**THE WAR.**

Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser (Qld. : 1860 - 1947), Tuesday 26 September 1916, page 6

(Continued from Page 5.) LETTER FROM PRIVATE LESLIE DUNSTAN.

The following is a letter from the Front from Private Leslie Dunstan (son of Rev. R. Dunstan), of the 3rd Field Ambulance: - August 5, 1916.

Dear Mother,

We are out of it at last. Suppose you have heard of the successful advance mode by this Division in the Somme. Everyone says that it was fiercest fight yet made. Even the Gallipoli chaps say that they would rather put in seven months in Gallipoli than go through those three days again.

We heard bombardments and saw the results of small scraps up at our posse between Armentieres and Levant, and thought what an awful thing it was, but my imagination never went to the extent of what a really BIG affair meant. It started on the 22nd July. The artillery commenced at 11 p.m. and nearly 100 guns of all calibres opened up. First the long range guns about two miles behind us in the woods. These guns couldn't be heard very distinctly on account of the density of the wood and the great distance behind us but the "whishing'' of the huge shells overhead gave the alarm of something big happening. These guns alone seemed to fill the whole sky with a rushing curtain of something invisible. Ten minutes later every field gun (4.7) opened up in chorus. These pieces were situated all round us, so that we were in the midst of a huge ball of fire. It was absolutely useless trying to speak to anyone. The night was very chilly and all we could do was to sit in the open curled up in a blanket. I get very nervous when excited like that, not frightened exactly, because there was nothing to be frightened at; but I'll tell you when I did get frightened though.

It was about 3 o'clock the same morning after the attack had been launched that we bearers had to pass through a curtain of fire sent over by Fritz to cut off reinforcements. I wouldn't believe anyone if he said he was not frightened while going through a barrage of heavy shells. They fell too closely for my liking. Well, all the while our bombardment was on, our infantry were in the trenches throwing bombs at Fritz. Immediately the guns stopped, up they jumped and routed the Huns out of the dugouts. My word they know how to make dug-outs too! A small hole about 2ft. by 2ft, is seen in the side of the trench leaving 6ft. of solid earth and sandbags on top of the opening. From the entrance a flight of stairs descends 40 feet at an angle of 60 degrees, and opens out into one, two or three huge rooms connected by passage ways and lit with electricity. Any one room could hold 20 or 30 men. Each room was fitted up according to the position of the person that occupied it. Beds, spring mattresses, huge mirrors, pictures, wardrobes, pianos, hot and cold water and electric light. It is plainly seen the Germans were trying to play the game of patience and tire us out. Now that we have broken into his stronghold this way and forced him into the open, I think it is the beginning of the end. Those dug-outs cost us a lot of casualties, but now that he is out of it, we have to thank the enemy for them. From the nature of the ground through which all our wounded have to be brought, it is impossible to provide sufficient shelter for the aid posts, which had to be very numerous and spacious to cope with the work.

I'll try to describe the country we have to work in. The advanced dressing station was at a place called “The Chateau”, a dilapidated castle in the centre of the woods which screened the long-range guns about 2½ miles from the original line before the advance. Coming out of the wood we go down to the field-gun pits called the dump or Gordon's dump. It is here that the loading of the ambulance waggons (horse) was done, and was a mile and a half behind the line. All our infantry passed through here to take up their position. Before the first advance was made on the Somme - that is, the advance on July 1 - the two lines of trenches ran along on the edge of the woods, so that this dump was then German territory. Passing through this dump we follow a road which leads to Contalmaison, but half-way down a road turns off to the left towards Pozieres. For about 50 yards before reaching the corner the road is cut through a small rise and on either side, small temporary dug-outs are made as a kind of shelter for the infantry while passing into the lines. Fritz's big guns had the range of this corner to a T, and knew what it was being used for as he could see quite plainly from his trenches on the other side of the valley everything that went on during the day.

Our first-aid post was situated on the corner of these roads. On the Saturday evening he must have expected something, for he sent over shell after shell to that corner and killed dozens. Dead were lying everywhere. After that night we called it Casualty Comer. Before that it was known as Cross Roads. The stretcher bearers' dug-out was about ten yards round the corner, and a little further on was another series of dug-outs used by the pioneers as a temporary resting place. At about 8 p.m. Fritz sent a 9.2, which lobbed right on the parapet of this place and accounted for 17 casualties - six killed and the rest badly injured and suffering from shell shock. Three who were affected with shell-shock ran blindly into our dugout for shelter. It is pitiable to see a man suffering from shell-shock. In the majority of cases they go mad. Well, they had hardly been in our place ten minutes when a shell fell right on top of the dugout and smashed the roof, but hurt no one.

Going down the valley, we came to the chalk pits, where Fritz had his gun-pits, in fact, the guns are still there. Then rising the slope again we pass three big German dugouts which after the advance became aid-posts, then on towards the village of Pozieres. Several attempts were made by the crack regiments of England to take this village but each time they were repulsed. Every cellar was a stronghold filled with machine gunners. Every corner and every broken wall that afforded shelter was manned with machine guns; in fact, the whole place was a mass of machine guns, and it was this that our boys had to take. The trench in front of the village was a comparatively easy task. The Huns were soon bombed out. Then they rushed the village, and, as you know, had it in their possession by next morning and had dug themselves in by 10 a.m. It is one thing to take a position though another thing to hold it, and it was that that caused a lot of anxiety because they were badly cut up and reinforcements were hard to get up. Not because we didn't have them, but because of the heavy shelling and the continuous curtain fire Fritz sent across our supports. All day Sunday was one continuous roar of artillery from both sides, and on Sunday night another dash was made to get to the other side of the village. This done, they again dug themselves in.

All this time we were carrying the wounded, sometimes between the aid-posts, then, when the regimental stretcher-bearers were knocked out, we had to carry from the front line through a hail of shrapnel and high explosives. I had a queer feeling go through me early Sunday morning. We (two of us) were carrying a chap from the 11th battalion and had to walk through the open all the way, that is, above the parapet, and when about 30 yards from the dressing post, a sniper tried his luck at us. I don't know whether he was trying to frighten us, but he sent half a dozen shots one after the other, first on one side and then on the other, but each missed us by about a foot, and we could see them lobbing on a bank not far ahead. We heard afterwards that that chap was the cause of several of our killed and the boys couldn't find him for some time, but eventually a couple sneaked on to him, and as soon as he saw them he threw down his rifle and cried "Mercy, Kamarad.'' They gave him no mercy. He is "still" there, to use his own words.

During the morning we also carried a few cases from Contalmaison. All through the day we worked very hard. The infantry seemed to think we had the worst job of the whole lot, and nearly every case we carried, they passed some remark. All day Tuesday we carried from the 11th battalion lines through the open valley where the sniper nearly got us on Sunday. This was a long carry - about 1½ miles. So four of us used to go together. At. 5 p.m. we were relieved and driven back to Albert, being relieved by the 5th Ambulance. We at last had a chance of a shave and a bath, and it went good too. We thought we were out for “keeps”, but when we got up for breakfast next morning we got orders to get ready to go back to the trenches again.

When we got back things were quiet for a time but our turn came again about 9 a.m. The next morning Fritz began to send over heavy stuff everywhere, principally over the trenches and across the chalk pits. The cases began to roll in then and we were working from aid-posts past the chalk pits back to the crossroads or Casualty Corner. It was a hot path to walk, and about three-quarters of a mile in length, and had to carry two at a stretcher - bearers I mean; not patients - to cope with the numbers coming down. We had carried three or four, and as we passed the chalk pits going back again a big shell fell on the side of the track close to a party of water-carriers who were passing at the time, but luckily no one was hit; but just as we got to the dugout about five yards this side, a small shell lobbed right above the doorway, killed a stretcher bearer broke the thigh of one man, and wounded four others standing alongside us, and not a splinter hit either my mate or myself. The stretcher bearer that was killed had just come into the trenches a few hours before this and this was his first case down. I had a look at him to see what I could do, but the first glance showed that the poor fellow had gone. The butt of the shell entered the pit of his stomach.

At about 12 o'clock we were relieved and it was just as well, too. Two of us carried a man who was hit by the last shell, and as we had no spare stretchers there, we had to carry him on our backs taking it in turns. Carrying a man like that takes more out of us than three stretcher cases. He was badly hit and we had to hurry. I carried him the last 100 yards or so and as I got to the aid-post door, I fell exhausted; couldn't help it. I felt alright again after a few minutes and went back again. There were a lot of cases, and some of them so bad that if they were left long, they would die. When we carried the next case back we were relieved -this time "for keeps." We came right back to the outskirts of Albert and camped in the open that night. The 25th battalion were camped close to us ready to go in, so I went down to look for Frank (his brother), but found that the 13th reinforcements had not arrived, but were still in England.

Here follow some personal and family references, and the writer concludes, "Well, I must stop now.” Love to all. Keep your pecker up. I am well and happy.

Your loving son,

LESLIE.