Chapter 8

The Young Officer in France

In April 1918 John Oliver was sent as one of a contingent of five officers and eleven men to the 8th Royal Scots who were deployed in the Berquette, Lillette region of North Western France. This Regiment was not designated as a front line fighting unit. They were the supporting pioneer battalion to the 51st Division, engaged mainly on trench digging and road and railway maintenance. The Regimental War Diary reports the movements of the 8th Battalion of the Royal Scots in the last week of April. The weather was obviously inclement!

April 24th: A and B Coys are working as two shifts on the breastwork posts and wiring north of St Venant. B Coy are out in the morning and A Coy in the afternoon. Work very satisfactory and good progress being made. Three posts have been finished and three more started, over 200 yards of wire being put up and hedges cleared so as to make good the field of fire. Echelon B formed with billets at La Goulee near Fontes. C Coy are enjoying their stay at Matringhem, hard at work and getting much useful instruction. Five officers and 11 other ranks reinforcements reported. [Among these was 2nd Lt. Oliver.]

April 25th: ------- work at St. Venant continued; advance HQ moved forward to Fauquelon.

April 26th: weather dull and misty – cold for the time of year------

April 27th: C & B Coys. changed over this morning, B Coy. Under Capt. HER Jones going back to Musketry Camp at Matringhem. Work continued near St. Venant, enemy remains quiet.

April 28th: Heavy rain during the night. In the afternoon A Coy’s billets in front of Fauquelon heavily shelled so had to move back beside C Coy. And bivouac in the fields. Very heavy gun fire in the evening.

April 29th: C Coy echelon B joined company in the morning. Work near St. Venant continued very satisfactorily. Ten more posts now finished, much wiring and clearing done.

April 30th: Very dull and wet day. Owing to enemy’s shelling the Battalion HQ (Adv) had to move back about 1000 yards beside C Coy. so as to be off the main road.

Letter 24 – After joining 8th Royal Scots in Northern France

Early May 1918

The great disadvantage of this place is the mud and filth. It has been rather damp weather lately. The roads are in horrible condition, and the methods of sanitation in this fair land of France are such as do not help to improve matters. Altogether this country is not a patch of the one we have left behind. An English village wouldn’t be seen within miles of a French hamlet, and the country generally is flat and dull as ditchwater compared with our own hillsides.

However, for a’ that and a’ that, there are some things to admire in France. For one thing, there is always people. They are always wonderful. They stand a tremendous
amount of inconvenience, hardship, danger, and constant suspense, and they never seem to complain, but just go on with their work and put all their energies on doing what they can to get France through her trouble.

At the last billet I was at [in St Venant] I had a look at some of the youngsters’ schoolbooks, and they made me understand one or two things. One was an elementary reading book. It was a really wonderful production – not just a haphazard collection of elegant extracts, but a collection of simple and thoroughly good bits of French literature to illustrate certain kinds of duties in different sorts of relationships, beginning with family duties, the school, the town, and working up to the duty towards one’s country and higher moral duties. Of course, it is obviously an attempt in a secularist country to fill the place of our religious instruction at home. But it was really an illuminating sort of thing.

Another was a history book, which interested me most by its treatment of “1870.” The chapter on it concluded with a paragraph in italics stating that Alsace and Lorraine were French and still are French, and that it is the duty of every Frenchman to look forward to their restoration. That also explains one or two thing in the spirit of our French friends.

Having completed the required work in the St Venant area the battalion was moved to the area north and east of Arras. The War Diary of the 8th Royal Scots for the first week in May reported changeable weather and the move to another part of the front:


May 2nd: Weather changed for the better – now lovely and warm. After the afternoon shift had finished work, Adv. HQ and A and C Coys. returned to Lilette, Chat and Fontes neighbourhood. During the 9½ days they spent on the work all the wiring was finished and posts completed and much clearing of field of fire done.

May 3rd: A and C spent day with inspections and baths. In the afternoon a party from the ‘Balmorals’ gave a concert in the Chateau grounds. [There is no longer a chateau at Lilette and the village is one built since the 1914 – 1918 war]. B Coy. Returned from Matringhem (1st Army Musketry Camp) in the afternoon and were billeted in Lilette.

May 4th: Transport left by road for our new sector at 8am. The CO inspected the Coys. at different hours throughout the day. During the remainder of the day, the Coys. were training and bathing.

May 5th: The QM with advance party left by motor van at 8am. Very wet day. The Battalion paraded at 4pm and marched from Lilette to Aire in pouring rain. The train was late in arriving so there was a wait of ------. Very scanty accommodation was provided for the men.

May 6th: Battalion detrained at Acq about 4am and marched through Ecouvres to Bray where it was billeted in huts. B and C Companies left to take over from Canadian Pioneers.

May 7th: Very wet day.

May 8th: B and C Coys. continued work of deepening and widening Farbus-Vimy-Lievin Line.
Letter 25 – from St Venant  

Probably 7th or 8th May 1918

Jerry is keeping wonderfully quiet. We occasionally have aeroplanes over giving our anti-aircraft guns some practice, and we hear them trying for some of the places of interest around us in the shape of batteries and so on, but otherwise there is little to disturb the calm. Everything is going on well. The worst of the whole of this job is the trouble of getting to work. The work itself is more or less plain sailing, but getting to it is a bit of a job. We first have to climb up the slippery side of the embankment, and then trek across country on a narrow track winding among shell holes. These we have always to be careful to avoid and likewise that other abomination to all who go out on night work – wires laid considerately by Royal Engineers and Artillery in such a position as either to throttle you or to trip you up. After that we have a maze of trenches to wander through, and then we get into a trench, which we have been digging. We are seldom troubled at all in our work as, of course, it is too dark for anybody to see what we are at, and we always have the comfort of getting back to our dug-outs and finding a hot meal waiting for us.

On Sunday [5th May] we left the village [Lillette] we were living in. We were sorry to go, as it was really a very nice place, and I have nothing but pleasant memories of it. On Saturday [May 4th] we paid a call on the people at our old billet [in St.Venant], who gave us a very hearty welcome and insisted on our having a cup of coffee. They had a sailor son home on leave and were all very proud of him. We did not stay very long and were soon off again, and the last thing I saw at the cottage was our friend Marie-Jeanne (the wee lassie) vigorously kissing her hand to us from the gate.

The last thing I did on Sunday was to attend Mass at the village church with some brother officers. When we went in we found the place crowded and had to stand,
but, as soon as the next item in the service was over, the priest paused for a moment and told some of the young folk to go off to the gallery above and make room for us. Rather a fine consideration for the stranger within the gates, isn’t it? I am afraid I did not follow the service very well. I followed the sermon but, for the rest, Latin chanted with a French accent is a trifle difficult to comprehend.

John Keegan in his “The First World War” makes the observation that “from the air (the Western Front) had a drably uniform appearance, a belt of disturbed earth, ravaged vegetation and devastated buildings some four miles across. Later, as the power of artillery increased and local infantry fighting conferred advantage on one side or the other, the zone of destruction would widen”. However, the country on either side of this ‘war zone’ was largely unscathed and so billets for officers and camp sites for the troops were found in pleasant little villages where life was continuing, as far as possible, as usual. In fact, as Keegan continues: “prosperity reigned in the ‘rear area’; the armies had brought money, and shops, cafés and restaurants flourished, at least on the Allied side of the line.” and “Outside the ribbon of destruction, the roads were full of traffic, long lines of horsed and motor transport going to and fro, and in the fields, ploughed by farmers right up to the line where shells fell, new towns and hutments had sprung up to accommodate the millions who went up and down to the trenches.”

The War Diary of the 8th Royal Scots reports the affairs of the next few days as follows:

May 12th: Church Parade at Bray Camp.
May 16th: very warm day.
May 19th: Church Parade at Bray Camp.”

Letter 26

Mid May 1918

I am now back at battalion headquarters. We started on our journey down here on Wednesday afternoon [8th May]. It was one of the hottest days we have had this summer, and the march was by no means a comfortable one. We first walked for several miles along a road, which led us to the outskirts of one of the towns famous in last year’s fighting. It is all battered and bruised, but even yet you can see how beautiful a city it must have been at one time. [This was most likely Arras].

The Town Square, Arras, February, 1919.
All around, where once had been fine cultivated fields, there was a waste of old trenches, and shell holes, and mine craters, and dilapidated notice boards pointing the way to such and such a redoubt or communication trench, and, in the middle of it all, what is left of the town, a regular monument of human folly and wickedness.

At this point we struck off across country by a track running over a maze of old trenches. The country was beginning to look wonderfully fine. Over the old trenches the grass is growing, and amongst it poppies and daisies and all sorts of flowers, as if to spread a decent veil over all the mess and muck caused by man’s inhumanity to man. We struck another road after this, and we turned off on the way to the village in which we are just now [Roclincourt], our road lay along a beautiful avenue with fine old trees on each side, trees which had been battered by shell fire a year ago but are now shooting out new branches and a host of fresh, green leaves, just as if there had never been any War Lords, and All Highests, and men of push and go playing their silly games with them. It was in the last few miles that the marching began to tell and I was right glad when we arrived. We are billeted in huts. They are quite comfortable except that the windows are not of glass but of light cloth, through which the light filters pretty sparingly.

On the first morning after arriving [Thursday 9th] I was along supervising two small parties at work at different points of a neighbouring village. It was a very warm day and it was hot droughty work parading along the roads between the two parties. I dropped into an officers’ club at one point and had a glass of orangeade, which was grateful and comforting. I beat a hasty retreat, however, when I found that I had arrived just as a padres’ meeting was being started. They were using the club room for a conference, and as I was the only layman among a host of chaplains of all denominations, I withdrew and got on with my work, what there was of it. In the afternoon I took a parade to the baths at a village near by. They were particularly fine baths, fitted up in the building of a rare old farmhouse, planned very much like other French farmhouses, with courtyard entered by a big gate, but unlike any other I have seen in that it had not a midden in the middle of the yard.

Yesterday I got the job to take a party up to a village some miles to “Hunward”. We got up all right to the village where we were to start work on dismantling huts, but by this time rain had come on and was battering down on us. I got the platoon into an empty hut and went on to find the place where we were to work, which was right at the far end of a big village. I found it all right, but by this time was in no mood for starting work, as I was drenched already, even though I had my trench coat on, and the rain was still coming down. I then made tracks for a telephone station, got on to the adjutant and got the order to come home, which orders I obeyed with alacrity, and we got home, bedrenched and bedraggled, in time for lunch. The company is now mostly doing musketry and wiring.
In the following letter, as in the last, John remarks about his discomfort with marching or walking long distances. He was evidently continuing to feel the effects of his smashed foot nearly three years after the event. During the long trek from Romilly to Reims in mid July he mentions fatigue with marching. In fact, with a serious wound to his other leg later in 1918, he never regained a "spritely gait" even after many years.

The War Diary of the 8th Royal Scots continues:

May 26th  
**Enemy attack British/French troops on 40km front between Soissons and Rheims.**  
B and HQ Coys. at Church Parade with Divisional School at Ecouvres.

May 27th  
**Enemy continue to attack South and begin in North.**

May 30th  
C Coy. ..... cut through Garvelle Road and duck-walk part of new Missouri.

This was the area where John’s brother Jim was fatally wounded. It is very likely that John would have visited Jim’s grave at Hautes Avernes which was only about three kilometres from Bray camp. Evidently he visited Mont-St-Eloi - a short distance from Ecouvre and Bray - as a book of postcards has been preserved showing photos of the village in 1918. The book has a bullet hole through it and the story goes that the heavy card stowed in his left breast pocket saved John’s life! This village has hardly changed in a century. An up to date map of the area is contained in the appendix.

Mont St. Eloi – then and now
*The torn outline of the bullet hole can be seen in the old postcard photos.*

Letter 27

Wednesday 29th May 1918

On Monday I was out with a working party from 7.30 in the morning till about 4.30 in the afternoon. It was very warm and I had to tramp about a good bit; so I felt, after I came back to camp, that I had done a good bit of work. We were working at a village [St Vaast] some two or three miles up the line from us. I call it a village by courtesy, but it is only the remains of one. All the buildings have disappeared long ago and all that remains to show that there once was a village is an occasional tiny fragment of a wall about three or four feet high, or the bare outlines of the foundations of a farmhouse. At the place where we were working there is what is left...
of the village churchyard. There is no church left, but many of the tombstones are still standing, sometimes with half of them knocked off and only one side of the inscription left, while a plentiful crop of weeds is growing up and promising to put the whole of them out of sight. Just beside it is another cemetery with the remains of French soldiers who were killed near by in 1915.

Although the old village is unrecognisable, a new village has sprung up in its place — a village of huts — and it is here we are working, taking down huts, which are no longer needed and sending them to be used elsewhere.

Yesterday was a particularly strenuous day. I went off with another officer about nine o’clock in the morning to see the place [Neuville] we are taking over when we go up the line. It is a post near to the place we were at last; in fact, practically alongside it. [These two villages are now the composite village of Neuville-St Vaast]. It is a very long walk up over difficult, barren, broken country. It was a lovely
morning, and the first stages of our jaunt were a real pleasure. Even that desolate country was looking bonny. There were flowers everywhere, flowers of all kinds, but the prevailing colour scheme was one of mixed red and gold supplied by a “rowth” of poppies and dandelions. These were springing up all over the place, covering everything. The old trenches were almost unrecognisable owing to the way these yellow headed gentry had taken up their position down their crumbling sides and along the top, from which they bent over and nearly bumped heads with their cronies on the other side. Truly a consoling thing, after all that the criminal lunatics who started this rumpus have done to squash out all the colour and pleasure and beauty from the world, to see those gaudy rascals flaming out all over the place and laughing at the blood and iron blockheads and their idiotic ambitions.

Well, it was a lang road and a sair trachle, but we won up in the hinner end, and after getting something to eat, I strolled round and had a look at the accommodation that our new post has to offer, just for all the world like a prospective tenant looking round before the term day, with this important difference, that here you have your new quarters assigned to you and can inspect them after, instead of inspecting them first and then choosing what pleases you.

This done, we had tea and then wandered off the way we had come. This part of the journey was scarcely so pleasant as the outward half. However, we got home all right about seven o’clock, feeling a trifle footsore, but still very much alive and quite able and willing to take a little nourishment.
Each officer had a trench map which showed the allied trenches in blue and the enemy’s trenches in red. It can be seen to the centre right of the portion of the Ordinance Map that the cemetery at St Vaast which John mentions was just behind the allied trenches and within the range of the enemy shells. The map from which this section is taken was the one used in 1918 by 2nd Lt Harry Bannister of the Yorkshire Hussars.

Just after writing the last letter, on 30th or 31st May, John was working at the front line for nine days until Saturday 8th June.