

War Diary of George Hedley Kempling for the Somme Offensive

Tuesday August 22, 1916

In the bay where I was this afternoon during the usual 4 p.m. or 5 to 5:30 p.m. bombardments, Fritzie sent over a whiz-bang which burst just on top of the parapet. Pieces of shrapnel buried themselves in the earth near us. Three of us were thrown flat by the force of the explosion and half buried up in fresh earth. Then while we were still lying flat, trying to get up to scurry around the corner of the traverse, another whiz-bang knocked in another part of the parapet just over us. That is about as near death as I have come yet. The rest of the afternoon we were running back and forth from one bay to another dodging rum-jugs. Fritzie razooed us pretty well that afternoon. Our support trenches were pretty well wrecked. Fritzie was very severely handled too so tonight both sides could be heard quite plainly using hammer and saw, mawl and spade.

Last night I spent my first time on listening post. It is kind of a nervy job. As soon as the evening gets a bit dark the first relief climbs over the parapet at a selected spot and crawls alone in front of the trenches till it reaches the listening post. This is simply a spot in front of our trenches chosen because the relief will be hidden. It is usually a clump of bushes, or some old shell-hole. The listening post is used for the purpose of keeping a closer watch on Fritzie's trenches, so that if he shows any activity at all such as to send out a bombing party or a working party. It is sometimes a nerve wracking job if one is not in a well covered position and Fritzie finds the place. He is constantly sending up flares just to find these places and to nab our working parties, scouts, and snipers.

Tuesday August 29, 1916

We turned out at 7 a.m. One pleasant thing about army life is that we are always wakened by the call of "tea up." Then we roll out of our overcoats, rub the sleep out of our eyes, grab our mess-tins and hurry out to where the two N.C.O's are dishing out the tea and bacon.

This morning we were surprised to hear that after a three day route march we were to run out for drill in heavy marching order. The training camp is 4 ½ miles away, over a few hills. Well the men were mad and that is no small thing in a Canadian army; very different from the Imperials. Then on the way out it began to rain. A lot of men fell out on the way out to the drill ground simply because their feet or shoulders were in bad condition from marching, and some from pure cussedness and small blame. We had been promised this day for rest.

When we arrived, we found that the parade ground was grain fields in stubble. Just as we commenced operations, it started in to rain in earnest. Well, we practised open

order work, going ahead in short spurts and flopping quickly in the mud, then getting up quickly, running a few yards and dropping again behind any cover you could get. This is all practice for the open fighting we are to have down on the Somme. The British are slowly pushing forward, and this means a lot of hand to hand fighting and fighting in rushes. We were to have practised until 4 p.m. but it rained so hard that we left at 3. On the way home it didn't rain, it poured. We were soaked through and through till our clothes squeaked all over. The bully beef hash we had for supper put some life into us but many of the boys had no sleep because they were cold and wet. This is one of those times that a drink of rum is a God-send.

Right after supper we went up to the horse lines and changed out (t)rusty Ross rifles for the handy little Le Enfield.

Our lieutenant, (Lieut Major) told us that the work down on the Somme was likely to be rough and hard. No regular trenches but live for a while in shell holes, ditches, or any place we could find, so we are expecting to have some genuine times.

Just seen in the papers where Roumania has declared war on Austria-Hungary, Germany on Roumania, and Italy on Germany. Some mix-up.

Friday September 15, 1916

To-day is the day of the big push. Our guns went at it all night till six this morning. And at 8 a.m. the first batch of German prisoners was escorted thru our camp. The cheerful news came that our local front of two battalions length (1 ½ miles) we had captured three lines of trenches and the Germ(h)uns were hiding in shell holes behind the last line. Our artillery is all standing to as they have the news from the observation balloons that there will be a counter-attack soon. The news comes that we have driven the Germans back 2000 yards, captured three lines of trenches on a 1 ½ mile front, and taken 1000 prisoners. The Germans have thus been driven from their last ridge, and are said to be hiding in shell holes behind the last line of their old trenches.

A wonderful new machine was used for the first time to-day, in the history of the world. It is a sort of armoured car, driven by a 205 H.P. engine. It is armed with two 4 inch Hotchkiss guns and eight machine guns. Then there are several holes for rifles to be fired through. The windows are prism, so that a man doesn't have to put his head before mere glass to have a look outside. This is on the principle of the periscope. The machine is like a square rather flattened out like this (sketch). There are no wheels. The treads, one continuous flexible tread on each side, are constant pulled round under and over a smooth track on each side of the machine. By the shape of the machine it is seen to be able to rock backward and forward in creeping along, and like a caterpillar it climbs down one side of a big hole and up the other, or it flops across it without bothering to reach the bottom if the hole or trench is narrow enough. When the Germans saw fifteen of these machines on our Canadian front, heading our charge it

scared them so stiff that our boys walked right through them. We captured 300 prisoners and reached our objective of 1600 yards and 400 yards extra for good measure. On the next page is a rough sketch of this wonderful fighting machine.

Sunday September 17, 1916

The day of rest has been the hardest day yet. The 26th has done itself but at a terrible cost. The battalion is practically shot to pieces, sections, platoons and companies being practically wiped out. We wonder how they managed to live, for the ration party of the last two days taking food to them has been simply obliterated by shell fire. I'm afraid that a couple of the 59th draft have been killed too. Sir Douglas Haig has sent an official congratulatory letter to the officers and men of the 2nd Canadian Division telling them that they have gone farther than any other division on the Somme front. This is French, British or Colonial. The 26th belongs to this glorious, hard-bitten division.

While I write, the din outside is a veritable hell of sound. Shells are bursting everywhere and our great masses of Canadian artillery are adding their deep bass to the terrible anthem.