

## THE RIPONIAN Magazine 1914 - 1918



Alan F Newton in 1901 aged 16

### Letters from Old Riponians at the FRONT

Sir,

I have been asked to describe some of my experiences, at the Front for the benefit of readers of the "Riponian".

To do so fully would probably fill all the pages of the Magazine, but I will endeavour as briefly as possible to give you some idea of the sort of life I have led. My experience extends over a period of about four months, beginning from the middle of March.

I joined my battalion just after the now historic battle of Neuve Chapelle, in which the battalion had played a not inconspicuous part. I thus reached France in time only for the tail - end of the winter months and the bad weather, in which respect I was lucky, for even as it was I was able to realise what the hardships of the winter campaign must have been. I was also lucky In another respect, namely, that we have been situated near the centre of the British line all the time and we have not had to bear the brunt .of the hard fighting that has taken place near the extremities of the line.

Most of my experience therefore has been of

**Trench Warfare:** This is a somewhat monotonous work, and is more akin to a siege than anything else. Both armies hold long lines strongly entrenched, and here they have remained for many months past with but little variation.

A little push here or a little push there occasionally gains a few hundred yards of ground, but to all intents and purposes the British line is the same now as it was last November.

Such is the power and accuracy of modern weapons of war that fighting in the open entails very heavy casualties, and even an advance of a few hundred yards can only be obtained at the cost of enormous losses. Consequently the War has developed into what is practically a siege -- a process of " wearing down the enemy.

**Life in the Trenches:** The word "trench" always appears to me somewhat of a misnomer as applied to the firing-lines of the armise engaged in the present conflict; for it implies a sort of ditch dug into the ground. The modern trench is nothing of the kind. It is dug down very little, if at all, but a parapet or breastwork of earth is thrown up in front, and built up with sandbags to a height of six feet or more. One can thus walk about behind the parapet, in perfect comfort and with nothing to fear from the enemy's bullets, and at the foot of the parapet a firing-step is made to en able the men to fire over the top with ease.

Also loopholes are made in places for use by snipers during the daytime, but it is essential that these loopholes should be well concealed and be closed up with an iron plate or other means when not in use. The parapet is made anything from six to ten feet In thickness, so as to be absolutely bullet-proof.

Occasionally the trenches are shelled by the heavy artillery. Nothing, of course, is proof against the modern high-explosive shell, and on these

occasions the parapet is often knocked all to pieces and has to be re-built, under cover of darkness. Such a bombardment, while having a certain "moral" effect, does not usually cause much loss of life, if proper precautions are taken, but it entails a good deal of inconvenience and extra labour.

Behind the trench another breastwork or parados is usually erected to protect against the backward-burst of a shell. It is in or behind the parados that the "dug-outs" - or living quarters-are made. They are built usually with a framework of wood and lined all round with sandbags, and roofed over with corrugated iron with a sprinkling of earth on top. Some dug-outs are quite commodious, and the walls are sometimes decorated with pictures cut from the illustrated papers.

Usually one has just room to lie or sit in them with comfort, but not to stand up. Each officer generally has a small dug-out to himself, or sometimes two officers share a dug-out. There is usually one larger one, where the officers of a company mess together. The men's dug-outs are somewhat bigger as a rule, and nine or ten have to share a dug-out, but when the weather is fine and warm many prefer to remain in the open.

About forty or fifty yards behind the fire-trenches there is usually a second line of trenches, with communicating trenches up to the firing-line. These, of course, are quite distinct from the second line of defence, which is prepared some distance behind the actual firing-line for use in case of emergency. The duties in the trenches are not particularly arduous, though causing a certain amount of strain. During the night double-sentries are posted at frequent intervals along the trench, and the officers constantly go round to ensure that the sentries are alert and attending to their duties.

At night, too, any work that requires to be done is performed, such as putting up or strengthening the barbed-wire entanglements in front of the trenches. Such work is rendered somewhat eerie and a spice of danger added to it by reason of the flares-sort of rockets or light-balls, not unlike Roman candles - which are constantly sent up. The German flares, by the way, are much superior to ours, though we have improved in this respect.

The daytime is usually comparatively quiet, except when the trenches are shelled. Single sentries only are necessary, and at wider intervals. A look-out is kept by means of periscopes, as it is unsafe to show one's head much over the parapet during daylight, or a sniper will very soon get busy. It is in the daytime chiefly that one is able to rest, and under ordinary conditions one can get quite a large amount of sleep-two or three hours at a time.

Every day - just before dawn and again at dusk everybody is required to "stand-to" - usually for about an hour. During the night all have to keep their equipment on, but in the day a certain proportion of the men are allowed to take it off. In fine weather the conditions are on the whole quite pleasant, but in wet weather quite the reverse, for the soil being mostly of a clayey nature is soon converted into a quagmire.

**Life in Billets:** During the winter months we usually spent a spell of three days in the trenches, and were then relieved by another regiment, reliefs of course being always carried out at night. Since the coming of summer, however, we have done spells of six days at a time. The intervals between the spells are spent in billets.

Some billets are much better than others, but as a rule we manage to make ourselves pretty comfortable. More often than not, we are billeted at some farm-house, and a company is always kept together as much as possible. The men are generally accommodated in the barns or stables, and given straw to lie upon, while the officers are allotted one or more rooms in the house itself.

Sometimes one even gets the luxury of a bed, but in any case we can make ourselves quite comfortable by laying our sleeping-bags upon the floor or on a mattress. If the billet happens to be anywhere near the firing-line, there is always the possibility of being shelled, an experience I have had more than once.

On these occasions we have to turn out of our billets and run to dug-outs or any cover that can be obtained. Also, if hostile aeroplanes come over, *it* is advisable to lie low, for if one is observed, information is given to the artillery, and they train their guns on the spot.

On the other hand, at times we get into billets well back from the firing-line, and one almost forgets that there is a war on at all. While in billets, we generally do some physical drill in the mornings, or go for a route-march, in order to keep the men fit.

It is a piteous sight to see the ruined and deserted farms and houses that are scattered all over the country-side many of them with nothing but the bare walls standing, and these all shattered by shell-fire. People at home cannot possibly realise what it means to have war brought to one's very doors. Churches, too, always afford targets for the artillery, and I have seen many a noble edifice in ruins. At the same time it is surprising how close to the firing line the French civilians continue to live, and carry on with their ordinary

peaceful occupations-cultivating their lands within sound and range of the guns.

I could fill pages with descriptions in this strain, but space forbids. I would have liked, too, to say something about our aeroplanes, our artillery, and many other modern weapons of warfare, but perhaps I may be able to devote a future letter to some of these subjects. In conclusion, I should like to give you a brief description of the one battle in which I have been engaged, namely:

**The Battle of the Aubers Ridge (May 9th):** The objective of our attack was the Fromelles-Aubers. Ridge, a commanding position overlooking the town of Lille. The 24th and 25th Brigades were to deliver the first assault, while the 23rd Brigade (to which my battalion belonged) were in support, and our special objective was to occupy the village of Fromelles itself.

We left our billets at the night of the 8th at dusk, after a few words of encouragement from the Colonel of our battalion, and proceeded to occupy some specially-dug trenches some thousand yards in rear of the actual firing-line. Here we spent the night with the, stars for our roof, and waterproof sheets to cover us.

On the morning of the 9th (Sunday), just oil the stroke of 5, our artillery opened the ball with a tremendous bombardment. Several hundred guns belched forth their shells -- guns of all sizes from the big naval 15-inch to the smaller eighteen - pounders and field-guns. The bombardment lasted almost an hour, and had the two-fold object of demoralizing the enemy and preparing the way for the infantry attack by destroying the enemy's barbed-wire entanglements and making breaches in his parapet.

About 6, the infantry moved forward and captured the Germans' front line with ease and but little loss. Then, however, a murderous fire was opened with machine-guns and shrapnel and high explosive shells, and no further advance could be made.

It was found impossible to get any supports up, and though we hung on to the ground we had won throughout the day, we were eventually bombed out and had to return with heavy losses to our own trenches.

Many of the above details I did not learn till afterwards, for my battalion, being in support, never got into the thick of the fighting; .but I will now endeavour to give my own personal experiences and impressions of the day.

After the artillery bombardment, we got the order to advance shortly after 6 a.m. We then moved forward from the trenches where we had spent the night to the next line of support trenches - a distance of four or five hundred yards but still some way behind our own fire-trenches. Shells from the German guns were now beginning to burst all around us, but we got through with very little loss.

Now, however, we came to a stand-still, and as hour after hour went by, and we still sat or lay cramped in the narrow trench, we began to realise that things were going wrong.

Shells were coming thick and fast, and continued to do so throughout the day and well into the night. One shell hit the parapet of the trench less than six yards from where I lay, making a big hole and covering us all with showers of earth, . three of four men close by being slightly wounded by flying fragments of shell.

We remained in our position till about 10p.m, when we retired to our original trenches. During the night It was proposed to attempt to retrieve the position by a baynet attack, and we actually moved up a little distance with that idea.

Many lives would probably have been sacrificed in what was after all a forlorn hope, and the idea was abandoned. The following day we went back and bivouacked in a field, obtaining a much-needed rest, and at night went into the trenches and resumed the usual routine.

Although our attack was thus in itself unsuccessful, yet it must be remembered that it was only a part of a general scheme. Our French Allies were making an attack simultaneously in another part of the line, and so it fulfilled its object to some extent, in that it created a diversion in their favour.

Before I close there is one other subject to which I must refer, namely, the proposed formation of an Officers' Training Corps at Ripon. As one who has had some experiences of O. T. C. work I hope the project will soon bear fruit and the Corps become an accomplished fact. Good luck to it!

**LIEUT. A. F. NEWTON (O.R.),**  
2nd West Yorks. Regt

Somewhere in France/"  
6th July, 1915.

**Harrogate Herald - 27th June 1917**

**Roll of Honour**

**Lieutenant Alan Francis Newton** (West Yorks Regt), elder son of **Mrs Newton**, of Crescent Parade, Ripon, and of the late **Minor Canon Newton**, of Ripon Cathedral, is in hospital in London suffering from a wound in the forehead and other bruises, received through the bursting of a shell over his billet on the evening of June 18th. This is the second time **Lieutenant Newton** has been wounded. It is only three weeks since he returned to the Front after recuperating from wounds received last July. He is an Old Riponian having been educated at Bradford and Ripon Grammar Schools. From Ripon School he gained an exhibition at St Catherine's College, Cambridge, and took his degree in the Classical Tripos in 1907. He obtained a commission in the West Yorks on the outbreak of war.