

## MEMORIES OF THE FIELDS OF FLANDERS

By O.A.G.

**H**ISTORY has repeated itself bitterly in Flanders. Mile after weary mile the Allied army fought its way back to the coast in the greatest rearguard action men have ever been called upon to fight. But a great army has been saved. When the full story is told it will rival in heroism the history of the armies of 1914-18 who fought over much of that same countryside. As a battle rages the account of every man's behaviour is worthy of record, but not all the details can be told; only the vast pattern of history is able to weave into a comprehensive whole the action of many thousands of men operating over many miles of territory.

Those of us who fought in the last war remember vividly the north of France and the southern corner of Belgium over which the great rearguard action has been fought to save the Allied army and embark it from the coast at Dunkirk. We struggled over much of that lost ground, scenes of such physical and mental stress from 1915 onwards. Those towns and villages where we rested in billets behind the front line are now held by the invader; those courageous French peasants whose modest homes warmed and cheered us are probably in flight and their houses smoking ruins. The battle areas we knew so well in the north—Ypres, Messines, Passchendaele, Armentières, Bois Grenier—are lost to the Allies.

Soldiers of the last war can picture the advance more vividly, perhaps, than those who have not yet tasted war nor witnessed the trail of destruction it leaves in its wake. Each name mentioned in the official news bulletins recalls memories of the last war and our particular part in its activities. Some of those place names are the tiniest villages, familiar because fierce fighting took place among their ruins or because we were billeted in the cottages and stables of the peasants who lived there.

### Like South Canterbury or Hawke's Bay

How best to convey an impression of the country over which the Allies have retired and left to history an imperishable story? As I remember it, some parts of the rolling down lands of South Canterbury (particularly round Geraldine), and Hawke's Bay come to mind, but without the background of mountain ranges. Give such country centuries of close cultivation; scatter it with many picturesque villages, each dominated by a church spire, sprinkle the whole with woods and coppices of oak and beech and elm, and lose that landscape in a blue haze—there you have something of

the north of France round Hazebrouck, Cassel, Kummel, and Messines. Many of the roads are lined with trees whose trunks are trimmed until only tufts of branches remain at the top, like those of Hobbema's famous landscape. Canals cut through the land, each bearing its cargo of slowly-moving barges. There are no fences of jangling wire, but many cropped hedges of hawthorn. Just now the whole will be alight with flowering fruit trees; every garden will be rich with the scent of lilac; the sowing and planting would have been in full swing where the invader arrived.

The New Zealand Rifle Brigade spent a month in the country near the coast, in the area where the last fierce stand of the Allies took place. We were attached to the 1st French Army, with headquarters at Pollinchove, only 12 miles from Nieuport and close beside the Yser Canal. Beyond the trenches, which were held by the remnants of the Belgian Army, were the flooded marshes which held the Germans back when the dykes of the Yser were broken. I still remember that countryside lost in its blue haze; hot and windless in late summer. The fields were ready for harvest; if an enemy shell fell in that area it was an unusual happening. During the day we constructed gun pits and buried communication cable in preparation for an advance, then returned each evening to sleep in peace such as we rarely knew in France. On July 14 the commander of the French Army treated us to an issue of wine and cigars in memory of the French National day.

### Round About Messines

In the north of France many small hills are crowned with picturesque towns and villages. Messines, before the war, was one of them, but when we last saw it every building was a meaningless heap of bricks and broken timber. Messines, by the way, was the scene of one of the greatest strategical battles of the last war when it was captured by the New Zealand Division. The noise on the morning of the attack was terrific. In addition to the roar of exploding mines, there was the tremendous thunder of 114 eighteen pounder guns, 42 4.5in. howitzers, 72 Vickers machine guns and heavy artillery in the rear. Myriads of German SOS rockets lit up the smoke as dawn was breaking.

Below Messines lay the forest of Ploegsteert, still green but a trap for gas fumes. Nearby was Hill 63, honey-combed with catacombs where the soldiers in reserve found safety and warmth. Before the war nightingales sang in the thickets which clothed its slopes and gave it the name of Rossignol Wood. On the crest a heap of bricks and rubble marked the site of Hennessy's chateau, but the cellars failed to reveal any bottles bearing that brand when we investigated the ruins. Hills in France are numbered by their height in

metres. We were frequently close to Hill 60, but it had been blown almost to ground level by mines and bombardment.

Further north from Messines was Ypres, before which the Germans used poison gas on April 22, 1915. That once lovely old fortress town, with its famous Cloth Hall and Cathedral, was just a heap of rubble. A moat surrounded the town on three sides, its walls of brick, weathered by centuries, scarred and pitted by shells. The last time I passed through the ruins two white swans still sailed majestically on water which spouted fountains where the shells fell as they searched for our giant howitzers hidden among the broken buildings. The Menin Gate, one of the most magnificent memorials of the last war, stands facing the Menin Road where it leads out of Ypres. Like many other memorials in the old battlefields, it will now bear scars of the new conflict.

Armentières, where the New Zealanders took over their first sector of trenches in France, was in the direct line of this retreat. The Lys Canal, so frequently referred to in the recent news bulletins, ran through our trenches out into no man's land. Behind that sector were the hundreds of towns and tiny villages we came to know so well. Fighting has swept over Morbecque, our first billets after we landed from Egypt and where our Corps School was afterwards installed. Some of us who attended that school tramped the whole district doing tactical exercises and advanced training. Near by was the town of Hazebrouck, picturesque with cobbled streets, its quaint market and buildings mellow with the stain of centuries. The Forest of Nieppe stretched away on the right. Set in its green depths was the tiny village of La Motte a Bois, junction of roads and canals and one of the loveliest I remember. Here, too, was the chateau of Madame la Duchesse de la Grange with its tiny theatre of grey stone down which wistaria dripped in mauve cascades. It seems difficult to realise that war has again swept through that tiny haven in the woods, so long forgotten, it seemed to me, by the outside world. Only the presence of the Canadian Forestry Corps, felling selected trees for roads and trenches, took the war into La Motte a Bois.

Cassel has been mentioned in the news. We saw it frequently, a hill crowned by a grey monastery with the village nestling about its green slopes. Those who have read "Fear and Be Slain" by Lord Mottistone (then General Sir John Seeley) will remember his adventures in the monastery when the Germans advanced to Cassel in 1914. Mount Kemmel also housed a village on its sloping crest, but this was reduced to ruins. During the German break in 1918 the 18-pound batteries of the New Zealand Division fought a wonderful rearguard action near Kemmel by covering the retiring soldiers till the last moment. St. Omer, site of an Army Instructional School, has witnessed fierce fighting. This was another of our billet areas and in the neighbouring villages we were housed while we practised for

the Battle of Messines. My own unit was billeted in a huge barn, close beside the cow sheds, and in the evenings we helped with the bedding down of the cattle which were kept under cover for the whole winter. It was also to this part of the country, mid-way between St. Omer and Boulogne, that we returned after the Battle of Passchendaele, the most tragic of all our exploits in France, where we advanced through the mud to meet great stretches of barbed wire defended by machine guns in concrete pillboxes along the ridge.

### What of Passchendaele?

I often wonder whether the boggy stretches of Passchendaele and the Ypres Salient ever recovered from the effects of war and whether the tiny villages have been rebuilt. It is impossible to convey an idea of the desolation of that area. Not a sign remained of the hamlets which once dotted the countryside. Hooge was simply a great crater, so deep that our Brigade headquarters was housed in dugouts excavated in its banks. The famous Menin Road ran from there to Ypres. Duckboard tracks laid over the mud and through the shell-holes led to the Butte de Polygon and the front line, past such places as Dead Muir Gully where the animals lay rotting in the mud. I remember it only too well, for I had charge of the carrying party which transported food, water, and ammunition from Hooge Crater to the Butte while my battalion was in the line. Any slip on the duck-boards meant a plunge to the waist in mud and slime. If we were shelled we simply sat down and hoped. The Butte de Polygon, a high mound dominating that part of the Salient, has been the property of the Australian Government since the last war. On its crest is a monument to Australian courage.

### Behind the Lines

Memories of place names revived by the war news recall the trenches and roads which traversed all territory behind the lines like an enormous net. Each carried a title, just as streets do in any town. There was Hyde Park Corner and the Birdcage, near Hill 63; there was Hellfire Corner, well and aptly named; there was Watling Street, Bond Street, The Only Way, and hosts of others, put there by the British soldiers when the line was first established. Those mentioned in Ian Hay's "The First Hundred Thousand" were familiar to the New Zealand Division.

Most of those trenches will have been filled in long ago, but it is quite within the bounds of possibility that a few of the old craters and earthworks may have afforded shelter to the men of this war. When the final story has been written and individual reminiscences begin to circulate we shall be told some astonishing tales in which this and the last campaigns will inevitably be interwoven. Perhaps the soldiers who have made history in the fields of Flanders during recent weeks took refuge behind those memorials to courage and sacrifice which have been erected since 1914-18. Sons may have seen the names of their fathers carved on the stones of remembrance.