

## Diary on the War

It was at 11.30 p.m. on the evening of the 5<sup>th</sup> August 1914 that we reserves received the order to mobilize. It was on the 7<sup>th</sup> 12.30 a.m. before I arrived at Chatham. I remained there until I had been fitted with clothing then left Chatham on the 10<sup>th</sup> for Curragh Camp Ireland to join 59 Company Royal Engineers.

It was not until August 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday that we received orders and at North Wall Harbour we embarked on the Bellerophon. It took us practically all day to embark and at 7p.m. in the evening before crowds of people we moved off from the Quay while the people on the Quay sang many of our National songs.

On board the Bellarophon we were destined to hear the first shot fired – it was at 12.30 a.m. on the 18<sup>th</sup> August a French Cruiser fired on us because we did not answer his signal. In the course of the day a Telegram of good luck and god speed was read to the Troops from the King. It was on the boat that we were told where we were going and it was at Le Havre that we disembarked. After a whole day in the embarkation shed we started to March to the rest Camp going right through the City and up the hill. This rest camp was situated on a potato field – the crop having been dug up in a hurry. We made a nice dinner for ourselves of fried potatoes and bacon and I may say that this was practically our first experience of roughing it – but many a worse day was in store for us.

It was August 20<sup>th</sup> that we entrenched at Le Harve Station on route for Belgium landing at Landrives early on the 21<sup>st</sup> and marched to Bavai at a distance of 15 miles. On the march one thing was very noticeable that the people of this part of France were much relieved at the sight of English troops and we had a great reception, the people giving the troops sweets, flowers, fruit, cigarettes, wine and eggs. Arriving at Bavay at 3 p.m. we made a halt for the night and the next morning started out on a forced march of 21 miles to Mons – arriving there in the evening of 22<sup>nd</sup> on Saturday night. As soon as we halted at Mons the cyclists were detailed to go and dig a firing trench and next morning the remainder of my section went to demolish a bridge. It was a girder plated bridge with paved stones and had to be excavated at once as a lot of troops had to go forward to meet the enemy. This was only completed in the nick of time and after a good days work on Sunday the enemy were reported to be within a mile of the bridge. It was not long afterwards that we heard a terrible rifle fire and saw the enemy advancing on us in superior numbers and our Section had to retire to the town leaving our officer with a Lieutenant Corp and sapper to complete the demolition. It was destined to be our position until the next day when we set out to dig trenches near a coal mine and opposite the railway embankment. We were in this locality most of the day until told to retire to let the infantry occupy the trenches. It was on Wednesday morning, 26<sup>th</sup> August that the Battle of Mons was finished. We started out to dig fire trenches and on our way entered a house for wood to make headcover – pulling shutters from the windows and leaving the place in disorder. Under a terrible artillery fire we proceeded and we had hastily

completed the earthwork when told to retire to make way for the infantry. We had not retired 5 minutes when 3 shells came over the trenches – previous to our retirement shells dropped around us and we could see they had got the range for us. Shell after shell came nearer and nearer until they dropped on to the trenches. We were eventually told to retire to the all removed cabbage patch and the enemy seeing our retirement began to shell us and as we still further retired the shells followed us down the road and we had many narrow escapes. Shells passing over our heads and bursting in the hedge the opposite side of the road and each shell that came we felt its effect – it was here we lost one of our men for he was missing and could not be accounted for – no one saw him from that day to this – this was the beginning of the great retirement which was to become world famous.

As soon as we got to the village we were told to make our way to ..... and the distance was done the best way you could – some of us in motor lorries - I must say I for one in the evening raining as it was we had to sleep in the open and with sticks of corn to cover us. We got to sleep to be at it again early the next morning, the 27<sup>th</sup> August, to start a forced march of 25 miles reaching our destination at about 12.30 p.m. We had a sleep for two hours then marched two more miles to rest for the night. Artillery firing all day and raining again in the evening. Next morning we were up at 1 a.m. to march to St..... arriving there about 10.00 a.m. Rested until 12.30 p.m. then continuing our march until we made a halt about 5 p.m. and were ordered to blow up a railway bridge at a distance of 3 miles. Arrived at bridge at 1 p.m. Commenced preparations for demolition which was completed in the early hours of the morning. A 2<sup>nd</sup> Corporal was ordered to stay behind with Lieutenant to complete the demolition but they were not destined to see this bridge blown up – after being there all the next day to return to the Company and they handed the bridge over to the Artillery Major who was remaining until the next morning as his battery were still over the bridge fighting the rear guard action. This bridge was eventually demolished on the 29<sup>th</sup> August. Leaving the Bridge on the 28<sup>th</sup> they had a distance of 28 miles to go on their cycles and after doing about 12 miles were advised not to go further as the Germans were close in the direction of their destination. They had to complete their journey the next morning arriving in camp – they had their first days rest – the first time for all of us. We all had a share and a wash and sorted our kit. I had none to sort as it was lost on the road. Our first correspondence from home – I received a letter from home that same night we were obliged to leave our camp and march 5 miles to get a sleep in peace. August 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday – Reveille at 2.30 a.m. owing to the enemy being located – marched 12 miles. Then bivouacked for the night – it was here that we could not get any drinking water. August 31<sup>st</sup>. Reveille 4 a.m. Enemy situated on our right flank – still continuing to retire we covered a distance of 20 miles – reaching destination about 4 p.m. and camped for the night. September 1<sup>st</sup> reveille 4 a.m. – could not proceed until 7.30 that evening having got around us our artillery shelling the enemy and our infantry attacked them. At 11 a.m. we were ordered to dig trenches on our left in case of a retirement - was placed on outpost duty near railway and on returning to Company we were each given a bottle of wine - 7 of us in all - which we had up the front of our coats when reporting to our officers that we had returned. Bivouacking at 7 p.m. for the night. Sept 2<sup>nd</sup> Reveille 1.45 a.m. Had a good breakfast but not to

much time for it. Continuing our retirement we reached our destination about 10.30 a.m. Short rest and the Section had to do inline pickett – called in for the evening and rested for the night under arms. Sept 3<sup>rd</sup> Reveille 4. a.m. Joined column at 7. a.m. continuing our retirement. We arrived at .....10. a.m. and ordered to sink boats along river bank. Had great efficiency in sinking some of them. Passed through orchards with apples still on the trees. Sappers take some and get into trouble.

Started to demolish girder of bridge in the first attempt explosion it failed owing to insufficient charge. Enemy just reported entering village not 100 yards away. Had to make a hasty second attempt which was successful, passed over a second bridge which was prepared by the French and had to attach new fuzes on account of first one failing .....took it in hand of the French and had retire after demolishing bridge at full speed – eventually reaching .....and bivouacking for the night.

Sept 4<sup>th</sup>

Remaining at .....to rest 8.a.m. ordered to stand by to continue the retreat in the direction of .....Sept 5<sup>th</sup> continuing our march of the 4<sup>th</sup> at 1 a.m. lost our way in forest and after proceeding about 5 miles was put right – making the march that day 20 miles instead of 15 miles. We reached our destination at 8. A.m. and rested for the day under the wall of a farm. Sept 6<sup>th</sup> rise at 4 a.m. within 20 miles of Paris. We continued our retreat at 6 a.m. marching 10 miles still in the direction of Paris. Resting from 12.30 p.m. until 3 p.m. when we continued our retreat. Marching 5 miles until 7 p.m. when we rested as we thought for the night but were roused at 11.30 p.m. to start again – being within 12 miles of Paris . On this march we made a side step of about 6 miles and halted at 3 a.m. on Sept 7<sup>th</sup> . This side step resulted in a retreat of the enemy and ended on of the greatest retreats the British have ever made.

I remain yours sincerely

**W H Shorto**

Ref:

Handwritten diary by WH Shorto transcribed by Michelle Parnwell (nee Shorto)  
1901 & 1911 Guernsey census returns  
British Army Service Records  
Michelle Parnwell - family history