific shelling all night and the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup>. Many of the shells were armour piercing and I can assure you all hands had a very anxious time till he had finished. There were several casualties among the batteries; some of the casualties were terrible - There seems to me nothing more heartbreaking and sad than cries of a man wounded unto death. One of our chaps was wounded sadly and we could not get to him to carry him in for some time on account of the enemy's barrage - Of course this is war - The Kaiser's war!

There is every indication that the struggle round Ostend is going to be the bitterest struggle of the war. The holding of Ostend means everything to the Germans and its loss to them means the British can establish a base for aeroplanes and also control German shipping and will end German submarine menaces.

## **PART 21: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Front near Ypres**

**Aug 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1917**

There has been so much of the same kind of thing occurring on each of these days that it would be hard to particularize :- Severe enemy shelling and gassing goes on each night and the roads are barraged during the day – One has to be extremely careful in moving around on account of the flying pieces of shell cases. No casualties in my own battery have occurred on above days but the enemy is taking his toll in the other batteries nearby – so far only one gun has been damaged.

The great Italian and French victories have just reached us at Verdun and on the Italian Front – a great many prisoners have been taken by each army. Aeroplane bombing is causing us some anxiety also at night lately.

**August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Again I have no items of particular interest to enter up to the 28<sup>th</sup> except the usual shelling some of which was very intense. On the 26<sup>th</sup> I spent the day at the observation post and some of the 15 inch German shells came very close to us. The vibration of the ground after one of these shells explode is something tremendous – Our O.P., which consists of a 4 story tower built of cemented brick and steel, used to shake in a manner that one would think it was going to collapse after each burst: It made all hands very windy.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> our guns pulled out of Triangle Wood, Nieuport and came back to the rear wagon lines. We are supposed to be out for a few days rest when the 6<sup>th</sup> (Army) will probably proceed to Ypres to again go into action.

### **Aug 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1917**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> we began to make preparations for moving out and on the 31<sup>st</sup> at 8.30pm we started to move and travelled all night arriving at Wormshaut about 5am and rested for about a day; leaving camp on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sept. at 4am, arriving at Stenevoort at 12 noon. On the journey we passed through the historical town of Cassal and within sight of St. Omer. Our brigade is now on the direct road to Ypres.

Nothing interesting occurred on the way except that it rained all the time and everybody kept quite "happy".

### **Sept. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

The 6<sup>th</sup> Army and B.A.C. are now camped at Godewaersvelde and a few miles from Eecke where our Headquarters is located. Nothing of unusual interest has occurred on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> but on the 4<sup>th</sup> about 11 o'clock at night I was delivering some despatches to H.Qtrs at Eecke when the Huns began to air-bomb the town. It was painful to watch the women and children running up the street screaming and making for cellars. Up to this time air bombs have dropped on many occasions, a safe distance from me, but this time I came very near being sent to "the land from which no traveller returns". One dropped very close to me and pieces flew all around me and the noise of the explosion has a terrifying effect. Eecke has been bombed a good deal lately; about the 1<sup>st</sup> Sept. one of our camps had 140 casualties and 40 men killed. There have been a good many civilian losses also.

Nothing of interest has occurred on the other days entered. We are still here awaiting orders – and up to date have not the remotest idea where we are going into action.

### **Sept. 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Nothing important on the 7<sup>th</sup> to enter except that preparations were being made to move the wagon lines further up towards the line. On the 8<sup>th</sup> at 10am the whole 6<sup>th</sup> Army began moving and passed through Dickebusch about 6pm and camped for the night near that town. Today the 9<sup>th</sup>, the 6<sup>th</sup> Army is moving again up the Ypres Menin road and it is rumoured that my battery is going into action tonight on some sector near Ypres.

Later - The amount of activity up here is tremendous - as far as the eye can see there is nothing but camps and traffic blocking the road so that progress is very slow. Endless streams of heavy guns are continually going up the main Ypres road. A dull thunder for hours at a time reaches us from the front lines and the night is lit up with the flashes from the great guns continually bombarding the enemy.

Later - My battery was about to leave its grounds, about noon, when a squad of enemy planes, including Gothas, came over our camps and took big toll in nearly every battery - some 200 men were wounded and many killed. Four men were wounded close to me and one killed - also about 15 horses were blown to bits. This air bombing is about the most deadly kind of warfare one could imagine and one has very small sporting chance of escape from bombs. We are now occupying a camp where 16 men were wounded and killed a couple of hours previously.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> the 106 Battery moved to a less exposed position from bombs but before we moved 27 men were wounded and killed in an adjoining battery from a bomb. On the 11<sup>th</sup> the guns moved up to the pits near Ypres after having been shelled out of previous positions on the 10<sup>th</sup>. Nothing worth entering occurred - except the usual air bombing by the enemy, in which he took his daily toll.

Sept. 13<sup>th</sup> - Today was a red letter day for me; it was crowded with incidents of danger. Several times the enemy came over our camps with a fleet of Gothas and bombed us. No damage was done in my own unit except some bad scares were given us. Other camps round us fared very badly. I have not heard the number of dead but it is a heavy list.

At 7pm I was ordered up to the gun pits with others and our battery wagons, loaded with seneitese shells and charges, passed through Ypres at about 8.00pm. I was surprised at the size of Ypres. In pre-war days it must have been one of the largest and most beautiful towns in Belgium. It is now an absolute ruin and looks like some unearthed city of the past. The cloth hall is hardly to be recognised. Some of the very fine buildings and churches still show their ruined outlines and give one a very fair idea of what an imposing city Ypres was before the Hun passed through.

## **PART 22: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Arm Injured at Ypres, Taken to Hospital at Chichester**

**Still Sept 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

At 9.30 my battery column arrived at "Hell Fire" Corner and there found an indescribable mass of battery wagons, motor lorries etc. discharging their ammunition – Contrary to military orders the lines of battery wagons "double banked" at this dangerous point and made it impossible to turn round on the narrow road when shelling began. All went well for some time – We had unloaded our wagons and were waiting our turn to get out when an enemy plane came over, very low, and sighted the mass of wagons and lorries. A few minutes after enemy shells began to pour on us in salvos. It was impossible for the drivers to turn around or attempt to save the horses. The land on each side of the road was pitted with shell holes filled with water and our escape was cut off in that direction. The men simply deserted the horses and wagons and ran blindly for their lives. The night was as black as Egypt and it was every man for himself.

I ran up the road from the shell and charges dumps which kept going up all round and annihilating everything in sight. After a while I reached a large dump of Engineers' Material, such as rails, cupolas etc., and lay up close to it as the shells were bursting everywhere, some only a few feet away and on top of the dump. – It was courting death to move so I remained there some time, probably half an hour, when the salvos of the enemy lifted. I thought it was time to make my way back along the road towards Ypres and safety but I hadn't gone more than a few yards before the shells began to land almost on top of me and I wandered, dazed, off the road into the shell holes and stumbled at last into a small brick shelter out of the darkness. I hadn't quite reached the inside before a shell burst some yards away and a piece of the copper driving band passed through my right forearm.

Luckily there were three of our own chaps sheltering there and they applied the field dressing to my arm and pulled the piece of metal out, which was protruding. The time was 11pm now and after a providential passage through the enemy's salvos up and down the road, picking our way through the darkness and the indescribable wreck of gun wagons, dead horses and wounded men, for at least a mile, I and the two men with me, reached the emergency dressing station where I received attention and inoculation against Tetanus etc. After some time the ambulance came along and I was landed with some others at the 2<sup>nd</sup> dressing station at Pontineape at 2am. And remained there till 4pm, receiving some refreshments from the Y.M.C.A. people. (What a grand institution the Y.M.C.A. is and what a boon to the wounded and tired soldiers).

About 4.30pm I was put aboard the Red Cross train feeling very restless and sick - My arm was very painful and had been contaminated by the poison of the shell piece and at about 3.30am of the next day arrived at No.7 Canadian General Hospital at Etaples and rested a few hours. At 10am the surgeon examined my arm and put me on the operating table, opened up the wound, scraped the bone and put a rubber draining tube through the arm. Of course there were hundreds of wounded men being similarly treated and I am describing my case to show what a wounded man goes through.

Many of the men wounded and receiving treatment with me were very sad cases indeed - Some will never see again and some will never walk again – many will die of their wounds. A great dressing station is a very unnerving sight indeed and is best left undescribed.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> September my temp. was low and my arm progressing sufficiently for my removal to England. The Red Cross train left Etaples at 5am and arrived at Calais at 10am. And all the stretcher cases, including myself, were run aboard the Hospital ship which arrived at Dover at 2pm. At 3pm we were all transported to another hospital train and arrived at Graylingwell War Hospital, Chichester, Sussex at 11pm on the night of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

I have been in this beautiful Institution, with its 2 or 3 miles of corridors, since I was allowed out of bed on the 1<sup>st</sup> Oct. and, except for the slight inconvenience of my arm, have been having a very nice quiet time away from the destruction and discomforts and living Hell around Ypres at the present time – October 7<sup>th</sup>.

### **Oct. 8<sup>th</sup>**

I have been permitted to walk out of the grounds of the hospital and have taken the opportunity of visiting the ancient cathedral of Chichester which dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century. Part of the cathedral is modern. Like all the old churches of England the same design is followed. What particularly struck me was the Gothic ceiling and roof and the ancient library of records – also the chapels and tombs.

The tomb of the Earl of Arundel, the carving round the altar and the altar itself are very beautiful. The Bell Tower is the most ancient part of the cathedral. It shows signs of wear from wind and rain through the centuries.

The long corridors, with cells on one side and stone seats on the other side, where the ancient monks lived and sat, are the approach to the main part of the church. This part is very interesting and instructive of the period in which the monks lived and laboured.

The next interesting sight in this old town is the cross in the middle of the town, which dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The structure is imposing and delicately finished. It now looks like some great band stand with seating of stone round the inside for weary travellers. As far as I can learn it is a memorial to some great personage. It now shows great signs of wear from the weather.

**Oct. 9<sup>th</sup> .....18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>,20<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

I have nothing unusual to enter from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> except that I have been having a very pleasant time visiting some of the towns nearby.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> I was marked out for Darfort A.I.F. Hospital and arrived there on the 19<sup>th</sup> about noon.

After various medical examinations nearly all the "B1 B" men, including myself, were transferred to Weymouth hospital "Westham". I had a good opportunity of looking round this beautiful seaside town. There are many historical sights round this town – the beach on which part of the Spanish Armada met its doom and the famous "Wyke Regis" Church with its magnificent Eastern window. Part of the church dates back 1000 years and most of it dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The graveyard near the church goes back to very early times also.

Most of the town of Weymouth is very modern. The beach and promenade is one of the great sights of the town. The pop. is between 20,000 and 30,000 but might have 50,000 or 60,000 in the summer.

**Oct. 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>.**

On the 27<sup>th</sup> I was again transferred from Weymouth to Hurdcott, near Salisbury.

Today, being Sunday the 28<sup>th</sup>, I visited an interesting little church at Barford, a village close to Hurdcott. The church is known as Barford St. Martin and was begun in the year 1215 and is built in the shape of a cross with a Bell Tower in the centre, put up about 1753. It is described as: "The shape of a cross of early English and perpendicular style and has a central battlemented tower – and was begun before Salisbury Cathedral. The oldest part is the chancel."

At the cross roads near the church stands a Village Cross of stone, very old and weatherworn. It was erected about the time of the church, 1215. The lower part looks like a drinking fountain and the upper part has lost its shape through age and weather. It is about 10 feet high.

**Oct. 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup> 1917**

There are no interesting particulars to enter on the above dates except the fact that I am still receiving treatment for my arm and still classified as B1B.



**Nov. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> .....9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> 1917**

The same state of affairs exists as in my last entry except that on the 7<sup>th</sup> one of the men in my hut contracted measles and the whole hut of 29 men have been isolated for 24 days, so that I expect to pass a very uninteresting time till the 1<sup>st</sup> Dec.

**Nov. 11<sup>th</sup> .....30<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Still in isolation on the above dates and released on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

Since my incarceration I have come across men of all branches of the A.I.F. Service and strange and awful have been some of their recent experiences. Some have come from Bullecourt and some from much more recent experiences round Ypres and Lens.

According to some of them who have seen service in all the big thrusts, the most savage exhibition of war was seen round Bullecourt where "tanks" were used, on a very much smaller scale at Cambrai, but very much less scientifically: There the infantry in many actions preceded the tanks and many men who fell from enemy fire, many only slightly wounded, were crushed to death by the tanks whose crews could not heed their screams, owing partly to lack of their facilities for manoeuvring and the grinding noise of the machinery within drowning the cries of the unfortunate men.

Although I have not really witnessed our wounded men being crushed to death by the tanks, I have received accounts from so many different men that I am of the opinion that it is a frequent occurrence.

Another exhibition of the savagery of war are the personal accounts from wounded men of the killing of prisoners. Our men are not guiltless in this respect. In many cases the men have been "warned" by their officers that if they take prisoners they will have to feed them. In preference to doing this, prisoners have, in many cases, been killed in a savage and treacherous way, while unarmed and helpless. - Because the enemy commits such crimes there is no justification in our men committing the same savagery and I hope officers who condone such crimes will be faced with a serious charge after the war.

The hardships that some of the men have undergone seems to have distorted their vision and changed their outlook on life. Men who have suffered last winter in France in the trenches, - for them there is some excuse for their changed outlook. When men come out of the trenches crying and hysterical, with trench feet and exhausted brains for want of sleep and food, caring not whether they lived another half hour with their miseries, for them, the ideals which made them join the caravan to fight for liberty and a better and freer world, are not quite the same in this fourth year of war against the most implacable foe men have ever faced.

I have heard many other strange and awful accounts of war savagery but they are better unwritten and hushed up. They are no credit to the human race.

## **PART 23: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Medical Furlough – Salisbury, Canterbury**

**Dec. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1917**

Nothing of interest to enter for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> except that I was reclassified and marked B1.A2 and fit for furlough.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> I was fortunate enough to visit Salisbury Cathedral and I have not felt as much impressed since I saw St. Paul's or Westminster Cathedrals. It has a most imposing interior.

What struck me most were the great arches through the nave supported by beautiful clusters of marble columns and overhead the imposing Triforium.

The church is built in the shape of a cross with great doors at the entrance of the nave and transepts. The black marble clusters of columns of the lower series of arches support the upper series of arches which in turn are also supported by clusters of black marble columns. Above all is the beautiful Gothic ceiling throughout.

At the intersection of the transepts and nave two inverted arches were inserted to counteract the tendency of the whole structure to thrust eastward on account of the immense weight of the tower on the slender columns. The work was done about the 14<sup>th</sup> century: It has a most pleasing effect.

The stained glass windows are very beautiful. The window in the south great transept and also the windows of the east and west ends of the aisle are very old specimens of not later than 1240 to 1280. The South Transept window is about the only one of its kind in existence.

Like most of the old cathedrals of England, the usual tombs and tablets, some of great artistic value, of Knights and Noblemen of the early centuries dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> are here.

The Bishopric was established about the year 705 and transferred to "Old Sarum" in 1075. Old Sarum is now the remains of an old Roman Fortification about two miles from "New Sarum" that is the site of the present cathedral.

Salisbury Cathedral is the only cathedral in England of pure Gothic architecture and the second in the world. Amiens Cathedral is the greatest specimen of Gothic design. It covers 70,000 sq. feet while Salisbury covers only 40,000 sq. feet.

There is very little modern work about the cathedral generally and it remains today in essence what it was in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

I attended service on Sunday and found the acoustic properties good and the organ sounded perfectly. There is a sacredness about the old place that makes one whisper and walk on tip toes.

Later in the day I visited Old Sarum or the old Roman fortified town close to Salisbury. On the top of a high hill is located the fortified town surrounded by an inner and outer moat. After passing the inner and outer moat one reaches a very thick wall, or the ruins of one. The wall seems to be about 8 to 10 feet thick and there is only one entrance, when the moat was full, across the drawbridge. Inside are the remains of the soldiers' quarters. I would imagine that it would be a most difficult place, at the time the Romans occupied it, to storm. It was inside this wall that the ancient cathedral was first begun.

### **Dec. 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

On this date I visited Canterbury Cathedral and had the good fortune to be present at Divine Service. One is struck with the solemnity of the service, probably due to the immensity and beauty of the architectural surroundings. While the service is being held the light in the great choir, the longest in England, is only very dim and you feel that you are permitted to sit, very silently, among the shades and tombs of so many great figures who have made up the sacred history of this cathedral.

First of all, I entered the South West porch, after coming through Christ Church Gateway (1507) and enter to the great nave of the cathedral. He is a poor man who is not struck with this wonderful nave. The great columns of stone seem to reach up to an immense height until they support the pointed arches which support the ceiling and roof of stone.

Round the great walls are tablets, some modern, some very old. Some of the tombs, some let into the walls, others in dark corners, are very ancient with inscriptions in Latin.

On wandering down the nave you come at last to the centre of the great structure, that is the Central Tower. The whole interior of the tower is open so that you can gaze up at what appears to be an immense height. The stone work is carved beautifully wherever you look and at the top is the artistic roof of the tower.

Beyond the tower begins the choir and here again one is lost in admiration at the finish wherever you cast your eyes and at the magnitude of everything – The delicate tracery of stonework and wood carving round the altars and throne and seats: The height of the ceiling, the stained glass of the windows, the solemnity and silence and reverence of all. Surely we are in a structure which is so rich and wonderful that its like will not be built again.

After leaving the Choir, the next place of interest is the Crypt. Part of the Crypt is Norman and part is Saxon. The columns are round and pointed arches indicate these periods. The Crypt is rich historically and now used, at times, for services of different kinds.

It was just outside the Crypt that Thomas Becket was murdered and it was in the Crypt that Henry had himself scourged and beaten.

The Cathedral itself was begun about the 9<sup>th</sup> century and various additions, repairs and rebuilding have been going on through the centuries up to the year 1910.

The first Archbishop of Canterbury was Augustine (597) and the present one is Randall Thomas Davidson (1903).

The interior of the church is still in perfect repair. The stone work or carvings show little sign of their great age but the outside is very worn by weather and the centuries.

The exterior shows signs of great antiquity.

## **PART 24: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Medical Furlough – Oxford, London**

**Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

To Oxford I made my next pilgrimage and while the grandeur of architecture is not to be compared to any part of Canterbury Cathedral, the Colleges are distinctive as architectural monuments of the classic age of English design. Most of the Colleges are very alike each other - each has an inner courtyard or Quadrangle. There is nothing very distinctive about the architecture of the buildings: But one almost shivers at the look of hoary antiquity of most of the colleges. If some of them are not beautiful they are at least impressive and have the look of "here is learning".

The first place I entered was the Bodleian Library (1737) and from the top looked down into all the colleges which must cover some square miles of grounds: and the various buildings connected with the University are very compact; there is very little room between them outside the quadrangles.

I next visited All Souls College, University College, Queens College, Bodleian Library (1445), St. Johns College, Magdalen College (1733) and Chapel and lastly the Church of St. Mary-the-Virgin's (the University Church).

There is nothing unusual about the architecture of the church or colleges. They all seem to bear the impress of the "close periods".

There are some very quaint and somewhat crude windows of stained glass in the University Church: Depicting various portions of the bible, such as Jacob's dream, Jonah and the Whale, Eve tempting Adam and Christ scourging the huckstering merchants in the temple etc. While they are somewhat crude, they are still much valued for their antiquity. The Great West Window of New College chapel is well worth seeing! The lower lights are designs of Sir Joshua Reynolds showing all the Christian graces and Cardinal Virtues. (1777).

Christ Church Cathedral is probably the most beautiful cathedral. There is more comfort and beauty of interior. The church was started about (1120).

All the colleges have chapels and there are a large number of colleges some 18 to 20 in all.

I was much impressed with the tomb of Shelley the poet. It is a beautiful work and is treasured in a small theatre so constructed that light falls on the naked marble figure lying - so that the tomb has a most impressive appearance.

It would take a long time to go over the whole of Oxford University owing to its wonderful historic wealth. I had to satisfy myself by looking at the exterior of many of the colleges that I could not go through. But I can never forget the cold and cheerless exterior of most of the buildings and the signs of decay and wear through age. One takes away the feeling that you have been at the very seat of learning and discipline.

**Dec. 8<sup>th</sup>, 1917.**

I had the opportunity of going through the Houses of Parliament today and availed myself of it. I was not particularly struck with the grandeur of the interior. It is too modern. There are parts, of course, which are very old but lack the imposing effects of other older monuments. Westminster Hall is perhaps now the oldest part, built by Wm. Rufus. It is now under extensive repair owing to the destruction caused in the columns and oak beams by the beetle. It has been found that a great part of the woodwork is nothing more or less than a shell.

It was here that King Edward lay in State and Gladstone and many other great figures of the past.

The House of Lords is perhaps the most sumptuous and costly in walls and ceilings that I have seen. It is too sumptuous and decorative to be beautiful. Everywhere is luxury and comfort and splendour and wealth indicated.

In the House of Commons a more puritan style is attempted but again it is sumptuous enough and decorated enough to suit the most fastidious.

Paintings everywhere along the corridors are to be seen of historical events bearing particularly on the struggle of parliamentary government. Some of them are very fine.

The exterior of Parliament House is far more imposing than the interior and far more impressive.

In the afternoon I went over the museum at South Kensington and without a doubt here is the greatest museum in the world. It would take at least six weeks at 8 hours a day to see it properly.

First of all I went through the part dealing with nature and animals and after that through the Arts and Sciences branches. I was particularly interested in the machinery portion because the whole history of the development of modern engineering, flying, steamships, battleships, bridges and various manufacturing processes are shown in many cases by working models.

The institution is immense and covers acres of ground and would take much labour to describe it in full.

Every branch of human energy is exhibited and probably every animal and creature and habit of those creatures is shown there.

## **PART 25: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE.**

### **Medical Furlough – York, Edinburgh, Glasgow**

**December 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

I left London today at 10am and arrived at York at 2pm and needless to say I made my way direct to the glorious cathedral of York Minster. It is a vast cathedral and very imposing and beautiful in architecture outside but when I entered to the great nave of the interior a feeling of veneration overcame me at once. Every part of the great pile of stones seems to harmonize and I have learned the secret of this harmony - No part of the columns – neither the flutes or capitals are alike and wherever you look at the floral carvings you find that no two parts are alike yet they all harmonize wonderfully and complete the beauty of design.

I don't know what the feelings of others are like who enter York Minster but if they have an eye for the noble and grand here it is.

I was fortunate to be there just as divine service was begun and took my seat in the great choir with the rest of the worshipers. I could not resist the attraction of the choristers and organ and as I sat through the service my eyes were drawn towards the great reredos. It is a most beautiful carving in wood of the crucifixion scene of the Saviour. It was illuminated in a half shaded manner which made it hypnotic to all who turned their eyes toward it. I thought this reredos the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. And the wonderful surroundings and setting produced a feeling in me only "real good people" feel. (I make no claims?)

The choir screens are wonderfully carved settings in wood. Such carving is not done today. They are too rich and too beautiful to be described. It is an art that has been lost and an art that is so uncommercial that its like will never be attempted again. The choir is the chief place of worship in all these great cathedrals. The naves and transepts are very little used.

In York Minster are some of the most remarkable windows in the world. The east window is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest and most beautiful in the world. The “five sisters” is a very fine window also and contains the original glass (1200).

The Chapter House is considered to be the most beautiful in England. In style and design York Minster is somewhat like Canterbury Cathedral. It is built in the shape of a cross. The long nave 486 feet long and breadth across transepts 223 feet. The great central tower is like Canterbury also: the interior open right to the beautifully carved stone roof and interior walls. The roof is Gothic and quite as beautiful as Salisbury and Canterbury.

The first Archbishop of the Cathedral was Paulinus, 625 and the present Archbishop is Lang, 1909.

Of course the main building being Gothic it only dates back to about 1080 – the earlier parts of the church are to be found in the crypts (767). The Emperor Severus died in York in 211 and Constantine the Great, proclaimed at York in 306.

On the same day, the 10<sup>th</sup>, I arrived in Edinburgh late at night and the following day, the 11<sup>th</sup>, went off to Edinburgh Castle and to view the town. The castle is situated on a very high hill and during the centuries it played a prominent part and must have been a most formidable fortress. One has a magnificent view from the battlements. It is very interesting and important historically of the Stewart period.

There is nothing wonderful about the castle in an architectural sense. The dungeons and great dining hall are probably the most interesting features of the castle. The castle remains now very much as it was a century ago. The old guns and cannons are still mounted in front of port holes in the great walls and command the city and surroundings. The dining hall is filled with historic weapons of war during the middle ages.

Probably the most interesting ruin in Edinburgh is the chapel house attached to Holyrood Castle. This chapel possesses many architectural features which make it famous. The under structure is partly Saxon and Norman and the upper ruins are all Gothic. It must have been a very beautiful church at one time. The great arch in front of the chapel is supposed to be one of the best in England.

St. Giles Church is also a very interesting cathedral in many respects and is associated with John Knox. R.L. Stevenson's memorial table is placed in one of the chapels. There is no architectural beauty about St. Giles but it is very massive and very ancient, dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and very interesting from an historical standpoint.

The church represents, to my mind, in its shape and structure and simplicity, the early Presbyterianism of Scotland.

**Dec. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

I left Edinburgh today at 9.10pm and arrived in Glasgow at 11pm and was fortunate enough to fall in with some friends who were going over the John Brown Shipyards and a most wonderful place it is. There must have been two battleships, 3 merchant ships and 6 torpedo boat destroyers building and on the stocks. Preparations were being made for more.

It is a most complete concern down even to a great saw mill and joinery works. The "Lusitania" was built here and many other large vessels.

It is quaint to see so many women working in the various departments such as the saw mill and doing crane work and various kinds of light work. I'm not sure but that the idea of having women among the workmen is not a good idea from a social standpoint. The men learn to guard their tongues better it seems although the women do not appear to me to have improved by the innovation.

## **PART 26: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Medical Furlough – Aberdeen, Stratford**

**December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Loch Lomond was my destination for this date. I left Glasgow at 10.35am and arrived at Balloch at 11.20 or thereabouts and the general method is to catch a ferry boat which goes up the Loch some 25 or 30 miles. As I had all the rest of the day I walked some miles along the Loch and had a good general view of the Loch.

Loch Lomond is certainly a very beautiful spot and must be charming indeed during the summer months. The irregular hills, closely assembled, and the rugged course of the stream studded with small islets covered with beautiful foliage hold the attention during the trip. The mossy banks of the hills slope down to the stream on each side and give a most charming effect.



Here and there along the stream are old castles and residences buried in foliage and help to complete the charm of the scene. The most interesting castle is near Balloch and known as Balloch Castle.

The day was clear and fine but I would much have preferred to see the Loch during summer in order to see it in all its beauty.

### **December 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

On the above date, 15<sup>th</sup>, the first place I visited was a quaint old cathedral in old Aberdeen, in the morning, and was much interested in its Presbyterian bareness. It was at one time a Roman church but became Episcopal after the Reformation. It was founded some time in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. One of the quaint things about it is the cloister passages at the top of the church on each side where the nuns used to go to their prayers.

Another church of very much interest was the chapel at Kings College. It has a very fine choir screen and some very beautiful carving and oak work round the choir of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the names cut in by the scholars in the seats date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the names are over 200 years old. The carving mostly is hand done and almost every panel is a different design. There is no attempt at regularity, yet the whole effect is very fine indeed. It is a charming little chapel and has the usual tombs and memorial tablets – some very old.

Kings College is the original University of Aberdeen but it is now only one part of the University. Marischal is the other part and is in New Aberdeen.

Marischal College is a most beautiful building of granite and is considered the finest in the world “of that material”. It is indeed a very fine building and has the usual quadrangle common to English Colleges. The Museum and Library are very fine indeed and contain many rare contributions of students past. The two Colleges together, Marischal and Kings Colleges form Aberdeen University.

### **December 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

I had the opportunity today, 17<sup>th</sup>, of seeing Stratford on Avon, the birthplace of Shakespeare. The first thing that appealed to me on arrival was the beautiful Avon, and its park like banks. No wonder Mary Hall (?) picked this spot to live her life in. Stratford on Avon is certainly, to my mind, a part of the “Garden of Eden”. The first place I visited was the memorial theatre erected to the memory of Shakespeare. It consists of a small but comfortable theatre of pretty design and a museum and art galleries of paintings of some of the Masters dealing with the characters of Shakespeare’s plays. There are many fine busts of eminent actors and actresses of his time.(?) The theatre is on the Avon (part of page missing) and commands a magnificent view of the beautiful river (from?) the tower.

I next visited the house in which the poet was born. It is kept in good repair and is the depository of many documents, pictures, printed originals of the poet's work and some furniture of the period. Every attention is given to the details, as far as is known, of the poet's life, particularly of a domestic character.

There is enough documentary evidence in the old house to disprove all the tales about his not being the author of his plays.

Names(?) are written all over the poet's house, some dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The poet's daughter figures quite a (?) in various ways in the house but little is seen of Anne Hathaway, the poet's wife. ? the documents original ? be viewed. Perhaps Anne couldn't write. (This section of the diary is very fragile and some words cannot be read or, on the edge of the page, have broken off).

The garden and walks and windows (with their writing on) are supposed to be kept in their original condition.

I next visited Holy Trinity Church, the memorial (?) Shakespeare. A priceless bust of Shakespeare is here, given to the church and erected by his family. The tombs also of the poet and his family are here with inscriptions in Latin.

The book of birth registration of the poet is kept in the church and is in its original condition. There are also some other original documents with the signature of his daughter on them.

The church itself looks old outside and is built, as nearly all churches of this period, in the shape of a cross with a central tower.

This memorial Church is on the Avon and Mary Hall's (?) house is nearby.

## **PART 27: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE.**

### **Medical Furlough – London, to Salisbury with Ossie**

**Dec. 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>.....31<sup>st</sup>, 1917**

On 18<sup>th</sup> I travelled back to London arriving early in the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup>. London so dull and foggy and cold that I found it difficult to go anywhere. I had intended going to Westminster & St. Paul's again but gave it up and reported back to camp at Hurdcott. There is nothing of interest to enter between 19<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> except that on Xmas day a very unusual dinner was given to all the Australian Forces in England. It was a **turkey** dinner of a first class kind and there were no complaints about quality. Everybody fared excellently.

**Jan 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On Jan 1<sup>st</sup> I got 48 hours leave to Salisbury to meet Ossie. I took him along to afternoon service at Salisbury Cathedral – but not against his will. Services are held every afternoon in all the great cathedrals in England. After the service we had the opportunity of looking over the church again. Personally I never grow tired of looking at these great monuments of the middle ages.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> I was moved from Hurdcott to Sandhill – Overseas T.C. near Warminster after being passed by the doctor as fit again for service. It is a bit rough coming back to training after a convalescent home like Hurdcott. I have yet to go to the Artillery Details then back to my Battery in France.

**Jan 7<sup>th</sup> .....24<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

From 7<sup>th</sup> up to the present time, the 24<sup>th</sup>, I am still at the Sandhill Camp undergoing training, mostly in infantry work. They call it here hardening up. I am also receiving a good deal of “physical jerks” and considering the “freshness” of the weather I am wishing most fervently that the war will come to an end. The same procedure goes on each day so that I have nothing interesting to enter.

**Jan 25<sup>th</sup> .....31<sup>st</sup>, 1918**

I have nothing of interest to enter between these dates as I am still at Sandhill O.T.B. (Overseas Training Battalion) undergoing the same monotonous drilling and physical exercise every day.

**Feb 1<sup>st</sup> .....8<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On these dates I have to enter the same details as above. Drill and P.T. (Physical Training). On the 8<sup>th</sup> I moved out with a draft for Heytesbury or the R.B.A.A. (Reserve Brigade Aus. Artillery) The draft moved out at 9pm and arrived at Heytesbury, per foot, at about 11.30pm. On the same day I entered the Signals and Map School, and have been installed in the School since. The School is very strict and it seems to be all hard work up to 6.30pm at night. I like the work very much so far. It seems to be very much more interesting than the class of work I have been doing.

**Feb. 8<sup>th</sup> .....23<sup>rd</sup>, 1918**

I am still out at the Signal School and like the hard work of learning the codes and sending and receiving Morse each day. As far as I can learn I will be here for a couple of months.

I fill in my time working hard and studying up a Perlman Course, interspersed with a good many walks to small villages in the district.

**Feb 22<sup>nd</sup> .....28<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

During these days I have nothing of any importance to enter. I am still engaged in the daily routine work of the Signal and Map School. I won't be sorry when I see the last of it. It has occurred to me often that of all the bungling, wasteful institutions in the world, militarism stands alone. The bungling is the result of lack of coordination in the various departments. It is wasteful also because of this lack of unity. But these things do not worry the ordinary soldier. What does worry him most and tends to make his life as a soldier anything but pleasant, are the absurd and petty rules that are in vogue in many camps. The more absurd and narrowed is the outlook of the C.O. the more absurd and petty are the daily orders and camp rules, which he is responsible largely for. This camp is overrun with such petty, narrow rules. Were it not for the greater matter of the war I am sure the men would not tolerate a narrow minded officer type of a C.O. But they have given their bodies, not to a C.O., but to their country and obey obediently all of the much absurdity that emanates from the officials who are largely not fitted by any means to be over men. I say, without exaggeration, that it is almost impossible for a man to remain for any length of time in a camp and keep clear of what the "military" call a crime or a fine.

Many of the young inexperienced chaps have crimes entered in their books and positively do not know what they have done or why they have been fined. If these petty tyrannies are not greatly altered, the time will come when the higher command will meet with a show of resentment that will overwhelm them. Personally I will be greatly relieved when the war comes to an end so that I can see the last of the "intolerable slavery" that militarism imposes upon me. But while the "War of Liberation" continues I must remain content to abide by every ridiculous rule laid down by men who have a small and imperfect knowledge of human nature and the results of their incompetence.

**March 1<sup>st</sup> .....20<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

I am still in the Signal School and have been undergoing the training mentioned in my last entry.

During these days there has been frequent talk in the Press of the great German Offensive. It was expected between 1<sup>st</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> but has not occurred yet.

## **PART 28: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE.**

### **Fit for Service, Signals Training at Sandhill**

**March 21<sup>st</sup> .....29<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

The 21<sup>st</sup> was the beginning of the greatest battle the world has ever known. The Germans attacked on a 60 mile front from near Arras to La Fere. They advanced about 3 miles but suffered an awful price. Some estimate their losses at 80,000. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the attack is still violent near Arras. West

of St. Quentin we fell back about 8 miles. The Germans have claimed 16,000 prisoners and 200 guns. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> the Germans broke through our defensive system west of St. Quentin and we have fallen back about 10 miles. The French Army is taking a part now near Noyon, on our right. The Germans claim today 25,000 prisoners and 400 guns.

March 24<sup>th</sup> the Germans have attacked round Bapaume and south of Peronne. They were pushed back over the Somme. We are now back 15 miles and the Germans claim 30,000 prisoners and 600 guns. The whole world was surprised today by the news that the enemy was shelling Paris at a distance of 74 miles with 9" shells.

March 25<sup>th</sup> – The Germans claim 45,000 prisoners and 600 guns. They are only advancing foot by foot and are paying a fearful price in life. The French are fighting hard North east of Moyon and we are struggling with overwhelming masses west of the Somme.

March 25<sup>th</sup> – The British, French and Americans are now fighting together. On March 27<sup>th</sup> news came through of the fall of Albert and the British gain ground north of the Somme. The French were pressed back west of Roye.

There is belief among many of the French peasants round Albert that when the great overhanging statue of the Madonna on the cathedral falls by German shells that on that day Germany has lost the war. It fell today!

March 28<sup>th</sup>. There is terrible fighting along the Somme today from Albert to Boyelles. Enemy attacks east of Arras have been defeated. The French have withdrawn from Montdidier.

March 28<sup>th</sup> – There is heavy fighting today North and South of the Somme. There has been a French counter offensive between Montdidier and Lassigny. Anglo-French troops are holding the line of the Arre.

### **March 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 1918**

There has been somewhat of a lull in the fighting on the above days. No Army can continue advancing with such appalling loss of life as the Germans have suffered and not arrest their advance in order to bring up their heavy guns.

The Australians have done very valuable work on the Somme and it is rumoured that casualties have been very heavy and that more than 10,000 have already passed through certain ports in England.

### **April 1<sup>st</sup> .....13<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

From the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> April the fighting has not been so terrific. The Germans have been confining their efforts to bringing up their heavy guns and getting their wounded away. It has already been estimated that the German losses for the first six days were 370,000 dead and it would be difficult to learn the number of other casualties. Reliable neutral travellers speak of masses of trains with wounded going through Belgium with blood trickling down the wheels from the box cars and cattle cars used by them. The ordinary Red Cross trains have long since been insufficient for the wounded.

Our losses have been very severe also but nothing in comparison to the German losses - probably not a quarter.

On 7<sup>th</sup> April the beginning of another terrific German offensive began, first against the Portuguese whose lines they broke through, which necessitated another British retreat towards Baiseal, Steenverck etc. and great pressure on our lines towards the Channel ports, such as Calais. There is also terrific fighting round Ploegstert and Messines Ridge but so far the enemy has made little progress in the area, while his losses are prodigal. The battle is still raging over a 50 mile front. Just how long the enemy can stand the ghastly losses which our armies are inflicting on him is a question of figures. It is estimated that he has 270 divisions of 15,000 men and his casualties in dead and wounded must be approaching the million mark.

Our losses have been very great also and all able bodied trained men are being hurried overseas to replace our own casualties.

Today is the 13<sup>th</sup>. A decided change in the dangerous military situation has set in for us. The enemy is being held and so far has not accomplished any of his objectives to time table. On the 12<sup>th</sup> Sir Douglas Haig's famous message to all armies was issued that our "backs are now to the wall and every man must die at his post".

### **April 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

The situation in Flanders is very much improved now and the tense anxiety on these days and for the days preceding is much relaxed. The military authorities are decided that the enemy is definitely held and that he is gradually being worn down and decimated. From accounts coming through the slaughter is appalling and is telling on the enemy reserves. Some day soon the Allies counter offensive begins and it will be a ghastly business for the enemy if there is any truth in the report or rumour that 4700 aeroplanes are waiting the word to begin. I trust it will bring to an end this "culture destroying" war.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> I was put on draft for France. Unfortunately for me it was just one week before I classified as a signaller after going right through the course. But then that is the way of the military authorities – Things are always done in the most illogical and misunderstandable way in almost every case. - Yet we are winning the war. I expect to leave for Havre on Monday morning 22<sup>nd</sup>.

## **PART 29: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Back to France- Big German Offensive at Amiens**

#### **Monday, 22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1918**

I left in a draft from Heytesbury today at 11.15am and arrived at Codford for embarkation to France at 12 noon. Entrained at 1.15 and arrived at Southampton at 3.30 and at 6pm boarded the Steamer for Le Havre. Arrived at Le Havre at 4am (23<sup>rd</sup>) and went ashore at 5am. Marched up to the A.G.13.D. about 7 miles from Havre.

#### **April 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 24<sup>th</sup> I was warned, among a large number of other men of the English draft, to be ready today to proceed up the line to my battery but for some reason it was put off till the 25<sup>th</sup>. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, also, a very large number of men, including myself, were marched out of camp some three miles and put through a gas school – the drill lasted all afternoon (from 12 noon till 6pm). The reason for so much gas drill is on account of the great danger of gas up in the firing zone at the present time.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> (Anzac Day) luckily the up-the-line draft was again put off till the 26<sup>th</sup> so that I had the good fortune to see the Anzac sports which were of the usual kind – races, tug-of-war competitions, obstacle races etc. It was of an international nature as American troops and teams, also Tommy teams took part and competed with our own men. The Americans struck me as a very fine type of men and soon made themselves popular with our own men. Our own men won in the competitions against them.

Today, the 25<sup>th</sup>, reports came through of the beginning of another great German Offensive. The main attack started north of Amiens and is proceeding with terrible fierceness.

#### **April 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 26<sup>th</sup> the draft left Havre about 11am and arrived at the Rest Camp of Liercourt at about 8am on the 27<sup>th</sup>. As usual, the Australians travelled in box cars and the men in the car I was in put in an unpleasant, cramped night on account of the number of men in the car. As a number of other troops were travelling under the same conditions these conditions must be expected.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> the mixed artillery draft, of which I am included, are still in the rest camp at Liercourt. We were ordered to get ready to entrain at 2.30pm. We were all aboard the train about 4.30 and arrived at Pernois, about 15 kilos from Amiens, and marched up to a rest camp about 8pm.

The roar of heavy guns is quite audible and sounds anything but pleasant to me after my absence for over 6 months. The big guns are roaring all day and night and unfortunately Amiens and our back areas are coming in for a good deal of enemy heavy shelling which would account for some of the din that reaches us.

### **29<sup>th</sup> April, 1918**

We moved in billets later in the day and rest here till the 30<sup>th</sup> April.

### **30th April, 1918**

My draft left Pernois at 9.30am and partly marched and drove in lorries to the rest camp of Villiers Boccau at 2pm. We are to rest here tonight and proceed on our journey to our units tomorrow.

About 100 lorries of British troops went through the village today to relieve an Australian division.

### **May 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

My battery is still camped near Freshencourt and I have very little matter of interest to enter from 11<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup>. – the usual camp routine continued as mentioned in my last entry. On the 17<sup>th</sup> our six guns went into action at Ribemont near Mericourt in an old battered French farm. The Battery went into action today, the 18<sup>th</sup>, and is now blazing away at the Hun. The district round this farm house and our gun pits are very much riddled with shell holes and the farm and houses of the village are in the usual state of destruction.

At night on the 18<sup>th</sup> I accompanied a despatch officer to the various batteries in the district - arrangements were made for a “time shoot” as there was to be a “hop over” by the infantry. Everything was well till 11pm and then the battery we were at then (17<sup>th</sup>) came in for some heavy enemy shelling with big stuff. It came around us so close that I have to admit that I had the “wind well up” – and so did the Officer. Anyone who says he has no fear of the worst kind when large shells of a high velocity and quick fuse are coming near him must be, to be charitable, very much unbalanced. Their ripping, tearing sickening explosion close to one creates a feeling very much akin to palsy. My experience is that the more one knows of shells and bombs, the less his taste for them and a long spell away from the firing line does not give back a courage the average man never feels, or previously felt, before going away.

At 2pm on the 19<sup>th</sup> the batteries began a two hours shoot and if the infantry “hop over” is successful my battery will in all likelihood pull out today.



Later - The operation referred to above was completely successful and the Australians brought back now over 400 prisoners till 22<sup>nd</sup>.

### **May 20<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1918**

The battery is standing by today and anticipates an S.O.S. for a counter attack by the enemy.

21<sup>st</sup> - On the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> Fritz began shelling our position at 10pm and kept it up for about 8 hours. The sneezing gas was most inconvenient and there was a good deal of chlorine gas thrown over afterwards. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the battery moved out of Ribemont position into positions prepared by the 10<sup>th</sup> (?) How. Battery at the rear of Heilly. There were a couple of casualties in the battery today, by bombs.

## **PART 30: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Heavy Fighting around Rheims, with Americans**

#### **May 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

From the 24<sup>th</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> I have nothing unusual to enter. I am still carrying on as mentioned in my previous entry.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> at 6pm, with another signaller and sergeant, I left for the Observation Point of the Brigade. The O.P. is situated on the top of a very high hill and the whole of our sector part of Fritz's country can be seen from there, including no man's land. It was very quiet for some time until about 9pm and after that, for some hours, the night became hideous with both enemy and our own artillery. There was a good deal of bombing around O.P. from 10 till about 3am and as the post we are in offers very little protection from such missiles, as it is merely a square hole in the ground about three feet deep and a wooden shelter overhead with a lookout and table for maps and instruments, at times we hold our breath, expecting the next bomb or shell to find us. But now it is morning and about 10am of the 28<sup>th</sup> and everything is quiet and peaceful again, except for the barking of a few guns. We have a 24 hour shift to do and will be relieved at 6pm tonight.

Later – 28<sup>th</sup> – Nothing eventful occurred until about 5pm when we left our shelter and stood for a few minutes outside. As the O.P. is on the horizon and in view of the enemy we were suddenly surprised by being sniped at with three 4.2 shells one of which went very close to us. Needless to say we lost no time in getting back to our hole. We were relieved at 8.30pm.

### **May 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 1918**

Very quiet on these days. Sometimes one would think that there was no more war – then suddenly all the batteries open up and the noise and “cross currents” are infernal for a while.

### **June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

About June 1<sup>st</sup> the great enemy thrust and continuation of the great battle began round Rheims. The Germans attacked on an 80 mile front. 25 Hun Divisions were intended to be used but 40 have now been identified. Naturally such a sudden and terrific onslaught would mean a falling back for the Allies. It is now estimated that in 8 days they have fallen back 17 kilometres. The enemy is now 40 miles from Paris but from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> it is reported that he is being held at all points by the French, British and Americans. No reports of casualties on either side have yet been estimated. They must necessarily have been awful.

### **June 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

During these days the great battle has been ebbing and flowing from Montedier to the Oise against the French. The last two days the Germans have advanced 3 miles at awful cost. The enemy is still 40 miles from Paris on the 13<sup>th</sup>. The fighting round Rheims and Chateau Thierry the last two days, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, is only intermittent.

The Americans have made some progress round Belleau Wood, capturing some 200 prisoners. The Australians have also done some good work up in our own sector in Picardy at Morlancourt which I am now looking into. On the 11<sup>th</sup> they captured 300 prisoners and advanced half a mile on a one and a half mile front.

At the present time it is estimated that there are now over 700,000 Americans here – so that manpower and morale ought soon to tell against the enemy of civilization.

The great battle now raging is considered by the German Command to be the decisive battle of the war. It is most intense and bloody and for us the days are most grave and fraught with many possibilities. The happy destiny of the world lies trembling in the balance. The German powers have “shown their hand”. They are aiming at a Central European Block of unimaginable strength and which cannot be assailed. This “Central European Block” intends to draw tribute from the rest of the world. – It is now a race between the Kaiser and President Wilson and the question is “Can the Americans get here in time” to stem back the most wasteful and the most savage and terrific attacks in recorded history.

## **PART 31: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Australian Attack at Albert**

**June 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

Terrific fighting is still going on in the French Sector and the enemy is trying by every means possible to push towards Paris. The tactics of the enemy against the French have now become quite plain to the Allies. Up to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> the Allies were to a large extent mystified to know what the enemy's intentions were. - They are now to push in close to shelling distance of Paris and to widen out their salients lastly but most important to destroy the French Army. Up to the present time the enemy gains have been won at terrific cost and is now held within 39 miles of Paris. The tendency during the last few days is for the French, British and Americans to make small gains and harass the enemy by aeroplane fire. According to accounts the enemy is simply being slaughtered.

Aeroplanes are doing invaluable cavalry work and are simply a nightmare to Fritz.

In the Piccardy Sector, comparative quietness reigns during the last few days except for mild shelling. Our own batteries are always shelling away at the enemy day and night. It is part of their programme to keep up an incessant shelling day and night.

Up to date I have nothing startling to enter of a personal nature. One has many occasional risks and escapes but takes very little note now of many incidents that might earlier have seemed a providential escape.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> a great attack was launched by the enemy against the Italians. The latest accounts are from the Italian Front that the enemy is being well held.

**June 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 19<sup>th</sup> and up to the present time the great Austrian Offensive continued with German violence but nothing of a startling nature came through till the 23<sup>rd</sup> when the papers gave out the news that the Offensive was beginning to break down and on the 24<sup>th</sup> news came through of the Austrian retreat back across the Piave and the Italians were in close pursuit. It is estimated that the Austrian losses run well into 180,000 and the number of dead is extraordinary. Everything seems to be very quiet on the Western Front at present.

I am having some strange and risky experiences lately - The Brigade now has an Observation Post right up in the front forward line within good view of the enemy in his trenches and there is considerable risk coming in and going out at night with snipers. I have been very lucky up to the present and have not yet drawn any sniping but there have been a good number of casualties and

deaths at this same post – one or two at least every day. It is always a miserable experience as the hours of watching are so long – generally from 3am till 8pm or about 17 hours.

The work itself is interesting enough to most officers and men who come up to the post – especially the kind who are fond of killing – personally, I am not. The chief work connected with this observing is to report immediately two or more of the enemy to be seen and have the guns fire some shells into them. Sometimes quite a party of the enemy is to be seen and the whole four batteries of the brigade will open out and there is very little hope for their party getting clear. It is a most callous business – but this is war.

**June 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

There is little of interest to enter on these days. The Italian Offensive has slowed down although some good consolidation work is being done and some slight advances and improvements in their front line. Nothing very startling has occurred on the Western Front.

**July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

Up to the 4<sup>th</sup> nothing unusual took place in the sector I am in. On the 4<sup>th</sup> a great attack was made by the Australians between Villers, Bretnau and Corbie and as far up as Albert. The Australians advanced 2000 yards and took 1500 prisoners. There were also a great number of Germans killed. On this day and the 5<sup>th</sup> the French and Americans have been doing good work and advanced in some sectors as much as half a mile and took a good number of prisoners.

The only personal news I have to enter was a trip up to the front line trench and the sniping at by the enemy snipers that one has to undergo in going into our observation post. I spent the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> at this post and I was glad to get back.

## **PART 32: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Heavy German Losses as Australians Advance to Caix**

**July 9<sup>th</sup>.....22<sup>nd</sup> 1918**

Up to about the 16<sup>th</sup> everything seemed to be normally quiet – but it was only camouflage on both sides. Apparently the enemy had been preparing for the greatest of his offensives. The offensive began about the 16<sup>th</sup> and up to date all goes well with the Allies. The enemy has been driven back some 10 kilometres on a large front, losing about 30,000 prisoners and some hundreds of guns. On the 18<sup>th</sup> it was estimated that his casualties were over 100,000. The French, Americans and British are participating in this offensive which bids fair to be Fritz's greatest failure and possibly the last great battle of the war.

**July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 1918.**

The war situation is still improving for us especially round Rheimes and in the French American sector. Progress, in advances, is being shown each day on all these dates – sometimes it is two miles and sometimes three. On the 24<sup>th</sup> I was detailed by the C.O. of the Brigade to go up to an observation post in our support trenches and make a large panorama sketch of the country of the enemy and put in all the magnetic bearings of the places shown or in view to us. I finished the job on the 26<sup>th</sup> and it has been sent to Division H. Qtrs.

On the night of the 27<sup>th</sup> the Battery moved out to positions near Corbie and Villers Bretenaux.. Up to the present the positions seem to be somewhat rough and slightly dangerous.

**July 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 1918.**

The position the Battery is now in is particularly lively and one has close calls almost every day. It is almost dangerous at times to come out of the dugout. Of course the various duties one has to do keeps me out in the open and my heart is in my mouth many a time. The war news at the present time is most encouraging to all the men. The Armies down south of Villers Bretonaux are doing excellent work and the end of the nightmare is drawing nearer.

**August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> there was little of interest to enter. The usual shelling of our positions by the enemy is still going on. The 3<sup>rd</sup> was a much more lively day for us. I had a very narrow escape from “destruction”. About 3am a salvo of three shells almost landed on top of me and I only escaped by falling over and then racing madly to a flank. I had the “wind well up”.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> I had an experience the like of which I am not anxious to go through again. An officer of the Battery and myself left for the Forward Observation Post at 4am and waded through muddy, wet trenches for about four miles. Severe shelling was going on all the time along the trenches. We managed to survive till 8pm at night, standing in mud and water above our knees all day, when we were due to come back. Coming back was a most dangerous and terrifying time as the enemy shelled the trenches like madmen all the way back. I never expected to get back with a whole skin. There were huddled up terrified figures of American soldiers and some of our own too, all the way back. I think Providence must take a hand in some of these things as there were only six light casualties that I know of, all day, and none during my passage down through the mud and water of the trench from 8pm. It is remarkable the small number of casualties with all the death dealing explosives and steel flying around. God must have deserted the Germans at last!

The theory among the military people is that the enemy is contemplating another retreat and is using up his dumps with mad energy.

**August 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> 1918**

We are now in the midst of stirring and probably the last events of the war. A great push on the whole Albert to Rheims front is about to begin today the 7<sup>th</sup>.

48 hours Rations have been issued to all the men of my battery who will be in the "patrol" part of the push. All blankets and gear have been taken from us so that we can travel lightly. Four Signallers, including myself, of the 106<sup>th</sup> Battery have been detailed to accompany the Officer staff to go forward first of all to keep up communications. The air is electrified with tremendous activity - Tanks and Infantry and heavy Artillery have been passing our guns night and day since the 4<sup>th</sup> and shells are being placed in dumps well forward in millions. It is now 5pm of the 7<sup>th</sup> and we are all waiting orders and standing by to move forward.

The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> were rather quiet days in contrast to the 4<sup>th</sup>. It may be the lull before the storm.

The front we are on now lies in front of Corbie and Villers Bretonneux. Our gun positions are on a sunken road midway between these two towns and about a mile from each. It is reported today that the British have passed through Albert and are keeping Fritz moving.

Later – At 8pm. All guns, gun crews and signallers moved up to positions two miles forward of the present ones. We got settled down in our new position in a quarry about 600 yards from the enemy front lines. A road runs at the top of the quarry and tanks of all sizes, including large numbers of troops, are passing along continuously. The road over which they are passing is being continuously shelled and machine gunned. An order was read out to us before we left from the General of our corps. Of the plan of the attack. - Five Australian divisions are attacking on this front from Morlincourt to Villers Bretonneux. Two English divisions are on the left flank and the Canadians are on the right. It is reported that there are American and French troops in support.

The Barrage opened up at 4.20am of the 8<sup>th</sup>. It was the most tremendous noise that I have yet heard and lasted about two and a half hours. In the meantime the tanks and infantry followed up the barrage. The reports we were getting is that objectives are being taken according to plan.

Unfortunately for our gun crews, the guns were in line with the road over the quarry and some stray shelling of the enemy got three of our guns and put them out of action. Five men were hit and one was killed. At about 10am we were ordered to advance and went over the enemy country for over 10 kilometres. The thing that struck me most was the effect on the enemy trenches of our barrage and the large number of prisoners. They were passing us all day in fair size batches and seemed to be a good type of men and well fed. The number of casualties on both sides seemed to me to be remarkably small in comparison to the magnitude of the operations. I did not notice more than 50 of our own casualties go through to the advanced dressing station. There were very few German dead or casualties in our sector – mostly prisoners.

We are now with the guns in a sunken road and awaiting orders to move forward again. Today, the 9<sup>th</sup>, finds us still in the sunken road waiting to support the English divisions on our left. It is now 10am and we have begun to take part in another great barrage.

Later – At 9am of the 9<sup>th</sup> the Artillery moved forward some thousand yards. Shelling at long distance by the enemy is continuous and remarkable as it is, the casualties are very light and considering the amount of traffic and horses around the losses are very light indeed. Unfortunately for the 17<sup>th</sup> Battery in front of our guns a shell meant for the road landed on top of four of the signallers killing two. A very sad burial service was conducted at night by the Major of the Battery – a military burial of the active service kind was given.

Large batches of German prisoners are passing along the road all day. Today, the 10<sup>th</sup>, we are again standing by to move forward. All guns are in order to move.

Reports coming through tell us that all objectives are gained on the right and left, while on the front where the Australians are, the advance has been 3 miles ahead of the objectives. 78,000 5.9 enemy shells, 100,000 Mills bombs have been captured besides valuable dumps of material. The advance so far is about 17 kilometres.

### **Aug 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

Another barrage was put over the enemy at 4am of the 11<sup>th</sup> and later reports tell us that another advance of 3000 yds has been made. Prisoners in batches keep coming through all day . All indications show that our casualties are ridiculously light and the enemy's fairly heavy for such huge operations. The 10<sup>th</sup> in our Sector was rather a quiet day and so, also, after the barrage, was the 11<sup>th</sup>. At 6.30pm on 11<sup>th</sup> our brigade moved out of action to quiet positions in front of Corbie.

On the whole front since the Germans began this offensive 50 to 60 thousand prisoners have been taken and 600 to 800 guns. Their dead and other casualties must have been tremendous.

### **Aug 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 13<sup>th</sup> the battery and also the rest of the 6<sup>th</sup> brigade left positions near Corbie about midday and arrived at positions near Caix about 5pm and remained all night. We were awaiting orders to move up further and later in the day (14<sup>th</sup>) the guns and crews moved out to dig gun pits and lay lines of communication. The balance of the battery and brigade came back to positions where water is more plentiful. The 15<sup>th</sup> finds all hands still in the last position about 2 kilos from Caix.

Enemy bombing the last two nights has been hair-raising and extremely close.

## **PART 33: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Heavy Fighting, Germans Retreat to Hindenburg Line**

**Aug. 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> I have little that was unusual to enter. In the early morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> the battery wagon lines were moved forward a couple of kilometres. On this same day I have to enter a matter which caused the battery some consternation and regret and it has caused me some pain. At 9am an enemy shell landed on top of the dugout where six of our signallers were sleeping – Five were killed and one badly wounded. Strange to say two of the men who arrived the night before at the gun pits were among the dead - I was detailed in the place of one of them but was prevented from going on account of a sickness that overcame me that day. It's a strange incident to me and a providential escape.

**Aug. 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1918**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> quiet days were passed. On the 20<sup>th</sup> I was detailed to go to the pits and I found the area round the guns a very much shelled and “windy” locality. The 106 Battery and the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery are in positions which were once occupied by the enemy a few days ago – probably for Heavy Guns and the enemy knows the area, range and position of our guns – consequently we are having, at times, most unhappy experiences and resort to “rabbit tactics” quite frequently.

I had occasion on the 21<sup>st</sup> to go to the O.P. in the front trenches and to go back over our communication lines. The enemy shelled all the way and my knees were quite weak when I reached the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery – the terminus. I scurried into a dugout at this position and couldn't get away for two hours. I think every dugout in the position must have been hit by a shell.

**Aug. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

There is little of interest to enter for 23<sup>rd</sup> except to say that the usual shelling still goes on and the night bombing is unusual on account of the bright moonlight.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> our positions were taken over by the French and the battery moved back to the wagon lines near Harbonieres and remained a day moving forward on 26<sup>th</sup> and it is now in a beautiful valley below Bray awaiting further orders.

**Aug 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, 1918**

The Battery and Brigade again moved today, the 27<sup>th</sup>, back to the old position near Posieres and awaited orders to move out again on 29<sup>th</sup> to wagon lines at Frameville. Today, 30<sup>th</sup>, the whole 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade is awaiting orders for the next move. As the enemy is retreating so fast it seems to be the



cause of the unsettled state of the Brigade and it may continue until the enemy pauses to put up a strong defence.

The 31<sup>st</sup> – Still in Frameville but expect to go forward any time now.

**Sept. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> 9<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

There is little of an unusual nature to enter on the 1<sup>st</sup>. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> the guns moved forward (above Foucacourt) to gun positions and the battery began to dig pits for the guns. Later in the evening orders came through to go back to Frameville and leave the guns in position as a reserve. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> the brigade is resting and taking things easily. The news coming through at the present time of unparalled successes and advances are very encouraging to all concerned.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> the battery again moved forward and continued early into the day of the 6<sup>th</sup>. It is now resting just over the Somme near St. Christ. Remained all day in the position and left 7am on the 7<sup>th</sup> for positions further advanced. Arrived at Monchy Lagach, and we are now in range of the enemy according to his shelling. It is reported that the enemy is moving and today, the 8<sup>th</sup>, the brigade is standing by to go forward again. The battery left Monchy Lagach at 3pm on the 8<sup>th</sup> and took up positions about 7 kilos forward. It is now only a few hundred yards from the front line. Already today the guns have registered.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> an infantry action took place by the 32<sup>ND</sup> Div., to whom we are attached as an artillery brigade, at Coulaincourt. No advance was made by us.

**Sept. 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

Quiet preparation is being made on the 10<sup>th</sup> for another advance towards St. Quentin. On the 11<sup>th</sup> a silent raid and advance began and all objectives were obtained. The infantry is only within a few kilos now of St. Quentin. On the 12<sup>th</sup> the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade moved away from Coulaincourt to positions on the left of St. Quentin and the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> finds the Brigade still here. There is little of importance to enter except two casualties on the 13<sup>th</sup> in the battery and some horses. We have now joined the Aus. Corps and during our stay at Coulaincourt were attached to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Div. English. Bombing is rather severe at night around the position.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> preparations were being made to move the brigade forward in conjunction with other masses of artillery. I spent the 16<sup>th</sup> at the new position - also the 17<sup>th</sup>. – and a very windy time it was as the enemy shelled the position continuously and bombed at night. The morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>, about daylight, began a great barrage with the Aust. Infantry close up. By 10am great numbers of prisoners began to pass through to the cages. At 12 noon the brigade began to move forward again some two or so kilos under extreme shellfire from the enemy. Another barrage was put over at 11pm. The full results of the day have not yet come to hand. Bombing at night by the enemy is very windy and dangerous for us - we sleep little.

**Sept. 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, .....30<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> still finds the battery in the same gun positions. There have been several barrage stunts on these days and a good deal of counter battery work by the enemy making it extremely dangerous for us. On the 21<sup>st</sup> at 5pm the battery moved out to forward positions some 2000 yds nearer the line.

A very sad incident occurred on the 22<sup>nd</sup> - Two of our men were killed by a premature burst of a gun - One other man is badly wounded. 7 men were also gassed and evacuated a few days previously so that our losses are heavy lately. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the battery moved back to a rear area some 4 kilos near Vraignes. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> there is little to enter except that the Brigade is standing by.

On 24<sup>th</sup> another move was begun to another Sector and on 27<sup>th</sup> we are camped near a ruined village and expect to go into action at any time.

Battery again moved forward on the 28<sup>th</sup> to take part in a barrage. The start opened up at 5am on the 24<sup>th</sup> and after a terrific bombardment of the Hindenburg Line and a previous shelling by 9.2" and heavy guns for about 24 hours the Infantry (Americans first) and Australians in our Sector following. It is now 10am and dense fog is just lifting. The battery is again moving forward to more advanced positions. It is reported that all objectives are taken and according to the number of prisoners it seems like it.

Later: The news coming through is that the Americans failed to reach their final objective and Australians were rushed forward and took their objectives or final advance positions. At about 10am the battery again advanced but owing to the unsatisfactory advance and enemy shelling the battery and brigade went back to their last position in reserve. Today, 30<sup>th</sup>, we are again going forward.

Later – 2pm – Hindenburg Line. The battery moved forward into position in the Hindenburg Line. The part that we are in now lies just before Bellecourt and is a series of valleys and high crests commanding many miles of country. The line is a very wide one and this part is only the "forward enemy position" and it is expected that we move forward again in a day or so. The results of the offensive begun on the 29<sup>th</sup> so far is 40,000 prisoners and 360 guns. In this sector as far as I have seen the Americans suffered rather severely which was largely due to inexperience and being caught between our own and the enemy barrage. The country reeks with dead men and horses. The cries of some of the very young wounded Americans at the first aid posts goes on all night and is very sad to hear. The shelling is rather severe round our positions at present.

## **PART 34: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **German Reducing Plant at Bellicourt**

**Oct. 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> I had the opportunity of visiting the strong posts along part of the St. Quentin canal that runs under Bellicourt. At the entrance of the canal archway, up a few steps in a long dungeon I saw the much talked of body reducing plant of the enemy. The sight was most horrible and uncanny. There were two long vats and in one of them the remains of bodies and a head was to be seen. The bodies were rendered by electrical means and probably by intense heat. On the floor all round the vats were strewn haphazardly a good many bodies of German soldiers in uniform. To see the place minutely it was necessary to walk on top of the bodies. In vessels round about could be seen a white lardy substance that may have been human fat for glycerine purposes. The dungeon was a dismal horrible place and inhuman – I now believe the Germans are capable of anything that is evil and dark and uncivilized.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> - The battery remained in the same gun position. Such progress over the Hindenburg system has been made that Divisional H. Qrs. Has been unable to place us in new positions. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> St. Quentin fell. Australians played a big part in its capture but the French occupied it. Early morning intense barrages are being continually put over on the enemy and progress all along our sectors is going on systematically and sure.

Later - On the 4<sup>th</sup> the brigade received orders to go forward and late in the evening our battery moved into gun positions near Johncourt. Luckily we found a deep dugout at hand and we surely needed to as the night bombing is the most intense and fierce I have ever been under – sometimes it is positively terrifying – casualties are quite frequent in men and horses.

We are now in new and open country and the enemy is fighting desperately in this sector, as it is recognised that when he is driven out of the “Canal Sector” must fall back over many miles of country. - It is a dreary and melancholy sight going over this new and hard fought countryside! The grim sight of masses of dead men and horses and other gear of war is enough to make one think and wonder whether we are living in a much less advanced age. Some things are much better left undescribed – they are too sickening and horrible - Man was not intended to undergo such a terrific and horrible experience - Surely these men, blown to shreds and clumps of unrecognisable flesh, have paid the full price of liberty and wiped away any stains, which the chequered careers of most men are distinguished by so many sign posts along the paths of life. I am sick sometimes, looking at a battle field and it is indescribably sad at times to see such fine brave human material lying in heaps, to be thrown into hastily dug pits and consecrated to Mother Earth, sometimes by a little mummery and often by a terrified clergyman anxious to flee from the carnage of modern war methods.

I devotedly trust that "The Spawn of Iniquity" who have brought about this damnable outrage upon our peaceful progress will stand indicted before Mankind's tribunal and just and terrific justice dealt out to them that the like of this vileness and soullessness will never be brought upon men again. To Damnation with their ambition and their royal houses – they have no just claim to the support of any free man – and the "Agents of Light" must feel, past grief, in beholding them.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> the battery was standing by for a stunt to take place on the 7<sup>th</sup>. Several orders and preparations were made to go forward and cancelled later on. A terrific barrage was put over on the enemy from a new forward position early in the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> and lasted two and a half hours. We then advanced from this position about two kilos to positions near Montbrebain Village about 9am. A line was immediately run to an observing post and from here one could see clearly an artillery duel of the fiercest kind.

The enemy batteries were in front of a long narrow woods and were sniping in all directions. Our brigade succeeded in driving the gun crews, first out of their pits and then decimating them in the open while they were running away. Great bodies of our Cavalry were waiting in full view of us and made several attempts to head off the fleeing crews but enemy machine gunners from cleverly hidden "posts" in the ground facing us played havoc with the Cavalry - 50 per cent must have been mown down – It was sheer murder. The observers were very successful in blowing up these machine gun nests and before the day was over all the nests were destroyed, the enemy batteries destroyed one by one and the country in front of us cleared of the enemy.

Today, the 9<sup>th</sup>, such advance has been made in our sector that it is probable that we will be advancing again in a few hours.

I have never seen this kind of open warfare and cavalry attacks that I witnessed this morning but it comes so near sheer murder that it makes one almost sick.

I forgot to enter that the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade is now attached to the Americans. The enemy in this sector has wrought grim havoc amongst them. The ground over which we are moving is strewn with dead – mostly Germans, Americans and many Australians. There is no time to bury them as the advance is so swift and deadly and the dead are hardly a second thought to a victorious army advancing and fighting its way. Many prisoners came through yesterday and they were utilised all day carrying the wounded back to the dressing stations at the rear. Many of the prisoners were the famous Prussian Guards.

It is interesting to note that, round these dates Germany has made the first direct proposals for peace to President Wilson (7<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1918).

## **PART 35: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE**

### **Rest at Amiens, German Surrender – Some Reflections**

**Oct. 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

Today the 10<sup>th</sup> the brigade is again advancing after having pulled into a position in the open on the 9<sup>th</sup> and today about 1pm we passed through Busigny which was interesting owing to the fact that the first civilians were seen by us. Only yesterday the Germans were here and the villagers were quite excited and pleased to see “their own” artillery going through. The battery is now resting for a while awaiting orders to advance again.

On the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> the battery remained in Busigny owing to the fact that the enemy is offering a good deal of resistance in artillery fire. It is especially intense at night and some shells have come extremely close to our billets. Almost every morning a barrage is put over on the enemy and good progress has been made along the line on these days.

The 13<sup>th</sup> still finds the battery in Busigny and it is quite likely that a move forward will take place at any time. The only item of interest to enter for this date is that a large number of civilians have been driven back over our line by the Germans and are drooping through Busigny at all hours of the day. They are unfortunate because they are homeless and have large handcarts filled with their possessions and food. They are going well back as the enemy is gassing and shelling this village at times intensely and life is very insecure to all concerned.

The brigade was relieved on the 14<sup>th</sup>, the (106 Bty by the 113<sup>th</sup> Bty) and my battery pulled out of Busigny at 8pm for the wagon lines.

The last two nights have been rather quiet and free from enemy artillery and bombers. Still at the wagon lines (also near Busigny) on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

16<sup>th</sup> Oct also finds the battery at the wagon lines mentioned above but preparations were made to go forward on this date and late at night the battery went forward to take part in the stunt of the early morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> - No casualties occurred till the wagons began to go forward of this date about 7am when six horses and six drivers were killed and wounded. At the gun pits misfortune seems to have followed us as many casualties occurred from enemy shelling and two men were killed and one wounded by a premature burst of gun. There were 14 casualties at the gun pits during the morning while the stunt and barrage was going on so that our casualties were twenty in all. It has cast a gloom over all and shows us once again how lucky is our own personal escapes at times. I understand the stunt went off well and all objectives were gained by the American infantry. (20 Division)

**Oct 18<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

I am sick today looking at dead men and parts of what were once human beings. In front of the battery position a whole American Company Was wiped out by the enemy counter barrage. There is no attempt by the Americans yet to bury their dead. Luckily we had sufficient time yesterday during the stunt to bury our own dead and erect rude crosses with their names and numbers. So severe were our losses that they were made up from every direction. I was detailed to serve on a gun and I've had a rough time the last 24 hours. Gas is continually thrown over on us and over 20 men of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battery have been evacuated on account of the effect on them.

I understand that the stunt went off very well and all objectives gained by the American infantry. At present the battery is remaining in this position as a reserve battery.

**Oct. 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 1918**

The battery moved out of the position near St. Souplet on the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the wagon lines at Busigny. On the 20<sup>th</sup> the whole battery including the guns moved camp into Billets in Busigny and it is expected that a rest of 48 hours will be given us. The 21<sup>st</sup> finds the battery still in billets but the officers have gone forward again to select gun positions and it is expected that orders will be issued to go into action again tonight the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The much needed rest of a few hours is necessary to us as we have just passed through a most distressing time and the absence of wading through the bodies of the dead who lead the vanguard of those great stunts is a welcome change to us. As far as I am personally concerned I am most relieved to get some sights that I have witnessed since the 8<sup>th</sup> August out of my mind. I never would have believed that one could witness such masses of mutilated dead without being sick and nervy. It is a most ghastly thing and the authors of this war should be wiped off the earth as they have proved themselves without soul or heart or conscience.

**October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

Contrary to expectations orders were issued that the brigade go out for a rest to the rear of Amiens.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> wed remained in billets at Busigny and on the 26<sup>th</sup> began a column of route and camped the first night at Naurey. On the 27<sup>th</sup> camped at Hameles and on the 28<sup>th</sup> at Cappy near Bray. The distance between these places is from 20 to 25 kilometres.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> at a very early hour the battery and brigade left Cappy and covered about 35 kilometres arriving at Lamos about 4.30pm. The battery is now installed in billets and is quite comfortable today, the 30<sup>th</sup>. On the 31<sup>st</sup> there is little of a local nature to enter but as far as the war is concerned we are living in great days – tremendous events are coming rapidly upon us. First the

collapse of Turkey and complete surrender to the Allies then the collapse of Austria and the breaking up of the dual monarchy into its racial component parts followed by revolution. The successes each day are so rapid that it is hard to follow them. Nearly all these events have occurred within the last few days and it is now expected that the end is only a matter of days.

### **November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

The Battery and Brigade are still in billets in the town of Lamos and there is yet no rumour about moving out.

The war situation is still very favourable and successes on the Western Front are coming through each day. The Italians up to date, the 3<sup>rd</sup>, have captured over 80,000 prisoners and are now on Austrian soil. These unparalleled successes have all occurred in the last three days.

### **Nov. 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

We are now living in some of the most momentous days in recorded history. Unparalleled successes each day are coming through to us from the various fronts. Today, the 9<sup>th</sup>, the German Armistice delegates are to meet Marshall Foch in order to (can't read this word which is written in pencil) the Allied terms to Germany and we learn(?) now that Germany has been given 72 hours in order to accept the terms and if she fails to accept them the greatest military concentration that has ever been known will move the ring of steel in closer until she is utterly crushed. I think that Germany will accept the terms presented to her by Marshall Foch and the British Naval Officer, Admiral (Can't read – looks like "Wenupoe").

Rumours are coming through to us of mutinies in the German Navy and colossal defects of her armies near her Frontiers. The battery is still in billets at Lamos.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> the battery moved out of Lamos at 10am and arrived at Proyart at 7pm at night passing through Villers Bretonneux and the country over which the Australians fought so hard some weeks back. We passed numerous small Australian cemeteries and other grim scenes which indicated how bitter was the struggle in this part of the battle area.

### **Nov. 11<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

This day is one of the greatest in history. It was conveyed to us today as it is the day on which the German emissaries are to sign the Armistice and we were informed that it had been signed: but just at what hour we will later discover.

There was only a little excitement amongst the troops as it seems to have been expected amongst us. All around us the countryside and villages seem to be lit up with flares and at the distance there seems to be a lot of excitement amongst the French people.

The battery is still camped at Proyart awaiting orders what to do next.

**Nov 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

There is little of interest to enter on these days. The brigade is still in the vicinity of the village of Proyart and my battery is camped in the same billets. There are many rumours about the brigade being broken up and moving forward for garrison work in Germany but up to the present nothing has transpired.

Now that the war is over there are some reflections that one can indulge in. When I look back over the many months of active service and the savage soulless conditions under which all men fought in the world war I can't help feeling thankful that the "dogs of war" are again under leash and that the sword will once again be turned into a ploughshare. I am thankful that the war is now over as much for the Germans as for ourselves. We have all lived under the perpetual fear of bombs, shells and gas and machine gun bullets - Not one hour for months could one feel what safety was and what real peace of mind is, as we have known it in peace times before we plunged into this hell of war.

I don't feel bitter against the ordinary German soldier. As a man he is not much worse than other "types of soldiers". His chief fault was that he was provided opportunities for frightfulness. He was badly led and guided by his savage and brutal overlords. He was also fighting for a bad cause and thought that it was a good one. In our case we had right on our side, a good cause and good leaders.

What the next few months reconstruction may mean for us, it is yet too early to speculate over. We do know that the day of the little dugout in the wet ground is over and vermin and filth are over. It may mean strict military discipline and garrison work in Germany or one of the other theatres of the war or we may be hurried at an early date back to Australia. Whatever the changes are upon us the immediate phases of reconstruction are most complex for the victors. At first the Allies are faced with a starving Germany and Austria and a sad state of affairs in Turkey. It is their first duty to now feed the starving populations of these war stricken countries. After order has been restored, justly apportion the huge indemnities and have restored the goods and property of the Allies.

Next, deal with the guilty leaders and savages who have brutally ill treated our captured soldiers. Strict justice must be done all round, otherwise this world agony has been in vain and the 10,000,000 who have died for a good and a bad cause will remain unavenged.

Out of these years of misery and destruction will come infinite good.



Rotten monarchies have been swept away and free government will be established in their stead. Historical crimes will be undone in one-time Turkish provinces in Poland and other places. The people of these countries knew little of the meaning of freedom for centuries in some cases. They will know it now.

The war will bring about a happier state of affairs the world over. Poverty will largely disappear and the accumulation of great wealth will not be tolerated. Rotten aristocracies will largely disappear because the common classes will rule their countries.

Many other changes are upon us but time will heal all the wounds of war and many things will be forgotten that we feel too bitter at present to think very intently about. Let time and the good intentions of our statesmen do their duty unmolested.

### **Nov. 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 16<sup>th</sup> the 6<sup>th</sup> brigade moved out of Proyart at 10am, passed through Villers Bretonneux, Warfaix(?) and Camon. In the last phase we are now billeted in houses. The 17<sup>th</sup> finds us still here.

The brigade is still in billets at Camon on the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>.

### **Nov 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>**

From the 21<sup>st</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> we are still in the same billets but there is persistent talk of moving out to some new part.

Some days ago I made a visit to Amiens to see the cathedral in particular. I was somewhat disappointed at the interior of the structure. It has been claimed that Amiens Cathedral is the last specimen of Gothic Architecture in the world but after seeing Salisbury Cathedral I am now convinced that Salisbury is far more beautiful in its finish. The only thing about Amiens that appealed to me was its imposing exterior. The front of the Cathedral is a monument of carving and Gothic design. The date of the building is about the same as Salisbury Cathedral. Unfortunately, the approaches of Amiens Cathedral are very poor indeed as narrow streets and poor dilapidated buildings surround it. Salisbury on the contrary has very beautiful approaches and is set in fine grounds.

The town of Amiens was badly shelled by the enemy but is now picking up wonderfully as it was estimated that during the time it was shelled one house in ten was damaged. Now, at midday, the town is quite busy and presents the appearance of a very busy place.

**Dec. 1<sup>st</sup> .....8<sup>th</sup>**

There is little of an unusual nature to enter for these days. The brigade is still in billets in Camon. Weather conditions have been very unpleasant lately – Rain has been falling steadily since about the 1<sup>st</sup> and still continues. Since the 5<sup>th</sup> I have been in a new job at Brigade. I am making reproductions of some of the sketches I have in my sketch book.

## **PART 36: WW1 DIARY OF Gunner ALEXANDER J. McKEE.**

### **Appointed Instructor, Then to Calais and London**

**Dec. 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

On the 9<sup>th</sup> orders were suddenly received by the brigade to move forward and about 8.30am we got on the move and reached Proyart that night. Early in the morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> the brigade again started to move and reached aviation sheds near Vraignes that night. On 11<sup>th</sup> again a move forward was made, reaching Fresny le Grand that night and next morning, the 12<sup>th</sup>, another move was made to Brancourt. On the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> the weather was fine and fresh but since the 10<sup>th</sup> the weather has been wet and miserable. I know of nothing more miserable than slopping about in mud attending to horses and we have mud in abundance round these latest billets. The 13<sup>th</sup> finds us still in these last billets at Brancourt and it is likely that we will remain here for some days.

**Dec. 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918**

The Brigade remained at Brancourt on the 14<sup>th</sup> and on the 15<sup>th</sup> moved out again and reached Rajact de Bailieu where it camped for the night. An early move was made on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> and tonight, the 16<sup>th</sup>, finds the brigade in billets at St. Hilaire.

On the 17<sup>th</sup>, at 8am, a move was again made forward and this day finds us at Siory and left again on the 18<sup>th</sup> for Boussy lez Walcourt where we are likely to remain for some time as it is our destination for the time being. During the last few days the weather has been most unpleasant, cold, muddy and rainy. Sleet is falling and there are indications of early falls of snow.

**December 14<sup>th</sup> .....31<sup>st</sup>, 1918**

All this time the Brigade has remained in billets at Boussy lez Walcourt and the only matter of interest to me personally is that I have been appointed Instructor in Mechanics and Electrical Machines for the brigade part in the A.I.F. Educational Scheme.

**Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>.....24<sup>th</sup>, 1919**

I am still carrying on my duties as instructor in Mechanics as the Brigade is still in the billet of Boussy lez Walcourt .

On the 24<sup>th</sup> I received my Blighty pass and a couple of fine recommendations to the Director of General Education and Repatriation which ought to be of some benefit to me when I get to London.

**Jan 25<sup>th</sup>, 1919**

On the 26<sup>th</sup> after a most dreary trip of 36 hours the leave train arrived at Calais and the men on leave, including myself, remained the night in Calais leaving on the 27<sup>th</sup> for Folkstone and arriving in London at 3pm.

My leave begins today, the 27<sup>th</sup>.