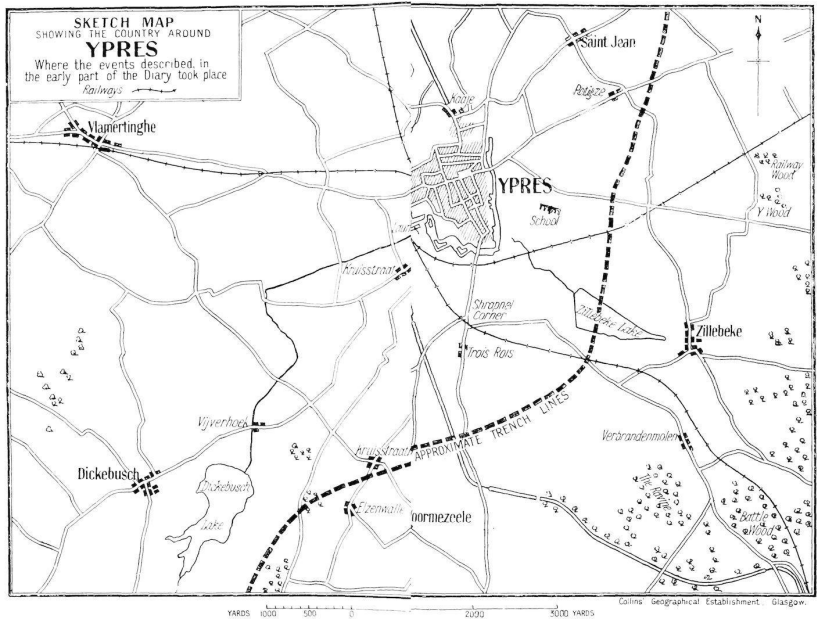


A
SOLDIER'S DIARY

by
RALPH SCOTT



Collins' Geographical Establishment, Glasgow.

TO THE P.B.I.

PREFACE

BY

MAJOR-GENERAL SIR FREDERICK MAURICE

Lord Robert Cecil has said that he is amazed at the false picture of war given by the history books, and that he trusts that the historians of the future will give us a better picture of what war really is than have historians of the past. I doubt if they will. They are concerned with the statesmen who direct and the generals who control, rather than with the soldier who fights, they have neither time nor space to concern themselves with the things that mattered to the men in the ranks. We can only get the things that matter, the misery, suffering, and endurance, the filth, the horror, the desolation, which are a part and the greater part even of the most triumphant progress in modern war, from the men who have experienced them.

The reason for the publication of this diary is given by the author in his entry for October 6. "The only way to stop war is to tell these facts in the school history books and cut out the rot about the gallant charges, the victorious returns, and the blushing damsels who scatter roses under the conquering heroes' feet. Every soldier knows that the re-writing of the history books would stop war more effectively than the most elaborately covenanted league which tired politico-legal minds can conceive." Again, in the last entry of all, written after the author has been watching the Swedish Royal Troops changing guard at the Palace: "Is there no one with the courage to tell them that war is not like this, that there will

come a day without music, and no admiring eyes, but when ‘the lice are in their hair and the scabs are on their tongue’? Surely our years of sacrifice were vain if the most highly educated people in Europe remain in ignorance of the real nature of war and are open scoffers at the League of Nations.”

These are not the words of a conscientious objector, nor of a neurasthenic, introspective man. They are written by a keen, healthy-minded, sport-loving, young Englishman, who passed through the war at the front, did his duty nobly, and behaved with great gallantry. He describes in vivid, clear language, just what he saw, he does not cover up the horrors with fine phrases, but just sets them down in their place alongside the stories of devotion and sacrifice, which make up the high lights in the picture.

It is remarkable that this story, which even to-day makes one shiver, is not an account of the grim struggle for the defence of Ypres, of the grimmer fight through the mud to Passchendaele, nor of the great retreat when the Germans swarmed over our lines in March, 1918, but of the period when the tide had turned definitely in our favour, and our armies swept forward to final victory. It is an account of triumphant war as seen in the front line. We are told that the public to-day is weary of war books. It may well be weary of war books of a certain kind, but I hope it is not weary of learning the truth about the war, and every word in this book rings true. One of the surest ways to get another war is to forget about the past war.

F. MAURICE.

30th Nov., 1922.

“Hear now a song—a song of broken interludes,
A song of little cunning—of a singer nothing worth,

Through the naked words and mean,
May ye see the truth between,
As the singer knew and touched it in the ends of all the earth!"
RUDYARD KIPLING.

A SOLDIER'S DIARY

April 23, 1918. Arrived at the R.E. Base Depot, Rouen, and was delighted to find a pile of letters waiting for me. Damn fools that we are, we are all fretting to get back into it again—the lines must be very thin nowadays. In the evening had an excellent Mess Smoking Concert, plenty of champagne, and a terrific “fug” in the ante-room. Heaven knows when we will have another night like this as we are at the last outpost of civilisation again.

April 24. Wasting time all day at the Demolitions School. God! what fools we are. Up in the line men are dying like flies for lack of reinforcements—here are thousands of troops and we cannot go because the R.T.O.'s staff is too small to cope with the railway embarkation forms!

April 25. Several fellows posted to companies to-day, so that it looks as if we shall soon be over the wall that Haig spoke about and with our backs to it again.

April 26. More Demolitions—news still very bad—if they don't let us go to the Huns methinks they will come to us.

April 27. Demolitions again. We destroyed a steel rail and heard a fragment of it go humming away over our heads just like a shell. About ten minutes afterwards the Colonel came down with great wind-up and chewed us all to pieces for being careless. Our piece of rail had evidently gone right over the camp and landed somewhere near the Revolver Range. Unfortunately, the Colonel had heard it humming over his hut and it had nearly frightened him to death!

April 28. Church parade.

April 29. Learning how to make dug-outs as practised by an officer who has never heard a gun go off—I wonder if the Huns do silly things like this.

April 30. Wasting ammunition all day on the Lewis Gun Ranges.

May 1. Bayonet fighting—so that it looks as if we may eventually get into it again. One man down from the line to-day says that he has seen R.E. Field Coys. holding the front lines with P.B.I. in support. Oh! let us be joyful!

May 2. Had the day off as I am Orderly Officer to-morrow. Went out with Lucas and two nurses and crossed the Seine by an old-fashioned rope ferry. Climbed the hills on the far bank and spent a glorious day in the woods—scenery magnificent and everything so unlike war. In the evening we boarded a river steamer and went downstream four or five miles to Rouen. Had tea (so-called), took the nurses back to their camp, and back to ours by train. Rouen is a strange mixture—Gothic beauty and twentieth century filth!

May 3. Quiet day. Could hear distant gunfire in the evening—presumably at Amiens.

May 4. Lucas and Richards went up the line to-day.

May 5. Church parade. Wrote a lot of letters and pretended to be happy.

May 6. Borrowed a horse from the Cavalry Depot and went for a ride with one of the nurses. Had a ripping lunch at a little café in Petit Couronne—omelettes and fresh butter (to say nothing of the nurse) are much nicer than bully and dry biscuit. In the evening

played the Cavalry at Rugger and whacked them 8–6 after an abnormally hard game. We did enjoy ourselves.

May 7. Lazy day! Sometimes I wonder if there really is a war on—these people here don't know about it, and in England they must naturally know less.

May 8. Very enjoyable ride in the Forêt de Rouvray with Major J. Had a damn good nag.

May 9. Poor old Jock received news of his brother's death in Mespot—knocked him up badly.

May 10. Great joy. I am posted at last and to my old Coy.—good old war again!

May 11. AT LAST!!! Left Rouen in a crowded troop train and made myself thoroughly miserable by wondering if I should ever come back and what everybody was doing at home, etc., etc. Silly ass!

May 12. Sunday. Passed through Boulogne and Wimereux early in the morning and then through Calais and Cassel and on to Heidelberg, where we slept in the train. Hun planes came over in the night and tried to bomb the train, but they didn't get anywhere near us.

May 13. Set off at 9 a.m. to find the company, and after walking eleven miles with my pack found them at one of the old camps in the Ypres Salient—quite like home again. The camp is surrounded by guns, and a battery of 9.2 howitzers just behind us make life unbearable. In the evening the Divisional Concert Party gave us a very good show in spite of the fact that the “theatre” was continually shaken by shell explosions.

May 14. Went up the line with Mellor to take over his work on the Green Support Line. Paid my respects to Ypres again—it doesn't alter much. Whilst I was writing a Bosche plane came over our camp and brought down two of our Parseval balloons in flames. All the observers managed to get into their parachutes and landed in the woods about 200 yards away. Later on two more Bosche came over, but one was driven off and the other forced to descend with a broken propeller.

May 15. Very heavy bombardment last night and early this morning—our own batteries replied so we had very little sleep. The Hens laid five eggs. Went up to Ypres again to make some gas-proof dug-outs.

May 16. Working in the line all day and saw several air fights but no casualties on either side. At night went up again and had 200 P.B.I. constructing a barricade on the main Ypres-Poperinghe road. Enemy strafed the 9.2 howitzer on the Plank Road, and as we passed his shells were falling about 20 yards away from us. We didn't stay to observe his shooting, which was a little too good to be comfortable! Arrived on the job and found that half the working party had gone astray owing to Brigade H.Q. giving wrong orders. Damned asses in their well-cut breeches—if they had to flounder about in trenches all night they would be more careful.

The Ypres Salient on an ordinary lively night is a sight to be remembered. The rise and fall of the Verey Lights makes a circle of fire all round us, and except just where the Poperinghe road connects us with the rest of France we appear to be completely surrounded. It is more than a marvel to me how they have failed to cut us off in that little bottle-neck. On this particular night Fritz was raining shrapnel into Dickebusch and our people were giving

him a warm time in reply. The 4.5 howitzers were firing hammer-and-tongs, and as I watched the angry shell-bursts on the ridge in front I began to feel quite sorry for the Bosche infantry. However, his field guns sent some high explosive over just to the left of my barricade, and my sympathy rapidly vanished. Cycling back in the gray of the morning we saw a 9.2 howitzer being tugged into position by a tractor and a cottage in Brandhoek just set on fire by a direct hit. We didn't linger!

May 17. Working on the barricade again. Much quieter night, but in the direction of Kemmel there was a very violent bombardment lasting about 20 minutes. Probably a raid by the French. At midnight went into support battalion dug-out for a whisky and whilst inside the Bosche got a direct hit on top with a gas shell. On way home noted the cottage in Brandhoek still smouldering after last night.

May 18. Finished the barricade except for wiring and the barrels of earth for the fairway. Also completed No. 2 Post. Got strafed by a 5.9 on the way up, and had wind vertical—10 shells all to myself and very close. Very quiet night except for a few rounds of shrapnel on the barricades.

May 19. Sunday. Rode round with the Skipper, taking over all the demolitions from him as he goes to the Gunners to-morrow as Liaison Officer. I am now responsible for the explosive charges under all the bridges behind Ypres, and in case of evacuation of the salient I've got to be the last man to leave, blowing up everything before I go. It's a regular suicide club, as I know that fully half the charges won't go off unless I fire my revolver into them—disadvantages of belonging to a corps with high ideals—"blow yourself up rather than fail to blow the bridge."

A 9.2 battery fired just as we rode past them, frightening Blacker's horse and giving him rather a bad fall. Heavy drum fire in the evening in the direction of Locre—heard later that the French got 300 prisoners. Durhams are doing a raid on our right to-morrow night.

May 20. Busy all day on demolitions—hot day and very quiet.

May 21. Vlamertinghe very heavily shelled with H.E. and shrapnel just as I was going in. Bosche got another direct hit on the old church tower and brought more masonry down into the road. Cycling along the Switch Road behind a lorry when a shell dropped into the swamp about 15 yards on my right. Tore some big holes in the lorry cover and splashed me with mud. Lucky the ground was so soft or else I should have had a little more than wind-up! At night had 260 P.B.I. working for me on the Green Line. They are the best workers we've had yet, and only came out of the line last night. One of their officers told us a very amusing yarn of a patrol stunt which he did the other night—captured a Bosche, killed four, and got away with everything except his tin hat. Recommended for M.C. Heavy barrage, for Durham's raid started at 12 midnight and lasted for three-quarters of an hour. Bosche retaliation on our roads and forward areas.

At five minutes to twelve the moon was shining on a peaceful but desolate scene; the frogs were croaking in the shell-holes, and the only signs of war were an occasional Verey light beyond Ypres and the lazy droning of a night bomber overhead. At midnight there was a crash behind us and instantly our guns let out together, surrounding us with a wall of noise and leaping, white-hot flame. The S.O.S. began to rise from the German lines and shortly afterwards the steady crashing of his shrapnel barrage was added to

the din. This went on steadily for three-quarters of an hour, while we grovelled on our stomachs in the mud, and punctually at 12.45 settled down to the usual desultory shelling. Had only one casualty in my party, but he was a nasty sight—chewed to pieces by a direct hit. On the way back Mellor and I cycled into some gas and swallowed a bit before we got our bags on—coughing and sneezing all night and had devilish headache.

Just outside Vlamertinghe we ran into a smashed ambulance and four limber mules and two drivers literally splashed about the road—our wheels were wet with warm blood. Later on we found a saddle-horse blown in two but could not see any signs of the rider. One of the worst nights I have had since March!

May 22. Quiet day testing my charges on the bridges. Very hot and water unobtainable—tried thirst quenchers, which were worse than nothing. White with dust, and eyes, nose, and mouth full of it.

May 23. Another quiet day testing charges. Derry twice shelled off his job but had no casualties.

May 24. Heavy rain last night converted everywhere into a quagmire.

May 25. Beautiful hot day again. Completed work on demolitions and finished all preliminary testing.

May 26. Busy day handing over demolitions—jolly glad to be rid of them although it means front line work instead. Very heavy shell-fire all night followed by Bosche attack, in which he captured Ridge Wood and Scottish Wood. Had seven casualties, and had to ride all the way home in gasmask. Hear that the Durhams have been very badly hit—two companies almost entirely gone.

May 27. Am posted as Reserve Officer to our forward company in addition to my own work. Working under the new major on Main Reserve Defences. Bosche still shelling very persistently all morning, especially round Brandhoek, where he fired a large petrol dump. Picked up some shrapnel which fell within two or three yards of me. Putting in a double machine-gun post in the top of a ruined windmill—splendid field of fire and view right away to the foot of Kemmel Hill. God help Jerry if these gunners stick it! Also constructed a very strong double post in a farm on the Switch road.

May 28. Up at 5.30 and working hard all day in the Green Line. Twice shelled out of the front line, and eventually had to withdraw all men to work on support. I have told Brigade Headquarters three times that it is madness to work here in daylight and that I cannot accept any responsibility for casualties—the German observation balloons can see us all the time, and we are shelled continuously. However, *they* don't get shelled, so it is "Carry on, the work has to be done!" The mists are the only things that save us—as soon as there is a clear day we shall be wiped out.

May 29. Had a whole battalion of P.B.I. working for me on Green Line—in this blasted exposed position again—it makes me feel like a High Church curate walking naked down the Strand! Shelled out of front line about 11 a.m., so left Captain of the infantry in charge of parties and went personally to the General—got his authority to do exactly as I liked and not to work in front of the village after the morning mists have cleared. Some one will be wild at my going direct to the General, but I have shown him up and saved at least 50 lives—but what are 50 lives to the Staff?

May 30. Tried the front line again, but Fritz knows we are there and shelled us out with low-bursting shrapnel—nasty stuff! After

the men had withdrawn I went back to see all clear and was damn nearly hit by a whizz-bang. It burst in a pile of bricks about six paces away. I heard the explosion, and on looking up saw a column of bricks and debris just starting on its downward journey again. It rattled all over my tin hat but I was otherwise untouched. Later on some shrapnel whizzed into the parapet at my feet and some more crashed through an old notice board by my head. Hadn't a single casualty all morning. My luck is still miraculous and it seems to extend to the men. Bosche aeroplane came over in the afternoon and brought down three of our balloons in flames.

May 31. Two companies of Fusiliers working for me on Green Line. Misty morning, so I started in front and got on very well for several hours. About 9 a.m. a 5.9 ploughed into a breastwork that my corporal and I were standing on, explaining things to some infantry. Three men were wounded and the work wrecked, although by all the laws of reason we should all be dead. Probably owed our safety to the fact that the earth was newly placed and the shell penetrated a good distance before exploding. After this our wire was hit three times and the men were getting nervous, so I withdrew to support, where we spent a fairly quiet day. Very bad news comes up from the south, and if the Bosche successes continue we expect to be attacked here.

June 1. Uneventful day except that there are rumours that we are going out of the line for a rest. Another huge piece of masonry was knocked off Vlam. church tower last night and buried itself several feet in the *pavé*. I should think it weighs over ten tons.

June 2. Sunday (I think!). Received orders to move out of the line and proceed to Army Reserve Area for a rest. Great joy, and as we are much below strength expect the rest to be a long one—the men

need it badly, and I suppose the Brigade Staff must get their hair cut! Company marched wearily through dear old Poperinghe and spent a quiet night beyond. All officers had feather beds although we messed in a granary. The whole road from Pop. to Wormhoudt was lined with temporary shacks and caravans where the refugees from Ypres are living. They were a noisy, dirty crowd, and the music from the estaminets was simply appalling. However, combined with French beer and women, it seemed to attract Tommy. Oh! ye women of England, could you but see your heroes now—

“Singing songs of blasphemy,
At whist with naked whores!”

At home it is Sunday and you are enjoying the beauties of a June evening after church. I daren't think about it, my imagination is too keen.

June 3. Moved off early in the morning and had a long, tiring, and dusty march, after which we entrained for our final destination. We passed through very peaceful-looking country, and although not interesting, it was like Paradise after the desolation of the Salient. From rail-head we marched to our final billets and arrived there at 8.30 p.m. absolutely worn out. Like a damn fool I carried two of my fellows' packs—but it makes them love me.

June 4. Spent a very quiet day washing, shaving, writing letters, and generally trying to forget the war. In the afternoon I cycled alone to Cassel Hill, but it was a misty day so that I could not enjoy the view. Met a pretty little waitress at the estaminet on the top, where I drank a bottle of filthy wine.

June 5. Did a little drill, etc., just to keep the men fit, and then went for a short ride—it is good to be with our horses again.

June 6. Weather is very beautiful. Spent the day in meditating—how I would love some books now. Gunfire is just audible at night.

June 7. Appointed Lewis Gun Officer to the company and spent the day lazily, apart from giving two lectures.

June 8. We are going to move again, although, thank heaven, it is still westwards. At 1.30 p.m. received orders to meet Staff Captain at Brigade H.Q. at 2.15 p.m., and it is 12 miles away!!!!

What would they do with bloody fools like that in business at home? And they make just the same kind of mistakes when lives are at stake. Set off with 12 men as billeting party, and after a very tiring ride reached the rendezvous at 6 p.m. to find the blasted captain not yet arrived. I would love to write down the men's remarks! When he turned up he told me that our billets were a little farther on at the next village, but when I got there I found nothing arranged. After three hours' hard work (a great strain on my French!) I had everything ready for the arrival of the company. M. le Maire and the farmers were very obliging people and extremely keen to help. If anything they were a little too hospitable, and as I was in a dickens of a hurry it was rather trying to have to stay and drink beer with 17 different farmers! About 10 p.m. Mellor arrived with the main body of cyclists, and we went to the Maire's to eat a dry bully sandwich. The old man watched us very gravely, and when we had absorbed the bully I poured a drink of greenish-looking water from my bottle. He made an awful face and exclaimed, "Ah! Chateau de la Pompe, pas bon!" He immediately rushed into his kitchen and brought us each a huge glass of

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