ERNST JÜNGER was born in Heidelberg in 1895. He ran away from school to enlist in the Foreign Legion and in 1914 volunteered to join the German army. He fought throughout the war and recorded his experiences in several books, most famously in *In Stahlgewittern* (*Storm of Steel*). While admired by the Nazis, he remained critical of them and through novels such as *On the Marble Cliffs* (1939) sought to understand the impasse into which Germany was heading. Throughout the Nazi period he was a controversial “inner emigrant,” distanced from the regime yet only obliquely in opposition. His most famous later books include *Heliopolis* (1949), *The Glass Bees* (1957), *Eumeswil* (1977), *Aladdin’s Problem* (1983), and *A Dangerous Encounter* (1985). He died in 1998.

MICHAEL HOFMANN has translated Joseph Roth, Herta Müller, Zöe Jenny, Wim Wenders, Wolfgang Koeppen, and Franz Kafka. His own books include *Corona, Corona* and *Behind the Lines*. He also coedited, with James Ladun, *After Ovid*. 
pouring water or coffee from a canteen into a snoring sleeper’s mouth.

On the evening of 22 April, we marched out of Prény and covered over twenty miles to the village of Hattonchâtel, without registering any footsoreness, in spite of our heavy packs. We pitched camp in the woods on the right of the famous Grande Tranchée. All the indications were that we would be fighting in the morning. Bandage packs were issued, extra tins of beef, and signalling flags for the gunners.

I sat up for a long time that night, in the foreboding eve of battle mood of which soldiers at all times have left report, on a tree stump clustered round with blue anemones, before I crept over the ranks of my comrades to my tent. I had tangled dreams, in which a principal role was played by a skull.

In the morning, when I told Priepke about it, he said he hoped it was a French skull.

Les Eparges

The tender green of young leaves shimmered in the flat light. We followed hidden, twisting paths towards a narrow gorge behind the front line. We had been told that the 76th was to attack after a bombardment of only twenty minutes, and that we were to be held in reserve. On the dot of noon, our artillery launched into a furious bombardment that echoed and re-echoed through the wooded hollows. For the first time, we heard what was meant by the expression ‘drumfire’. We sat perched on our haversacks, idle and excited. A runner plunged through to the company commander. Brisk exchange. ‘The three nearest trenches have fallen to us, and six field guns have been captured!’ Loud cheers rang out. A feeling of up-and-at’em.

At last, the longed-for order. In a long line, we moved forward, towards the pattering of heavy rifle fire. It was getting serious. To the side of the forest path, dull thumps came down in a clump of firs, bringing down a rain of branches and soil. One nervous soldier threw himself to the ground, while his comrades laughed uneasily. Then Death’s call slipped through the ranks: ‘Ambulance men to the Front!’

A little later, we passed the spot that had been hit. The casualties had already been removed. Bloody scraps of cloth and flesh had been left on bushes around the crater – a strange and dreadful sight that put me in mind of the butcher-bird that spikes its prey on thorn bushes.
Troops were advancing at the double along the Grande Tranchée. Casualties huddled by the roadside, whimpering for water, prisoners carrying stretchers came panting back, limbers clattered through fire at a gallop. On either side, shells spattered the soft ground, heavy boughs came crashing down. A dead horse lay across the middle of the path, with giant wounds, its steaming entrails beside it. In among the great, bloody scenes there was a wild, unsuspected hilarity. A bearded reservist leaned against a tree: ‘On you go now, boys, Frenchie’s on the run!’

We entered the battle-tramped realm of the infantryman. The area round the jumping-off position had been deforested by shells. In the ripped-up no man’s land lay the victims of the attack, still facing the enemy; their grey tunics barely stood out from the ground. A giant form with red, blood-spattered beard stared fixedly at the sky, his fingers clutching the spongy ground. A young man tossed in a shell-crater, his features already yellow with his impending death. He seemed not to want to be looked at; he gave us a cross shrug and pulled his coat over his head, and lay still.

Our marching column broke up. Shells came continually hissing towards us in long, flat arcs, lightnings whirled up the forest floor. The shrill toot of field artillery shells I had heard quite often even before Oraisonville; it didn’t strike me as being particularly dangerous. The loose order in which our company now advanced over the broken field had something oddly calming about it; I thought privately that this baptism of fire business was actually far less dangerous than I’d expected. In a curious failure of comprehension, I looked alertly about me for possible targets for all this artillery fire, not, apparently, realizing that it was actually ourselves that the enemy gunners were trying for all they were worth to hit.

‘Ambulance!’ We had our first fatality. A shrapnel ball had ripped through rifleman Stolter’s carotid artery. Three packets of lint were sodden with blood in no time. In a matter of seconds he had bled to death. Next to us, a couple of ordnance pieces loosed off shells, drawing more fire down on us from the enemy. An artillery lieutenant, who was in the vanguard, looking for wounded, was thrown to the ground by a column of steam that spurted in front of him. He got to his feet and made his way back with notable calm. We took him in with gleaming eyes.

It was getting dark when we received orders to advance further. The way now led through dense undergrowth shot through by shells, into an endless communication trench along which the French had dropped their packs as they ran. Approaching the village of Les Eparges, without having any troops in front of us, we were forced to hew defensive positions in solid rock. Finally, I slumped into a bush and fell asleep. At moments, half asleep, I was aware of artillery shells, ours or theirs, describing their ellipses in a trail of sparks.

‘Come on, man, get up! We’re moving out!’ I woke up in dew-sodden grass. Through a stuttering swathe of machine-gun fire, we plunged back into our communication trench, and moved to a position on the edge of the wood previously held by the French. A sweetish smell and a bundle hanging in the wire caught my attention. In the rising mist, I leaped out of the trench and found a shrunken French corpse. Flesh like mouldering fish gleamed greenishly through splits in the shredded uniform. Turning round, I took a step back in horror: next to me a figure was crouched against a tree. It still had gleaming French leather harness, and on its back was a fully packed haversack, topped by a round mess-tin. Empty eye-sockets and a few strands of hair on the bluish-black skull indicated that the man was not among the living. There was another sitting down, slumped forward towards his feet, as though he had just collapsed. All around were dozens more, rotted, dried, stiffened to mummies, frozen in an eerie dance of death. The French must have spent months in the proximity of their fallen comrades, without burying them.

During the morning, the sun gradually pierced the fog, and
spread a pleasant warmth. After I'd slept on the bottom of the trench for a while, curiosity impelled me to inspect the unoccupied trench we'd captured the day before. It was littered with great piles of provisio ns, ammunition, equipment, weapons, letters and newspapers. The dugouts were like looted junk-shops. In amongst it all were the bodies of the brave defenders, their guns still poking out through the shooting-slits. A headless torso was jammed in some shot-up beams. Head and neck were gone, white cartilage gleamed out of reddish-black flesh. I found it difficult to fathom. Next to it a very young man lay on his back with glassy eyes and fists still aiming. A peculiar feeling, looking into dead, questioning eyes - a shudder that I never quite lost in the course of the war. His pockets had been turned inside out, and his emptied wallet lay beside him.

Unmolested by any fire, I strolled along the ravaged trench. It was the short mid-morning lull that was often to be my only moment of respite on the battlefield. I used it to take a good look at everything. The unfamiliar weapons, the darkness of the dugouts, the colourful contents of the haversacks, it was all new and strange to me. I pocketed some French ammunition, undid a silky-soft tarpaulin and picked up a canteen wrapped in blue cloth, only to chuck it all away again a few steps further along. The sight of a beautiful striped shirt, lying next to a ripped-open officer's valise, seduced me to strip off my uniform and get into some fresh linen. I relished the pleasant tickle of clean cloth against my skin.

Thus kitted out, I looked for a sunny spot in the trench, sat down on a beam-end, and with my bayonet opened a round can of meat for my breakfast. Then I lit my pipe, and browsed through some of the many French magazines that lay scattered about, some of them, as I saw from the dates, only sent to the trenches on the eve of Verdun.

Not without a certain shudder, I remember that during my breakfast I tried to unscrew a curious little contraption that I found lying at my feet in the trench, which for some reason I took to be a 'storm lantern'. It wasn't until a lot later that it dawned on me that the thing I'd been fiddling around with was a live hand-grenade.

As conditions grew brighter, a German battery opened up from a stretch of woods just behind the trench. It didn't take long for the enemy to reply. Suddenly I was struck by a mighty crash behind me, and saw a steep pillar of smoke rising. Still unfamiliar with the sounds of war, I was not able to distinguish the hisses and whistles and bangs of our own gunnery from the ripping crash of enemy shells, and hence, to get a sense of the lines of engagement. Above all, I could not account for the way I seemed to be under fire from all sides, so that the trajectories of the various shells were criss-crossing apparently aimlessly over the little warren of trenches where a few of us were holed up. This effect, for which I could see no cause, disquieted me and made me think. I still viewed the machinery of conflict with the eyes of an inexperienced recruit - the expressions of bellicosity seemed as distant and peculiar to me as events on another planet. This meant I was unafraid; feeling myself to be invisible, I couldn't believe I was a target to anyone, much less that I might be hit. So, returned to my unit, I surveyed the terrain in front of me with great indifference. In my pocket-diary I wrote down - a habit of mine later on as well - the times and the intensity of the bombardment.

Towards noon, the artillery fire had increased to a kind of savage pounding dance. The flames lit around us incessantly. Black, white and yellow clouds mingled. The shells with black smoke, which the old-timers called 'Americans' or 'coal boxes', ripped with incredible violence. And all the time the curious, canary-like twittering of dozens of fuses. With their cut-out shapes, in which the trapped air produced a flute-like trill, they drifted over the long surf of explosions like ticking copper toy clocks or mechanical insects. The odd thing was that the little
STORM OF STEEL

birds in the forest seemed quite untroubled by the myriad noise; they sat peacefully over the smoke in their battered boughs. In the short intervals of firing, we could hear them singing happily or ardently to one another, if anything even inspired or encouraged by the dreadful noise on all sides.

In the moments when the shelling was particularly heavy, the men called to each other to remain vigilant. In the stretch of trench that I could see, and out of whose walls great clumps of mud had already been knocked here and there, we were in complete readiness. Our rifles were unlocked in the shooting-slits, and the riflemen were alertly eyeing the foreground. From time to time they checked to left and right to see whether we were still in contact, and they smiled when their eyes encountered those of comrades.

I sat with a comrade on a bench cut into the clay wall of the trench. Once, the board of the shooting-slit through which we were looking splintered, and a rifle bullet flew between our heads and buried itself in the clay.

By and by, there were casualties. I had no way of knowing how things stood in other sectors of the labyrinthine trench, but the increasing frequency of the calls for 'Ambulancemen!' showed that the shelling was starting to take effect. From time to time, a figure hurried by with its head or neck or hand wrapped in fresh, clean and very visible bandages, on its way to the rear. It was a matter of urgency to get the victim out of the way, because of the military superstition by which a trifling wound or hit, if not immediately dealt with, is certain to be followed by something rather worse.

My comrade, volunteer Kohl, kept up that North German sang-froid that might have been made for such a situation. He was chewing and squeezing on a cigar that refused to draw, and apart from that looked rather sleepy. Nor did he allow himself to be upset when, suddenly, to the rear of us, there was a clattering as of a thousand rifles. It turned out that the intensity of the shelling had caused the wood to catch fire. Great tongues of flame climbed noisily up the tree trunks.

While all this was going on, I suffered from a rather curious anxiety. I was envious of the old 'Lions of Perthes' for their experience in the 'witches' cauldron', which I had missed out on through being away in Recouvrence. Therefore, each time the coal-boxes came down especially thick and fast in our neck of things, I would turn to Kohl, who had been there, and ask:

'Hey, would you say this was like Perthes now?'

To my chagrin, he would reply each time with a casually dismissive gesture:

'Not by a long chalk!'  

When the shelling had intensified to the extent that now our clay bench had started to sway with the impact of the black monsters, I yelled into his ear:

'Hey, is it like Perthes now?'

Kohl was a conscientious soldier. He began by standing up, looked about himself carefully, and then roared back, to my satisfaction:

'I think it's getting there!'

The reply filled me with foolish delight, as it confirmed to me that this was my first proper battle.

At that instant, a man popped up in the corner of our sector:

'Follow me left!' We passed on the command, and started along the smoke-filled position. The ration party had just arrived with the chow, and hundreds of unwanted mess-tins sat and steamed on the breastwork. Who could think to eat now? A crowd of wounded men pushed past us with blood-soaked bandages, the excitement of the battle still etched on their pale faces. Up on the edge of the trench, stretcher after stretcher was swiftly lugged to the rear. The sense of being up against it began to take hold of us. 'Careful of my arm, mate!' 'Come along, man, keep up!'

I spotted Lieutenant Sandvoss, rushing past the trench with distracted staring eyes. A long white bandage trailing round his
neck gave him a strangely ungainly appearance, which probably explains why just at that moment he reminded me of a duck. There was something dreamlike about the vision – terror in the guise of the absurd. Straight afterwards, we hurried past Colonel von Oppen, who had his hand in his tunic pocket and was issuing orders to his adjutant. ‘Aha, so there is some organization and purpose behind all this,’ it flashed through my brain.

The trench debouched into a stretch of wood. We stood irresolutely under huge beech trees. A lieutenant emerged from dense undergrowth and called to our longest-serving NCO: ‘Have them fall out towards the sunset, and then take up position. Report to me in the dugout by the clearing.’ Swearing, the NCO took over.

We fell out in extended order, and lay down expectantly in a series of flattish depressions that some predecessors of ours had scooped out of the ground. Our ribald conversations were suddenly cut off by a marrow-freezing cry. Twenty yards behind us, clumps of earth whirled up out of a white cloud and smacked into the boughs. The crash echoed through the woods. Stricken eyes looked at each other, bodies pressed themselves into the ground with a humbling sensation of powerlessness to do anything else. Explosion followed explosion. Choking gases drifted through the undergrowth, smoke obscured the treetops, trees and branches came crashing to the ground, screams. We leaped up and ran blindly, chased by lightnings and crushing air pressure, from tree to tree, looking for cover, skirting around giant tree trunks like frightened game. A dugout where many men had taken shelter, and which I too was running towards, took a direct hit that ripped up the planking and sent heavy timbers spinning through the air.

Like a couple of squirrels having stones thrown at them, the NCO and I dodged panting round a huge beech. Quite mechanically, and spurred on by further explosions, I ran after my superior, who sometimes turned round and stared at me, wild-eyed, yelling: ‘What in God’s name are those things? What are they?’ Suddenly there was a flash among the rootwork, and a blow on the left thigh flung me to the ground. I thought I had been struck by a clump of earth, but the warm trickle of blood indicated that I’d been wounded. Later, I saw that a needle-sharp piece of shrapnel had given me a flesh wound, though my wallet had taken the brunt of it. The fine cut, which before slicing into the muscle had split no fewer than nine thicknesses of stout leather, looked as though it might have been administered by a scalpel.

I threw down my haversack and ran towards the trench we had come from. From all sides, wounded men were making tracks towards it from the shelled woods. The trench was appalling, choked with seriously wounded and dying men. A figure stripped to the waist, with ripped-open back, leaned against the parapet. Another, with a triangular flap hanging off the back of his skull, emitted short, high-pitched screams. This was the home of the great god Pain, and for the first time I looked through a devilish chink into the depths of his realm. And fresh shells came down all the time.

I lost my head completely. Ruthlessly, I barged past everyone on my path, before finally, having fallen back a few times in my haste, climbing out of the hellish crush of the trench, to move more freely above. Like a bolting horse, I rushed through dense undergrowth, across paths and clearings, till I collapsed in a copse by the Grande Tranchée.

It was already growing dark by the time a couple of stretcher-bearers who were looking for casualties came upon me. They picked me up on their stretcher and carried me back to their dressing-station in a dugout covered over with tree branches, where I spent the night, pressed together with many other wounded men. An exhausted medic stood in the throng of groaning men, bandaging, injecting and giving calm instructions. I pulled a dead man’s coat over me, and fell into a sleep that incipient fever lit with lurid dreams. Once, in the middle of the
night, I awoke, and saw the doctor still working by the light of a lamp. A Frenchman was screaming incessantly, and next to me a man growled: ‘Bloody Frenchies, never happy if they’ve not got something to moan about!’ And then I was asleep again.

As I was being carried away the following morning, a splinter bored a hole through the stretcher canvas between my knees.

Along with other wounded men, I was loaded on to one of the ambulance wagons that shuttled between the battlefield and the main dressing-station. We galloped across the Grande Tranchée, which was still under heavy fire. Behind the grey canvas walls we careered through the danger that accompanied us with giant stamping strides.

On one of the stretchers on which – like loaves of bread into an oven – we had been pushed into the back of the cart lay a comrade with a shot in the belly that occasioned him intense pain. He appealed to every one of us to finish him off with the ambulanceman’s pistol that hung in the wagon. No one answered. I was yet to experience the feeling where every jolt seems like a hammer blow on a bad injury.

The chief dressing-station was in a forest clearing. Long rows of straw had been laid out and covered with foliage. The stream of wounded was proof, if proof were needed, that a significant engagement was in progress. At the sight of the surgeon, who stood checking the roster in the bloody chaos, I once again had the impression, hard to describe, of seeing a man surrounded by elemental terror and anguish, studying the functioning of his organization with ant-like cold-bloodedness.

Supplied with food and drink, and smoking a cigarette, I lay in the middle of a long line of wounded men on my spill of straw, in that mood which sets in when a test has been got through, if not exactly with flying colours, then still one way or another. A short snatch of conversation next to me gave me pause.

‘What happened to you, comrade?’
‘I’ve been shot in the bladder.’
his respects to neighbouring monarchs (with many libations to Bacchus), in readiness for the evening ahead. These visits he referred to as ‘ambuscades’. On one occasion, he got into a tiff with the King of Inchy, and had a mounted MP call out an official feud between them. After several engagements, in the course of which rival detachments of squires bombarded each other with clods of earth from their respective fortified trenches, the King of Inchy was incautious enough to regale himself with Bavarian beer at the mess in Quéant, and was apprehended while visiting a lonely place. He was forced to purchase a vast tun of beer by way of ransom. And so ended the epic war between the two monarchs.

On 11 December, I went over the top to the front line, to report to Lieutenant Wetje, the commander of my new company, which occupied C Sector in turn about with my former company, the 6th. As I was about to leap into the trench, I was shocked at the change to the position in just a fortnight. It had collapsed into a huge, mud-filled pit in which the occupants sloshed around miserably. Already up to my hip in it, I thought ruefully back to the round table of the King of Quéant. We poor grunts! Almost all the dugouts had collapsed, and the shelters were inundated. We had to spend the next weeks working incessantly, merely to get something resembling terra firma underfoot. For the time being, I stayed with Lieutenants Wetje and Boje in a shelter, whose ceiling — in spite of tarpaulins suspended beneath it — leaked like a sieve, so that the servants had to carry the water out in buckets every half-hour.

When I left the shelter completely sodden the following morning, I couldn’t believe the sight that met my eyes. The battlefield that previously had borne the stamp of deathly emptiness upon it was now as animated as a fairground. The occupants of both trenches had emerged from the morass of their trenches on to the top, and already a lively exchange of schnapps, cigarettes, uniform buttons and other items had commenced between the two barbed-wire lines. The throng of khaki-clad figures emerging from the hitherto so apparently deserted English lines seemed as eerie as the appearance of a ghost in daylight.

Suddenly a shot rang out that laid one of our men dead in the mire, whereupon both sides quickly scuttled back into their trenches. I went to that part of our line which fronted on to the British sap, and called out that I wanted to speak to an officer. And lo, I saw several British soldiers going back, and returning with a young man from their firing trench who had on, as I was able to see through my field glasses, a somewhat more ornate cap than they did. We negotiated first in English, and then a little more fluently in French, with all the men listening. I reproached him for the fact that one of our men had been killed by a treacherous shot, to which he replied that that hadn’t been his company, but the one adjacent. ‘Il y a de cochons aussi chez vous!’ he remarked when a few shots from the sector next to ours plugged into the ground not far from his head, causing me to get ready to take cover. We did, though, say much to one another that betokened an almost sportsmanlike admiration for the other, and I’m sure we should have liked to exchange mementoes.

For clarity’s sake, we gave a solemn mutual declaration of war, to commence three minutes after the end of our talks, and following a ‘Good-night!’ on his part, and an ‘Au revoir!’ on mine, to the regret of my men I fired off a shot that pinged against his steel loophole, and got one myself that almost knocked the rifle out of my hands.

It was the first time I had been given an opportunity of surveying the battlefield in front of the sap, seeing as otherwise one couldn’t even show the peak of one’s cap in such a perilous place. I saw that immediately in front of our entanglements there was a skeleton whose bleached bones glimmered out of scraps of blue

* ‘There are some unscrupulous bastards on your side too!’
uniform. From the British cap-badges seen that day, we were able to tell that the regiment facing ours were the 'Hindustani' Leicestershires.

Shortly after our negotiations were concluded, our artillery fired off a few rounds at the enemy positions, whereupon, before our eyes, four stretchers were carried across the open field without a single shot being loosed off at them from our side. I must say I felt proud.

Throughout the war, it was always my endeavour to view my opponent without animus, and to form an opinion of him as a man on the basis of the courage he showed. I would always try and seek him out in combat and kill him, and I expected nothing else from him. But never did I entertain mean thoughts of him. When prisoners fell into my hands, later on, I felt responsible for their safety, and would always do everything in my power for them.

As Christmas approached, the weather seemed to worsen; we had recourse to pumps in our efforts to do something about the water. During this muddy phase, our losses also worsened. So, for instance, I find in my diary for 12 December: 'Today we buried seven men in Douchy, and two more were shot.' And for 23 December: 'Mud and filth are getting the better of us. This morning at three o'clock an enormous deposit came down at the entrance to my dugout. I had to employ three men, who were barely able to bale the water that poured like a freshet into my dugout. Our trench is drowning, the morass is now up to our navels, it's desperate. On the right edge of our frontage, another corpse has begun to appear, so far just the legs.'

We spent Christmas Eve in the line, and, standing in the mud, sang hymns, to which the British responded with machine-gun fire. On Christmas Day, we lost one man to a ricochet in the head. Immediately afterwards, the British attempted a friendly gesture by hauling a Christmas tree up on their traverse, but our angry troops quickly shot it down again, to which Tommy replied with rifle-grenades. It was all in all a less than merry Christmas.

On 28 December, I was back in command of the Altenburg Redoubt. On that day, rifleman Hohn, one of my best men, lost his arm to a shell fragment. Heidotting received a bad thigh wound from one of the many bullets that were whizzing round our earthworks in the hollow. And my faithful August Kettler, the first of many servants to die in my service, fell victim to a shrapnel that passed through his windpipe as he was on his way to Monchy to get my lunch. As he was setting off with the mess-tins, I had called out to him: 'August, mind how you go, won't you.' 'I'll be fine, Lieutenant!' And then I was summoned and found him lying on the ground close to the dugout, gurgling, as the air passed through the wound into his chest with every breath he took. I had him carried back; he died a few days later in hospital. It was a feature of his case, as it was of quite a few others, that his inability to speak made him even more pathetic, as he stared at the nurses in bewilderment like a tormented animal.

The road from Monchy to Altenburg Redoubt cost us a lot of blood. It led along the rear slope of a modest elevation, perhaps five hundred paces behind our front line. Our opponents, perhaps alerted by aerial photographs to the fact that this road was indeed much frequented, set themselves to rake it at intervals with machine-gun fire, or to unload shrapnels over the area. Even though there was a ditch running along beside the road, and there were strict orders to walk in the ditch, sure enough everyone tended to stroll along this dangerous road, without any cover, with the habitual insouciance of old soldiers. Generally, we got away with it, but on many days fate snatched a victim or two, and over time they added up. Here, too, stray bullets from all directions seemed to have arranged a rendezvous for themselves at the latrine, so that we were often compelled to flee, holding a newspaper and trousers at half-mast. And for all that, it seemed
height; and over them, hundreds of speedy lightnings produced by bursting shrapnels. Only the coloured signals, the mute appeals to the artillery for help, indicated that there was still life in the trenches. This was the first time I had seen artillery fire to match a natural spectacle.

In the evening, just as we hoped for a good night's sleep at last, we were given orders to load trench-mortar ammunition at Monchy, and had to spend all night waiting in vain for a lorry that had got stuck, while the British made various, fortunately unsuccessful attempts on our lives, either by means of high-angled machine-gun fire or sweeping the road with shrapnels. We were especially irritated by one machine-gunner who sprayed his bullets at such an angle that they came down vertically, with acceleration produced by sheer gravity. There was absolutely no point in trying to duck behind walls.

That night, the enemy gave us an example of his painstaking observation skills. In the second line, perhaps a mile and a quarter from the enemy, we had left a heap of chalk in front of what was to be a subterranean munitions dump. The British drew the unfortunately correct conclusion that this dump was to be masked over in the course of the night, and fired a group of shrapnels at it, succeeding in gravely wounding three of our men.

In the morning, I was shaken out of my sleep yet again by the order to lead my platoon on a digging detail to C Sector. My sections were broken up and divided among the 6th Company. I accompanied some of them back to the Adinfer woods, to get them chopping timber. On the way back to the trench, I stopped in my dugout for a quick catnap. But it was no good, I was unable to get any rest in those days. No sooner had I pulled off my boots, than I heard our artillery firing with unwonted animation from their position on the edge of the woods. At the same time my batman Paulicke materialized in the entrance to the shelter, and shouted down: 'Gas attack!'

I broke out the gas mask, got into my boots, buckled up, ran out and saw a huge cloud of gas hanging over Monchy in thick white swathes, and drifting under a slight breeze in the direction of Point 124 on the low ground.

Since my platoon was for the most part in the front line, and an attack was probable, there wasn't much time to stop and think. I leaped over the ramparts of the reserve line, raced forward, and soon found myself enveloped in the gas cloud. A penetrating smell of chlorine confirmed for me that this was indeed fighting gas, and not, as I had briefly thought, artificial fog. I therefore donned my mask, only to tear it off again right away because I'd been running so fast that the mask didn't give me enough air to breathe; also the goggles misted over in no time, and completely whited out. All this of course was hardly the stuff of 'What To Do in a Gas Attack', which I'd taught so often myself. Since I felt pain in my chest, I tried at least to put the cloud behind me as fast as I could. At the entrance to the village, I needed to get through a barrage of gunfire, whose impacts, topped by numerous clouds of shrapnel, drew a long and even chain across the barren and otherwise unfrequented fields.

Artillery fire in open country never has the same effect, either physically or on one's morale, as it does among dwellings or fortifications. I therefore broken through the line of fire, and found myself in Monchy, which lay under an extraordinary hail of shrapnel. A shower of balls, splinters and fuses came hissing through the branches of the fruit trees in the neglected gardens, or smacked against the masonry.

In a dugout in the garden, I saw my company comrades Sievers and Vogel sitting; they had lit a merry wood fire, and were leaning over the cleansing flame to escape the effects of the chlorine. I joined them there, until the fire had slackened off a little, and then went forward down communication trench 6.

As I went on, I looked at all the little animals lying in the pit of the trench, killed by the chlorine, and thought: 'The barrage...
is bound to start up again any moment, and if you continue
taking your time, you'll be caught in the open, like a mouse in a
trap.' And yet, I continued phlegmatically at my own pace.

Exactly what I had anticipated happened: not more than fifty
yards away from the company shelter, I found myself in a whole
new and much worse bombardment, in which it seemed com­
pletely impossible to get through even this short stretch of trench
without being hit. Luckily for me, I saw right by me one of the
occasional niches that were carved into the trench walls for
dispatch runners. Three dugout frames, not a whole lot, but
better than none at all. So I pressed myself in there and allowed
the storm to pass.

Unwittingly, I seemed to have chosen the liveliest corner going.
Light and heavy 'toffee-apples', Stokes bombs, shrapnels, rattles,
shells of all kinds – I could no longer identify everything that was
buzzing and whizzing and crashing around me. I was reminded
of my corporal at Les Eparges, and his exclamation: 'What in
God's name are those things?'

Occasionally my ears were utterly deafened by a single fiendish
crashing burst of flame. Then incessant hissing gave me the sense
of hundreds of pound weights rushing down at incredible speed,
one after the other. Or a dud shell landed with a short, heavy
ground-shaking thump. Shrapnels burst by the dozen, like dainty
crackers, shook loose their little balls in a dense cloud, and the
empty casings rasped after they were gone. Each time a shell
landed anywhere close, the earth flew up and down, and metal
shards drove themselves into it.

It's an easier matter to describe these sounds than to endure
them, because one cannot but associate every single sound of
flying steel with the idea of death, and so I huddled in my hole in
the ground with my hand in front of my face, imagining all the
possible variants of being hit. I think I have found a comparison
that captures the situation in which I and all the other soldiers
who took part in this war so often found ourselves: you must
imagine you are securely tied to a post, being menaced by a man
swinging a heavy hammer. Now the hammer has been taken back
over his head, ready to be swung, now it's cleaving the air towards
you, on the point of touching your skull, then it's struck the post,
and the splinters are flying – that's what it's like to experience
heavy shelling in an exposed position. Luckily, I still had a bit of
that subliminal feeling of optimism, 'it'll be all right', that you
feel during a game, say, and which, while it may be quite
unfounded, still has a soothing effect on you. And indeed even
this shelling came to an end, and I could go on my way once
more, and, this time, with some urgency.

At the front, the men were all busy greasing their rifles in
accordance with the nostrums of 'What To Do in a Gas Attack',
because their barrels had been completely blackened by chlor­ine.
An ensign dolefully showed me his new sword-knot, which had
quite lost its silver sheen, and had turned a greenish black.

Since our opponents seemed not to be making a move, I took
my troops back to the rear. Outside the company office in
Monchy, we saw a lot of men affected by gas, pressing their
hands against their sides and groaning and retching while their
eyes watered. It was a bad business, because a few of them went
on to die over the next several days, in terrible agony. We had
had to withstand an attack with chlorine, which has a burning,
corrosive effect on the lungs. Henceforth, I resolved never to go
anywhere without my gas mask, having previously, incredibly
foolishly, often left it behind in my dugout, and used its case –
like a botanist – as a container for sandwiches. Seeing this taught
me a lesson.

On the way back, meaning to buy something, I had gone into
the 2nd Battalion canteen, where I found a dejected canteen
boy standing surrounded by broken crockery. A shell had come
through the ceiling and gone off in the store, converting its
treasures into a mélange of jam, liquid soap and punctured con­
tainers of this and that. He had just, with Prussian pernicketiness,
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substantially harder than usual; also, there was a suspicious change of target, as though new batteries were set to finding their range. In spite of it all, we were relieved on 12 July, without too much disagreeableness, and went into the reserve in Monchy.

On the evening of the 13th, our dugouts in the garden came under fire from a ten-inch naval gun, whose massive shells rumbled at us in a low arc. They burst with a terrific bang.

At night, we were woken up by intense fire and a gas attack. We sat round the stove in the dugout in our gas masks, all except Vogel, who had lost his, and was running around like a madman, looking in all the corners, while a few sadistic fellows whom he'd given a hard time reported that the smell of gas was getting stronger and stronger. In the end, I gave him my refill, and he sat for an hour behind the smoking stove, holding his nose, and sucking on the mouthpiece.

On that same day I lost two men from my platoon, wounded as they went around the village: Hasselmann had a bullet through the arm, while Maschmeier caught a shrapnel ball through the throat.

There was no attack that night; even so, the regiment lost another twenty-five dead and a great many wounded. On the 15th and 17th, we had further gas attacks to endure. On the 17th, we were relieved and twice suffered heavy bombardment in Douchy. One of them came just as we were having an officers' meeting with Major von Jarotzky in an orchard. It was dangerous, but it was still ridiculous to watch the company suddenly burst apart, fall on their faces, force their way through hedges in an absolute trice, and disappear under various cover before you could count to ten. A shell falling in the garden of my lodgings killed a little girl who had been digging around for rubbish in a pit.

On 20 July we moved back up. On the 28th, I arranged with Ensign Wohlgemut and Privates Bartels and Birkner to go on another one of our patrols. We had nothing more in mind than to wander around between the lines and see what was new in no man's land, because we were beginning to get a bit bored with the trench. In the afternoon, Lieutenant Brauns, the officer in the 6th Company who was relieving me, paid me a call in my dugout, bringing a fine Burgundy with him. Towards midnight we broke up; I went out into the trench, where my three companions were already assembled in the lee of a traverse. After I'd picked out a few bombs that looked dry and in working order, I climbed over the wire in a high good humour, and Brauns called out a jovial: 'Break a leg!' after me.

In quick time, we had crept up to the enemy barrier. Just before it, we came across a pretty stout and well-insulated wire in some long grass. I was of the opinion that information was important here, and instructed Wohlgemut to cut off a piece and take it with him. While he was sawing away at it with— for want of more appropriate tools—a cigar clipper, we heard something jingling the wire; a few British soldiers appeared and started working without noticing us, pressed as we were in the long grass.

Mindful of our hard time on the previous expedition, I breathed: 'Wohlgemut, toss a hand-grenade in that lot!'

'Lieutenant, shouldn't we let them work a bit more first?'

'Ensign, that was an order!'

Even here, in this wasteland, the magic words took effect. With the sinking feeling of a man embarking on an uncertain adventure, I listened to the dry crackle of the pulled fuse, and watched Wohlgemut, to offer less of a target, trundle, almost roll the grenade at the British group. It stopped in a thicket, almost in the middle of them; they seemed not to have seen anything. A few moments of great tension ticked by. 'C-crashh!' A flash of lightning lit up their sprawling figures. With a shout of 'You are prisoners!' we launched ourselves like tigers into the dense white smoke. A desperate scene developed in fractions of seconds. I held my pistol in the middle of a face that seemed to loom out of the dark at me like a pale mask. A shadow slammed back against the barbed wire with a grunt. There was a ghastly cry, a sort of
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‘Wah!’—of the kind that people only produce when they’ve seen a ghost. On my left, Wohlgemut was banging away with his pistol, while Bartels in his excitement was throwing a hand-grenade in our midst.

After one shot, the magazine had clicked out of my pistol grip. I stood yelling in front of a Briton who in his horror was pressing his back into the barbed wire, and kept pulling the trigger. Nothing happened—it was like a dream of impotence. Sounds came from the trench in front of us. Shouts rang out, a machine-gun clattered into life. We jumped away. Once more I stopped in a crater and aimed my pistol at a shadowy form that was pursuing me. This time, it was just as well it didn’t fire, because it was Birkner, whom I had supposed to be safely back long ago.

Then we raced towards our lines. Just before our wire, the bullets were coming so thick and fast that I had to leap into a water-filled, wire-laced mine-crat er. Dangling over the water on the swaying wire, I heard the bullets rushing past me like a huge swarm of bees, while scraps of wire and metal shards sliced into the rim of the crater. After half an hour or so, once the firing had abated, I made my way over our entanglements and leaped into our trench, to an enthusiastic reception. Wohlgemut and Bartels were already back; and another half an hour later, so was Birkner.

We were all pleased at the happy outcome, and only regretted that once again our intended captive had managed to get away. It was only afterwards that I noticed that the experience had taken its toll on my nerves, when I was lying on my pallet in my dugout with teeth chattering, and quite unable to sleep. Rather, I had the sensation of a sort of supreme awareness—as if I had a little electric bell going off somewhere in my body. The following morning, I could hardly walk, because over one knee (over other, historic injuries) I had a long scrape from the barbed wire, while the other had caught some shards from Bartels’s hand-grenade.

These short expeditions, where a man takes his life in his hands, were a good means of testing our mettle and interrupting the monotony of trench life. There’s nothing worse for a soldier than boredom.

On 11 August there was a black riding stallion loose outside Berles-au-bois, which a territorial was finally able to kill with three bullets. The British officer it had escaped from wouldn’t have been too pleased to see it in that condition. In the night, Fusilier Schulz caught a spent part of an English bullet in his eye. In Monchy, too, there were more casualties, as the walls brought down by shelling now afforded less and less protection from random sprays of machine-gun bullets. We started to dig trenches right across the village, and erected new walls near the most dangerous places. In the neglected gardens, the berries were ripe, and tasted all the sweeter because of the bullets flying around us as we ate them.

The 12th of August was the long-awaited day when, for the second time in the war, I had a home furlough. No sooner had I got home and settled in, though, than a telegram came winging after me: ‘Return immediately, further details from local command Cambrai.’ And three hours later, I was on the train. On the way to the station, three girls in light dresses sauntered past me, clutching tennis racquets—a shining last image of that sort of life, which was to stay with me for a long time.

On the 21st I was back in familiar country, the roads swarming with soldiers on account of the departure of the 111th and the arrival of a new division. The 1st Battalion was based in the village of Ecous-St-Mein, whose wreckage we were to reoccupy on our advance two years from now.

I was welcomed by Paulicke, whose days were also numbered. He told me that the young fellows from my platoon must have inquired about a dozen times whether I wasn’t back yet. It stirred and revived me to hear that; I realized that in the hot days that were ahead of us, I had a following based not only on rank, but also on character.

That night I was put up with eight other officers in the loft of
After breakfast, I took a little look around the place. In the course of a very few days, heavy artillery had transformed a peaceful town in the hinterland to the image of dread. Whole houses had been flattened or ripped apart by shells, so that the rooms and their furnishings were left hanging over the chaos like theatre flats. The smell of corpses oozed from some buildings, because the first abrupt assault had taken the inhabitants by surprise, and buried many of them in the ruins before they could leave their dwellings. On one doorstep lay a little girl, stretched out in a lake of crimson.

All that was left of the streets were narrow footpaths that went snaking through huge mounds of beams and masonry. Fruit and vegetables were mouldering away in the ravaged gardens.

After lunch, which we put together in the kitchen from an over-supply of iron rations, and which was concluded, of course, by a potent cup of coffee, I went and stretched out in an armchair upstairs. From letters that were lying around I saw that the house had belonged to a brewer by the name of Lesage. There were open cupboards and wardrobes in the room, an upset washstand, a sewing-machine and a pram. On the walls hung smashed paintings and mirrors. On the floor were drifts, sometimes several feet deep, of drawers pulled out of chests, linen, corsets, books, newspapers, nightstands, broken glass, bottles, musical scores, chair legs, skirts, coats, lamps, curtains, shutters, doors off their hinges, lace, photographs, oil paintings, albums, smashed chests, ladies’ hats, flowerpots and wallpaper, all tangled together.

Through the splintered shutters, the view was of a square furrowed by bombs, under the boughs of a ragged linden. This confusion of impressions was further darkened by the incessant artillery fire that was raging round the town. From time to time, the gigantic impact of a fifteen-inch shell drowned out all other noise. Clouds of shards washed through Combles, splattering against the branches of the trees, or striking the few intact roofs, sending the slates slithering down.

In the course of the afternoon, the bombing swelled to such a pitch that all that was left was the feeling of a kind of oceanic roar, in which individual sounds were completely subordinated. From seven o’clock, the square and the houses on it were subjected to fifteen-inch-shell bombardment at thirty-second intervals. There were many that did not go off, whose short, dull thumps shook the house to its foundations. Throughout, we sat in our basement, on silk-upholstered armchairs round a table, with our heads in our hands, counting the seconds between explosions. The witicisms dried up, and finally the boldest of us had nothing to say. At eight o’clock the house next door came down after taking two direct hits; its collapse occasioned a huge cloud of dust.

From nine till ten, the shelling acquired a demented fury. The earth shook, the sky seemed like a boiling cauldron. Hundreds of heavy batteries were crashing away at and around Combles, innumerable shells criss-crossed hissing and howling over our heads. All was swathed in thick smoke, which was in the ominous underlighting of coloured flares. Because of racking pains in our heads and ears, communication was possible only by odd, shouted words. The ability to think logically and the feeling of gravity, both seemed to have been removed. We had the sensation of the ineluctable and the unconditionally necessary, as if we were facing an elemental force. An NCO in No. 3 Platoon went into a frenzy.

At ten o’clock, this infernal carnival gradually seemed to calm itself, and settled into a sedate drumfire, in which, admittedly, one still was not able to make out an individual shot.

At eleven o’clock, a runner arrived with orders to take the men out on to the church square. We joined up with the other two platoons in marching order. A fourth platoon, under Lieutenant Sievers, had dropped out because they were to take provisions up to the front. They now ringed us as we assembled in this perilous location, and loaded us with bread, tobacco and canned
meat. Sievers insisted I take a pan of butter, shook hands, and wished us luck.

Then we marched off in Indian file. Everyone was under strict orders absolutely to stay in touch with the man in front. No sooner were we out of the village, than our guide realized he’d gone wrong. We were forced, under heavy shrapnel fire, to retrace our steps. Then, mostly at a jog, we crossed open country, following a white ribbon laid out to guide us, though it was shot in pieces. We were forced to stop periodically, often in the very worst places, when our guide lost his way. To keep the unit together, we were not allowed to lie down or take cover.

Even so, the first and third platoon had suddenly vanished. On, on! In one violently bombarded defile, the sections backed up. Take cover! A horribly penetrating smell told us that this passage had already taken a good many lives. After running for our lives, we managed to reach a second defile which concealed the dugout of the front line commanding officer, then we lost our way again, and in a painful crush of excited men, had to turn back once more. At the most five yards from Vogel and me, a middle-sized shell struck the bank behind us with a dull thump, and hurled mighty clods of earth over us, as we thought our last moment had come. Finally, our guide found the path again — a strangely constellated group of corpses serving as landmark. One of the dead lay there as if crucified on the chalk slope. It was impossible to imagine a more appropriate landmark.

On, on! Men collapsed while running, we had to threaten them to use the last energy from their exhausted bodies. Wounded men went down left and right in craters — we disregarded their cries for help. We went on, eyes implacably on the man in front, through a knee-high trench formed from a chain of enormous craters, one dead man after another. At moments, we felt our feet settling on soft, yielding corpses, whose form we couldn’t make out on account of the darkness. The wounded man collaps-
ploughed by heavy shells. Not a single blade of grass showed itself. The churned-up field was gruesome. In among the living defenders lay the dead. When we dug foxholes, we realized that they were stacked in layers. One company after another, pressed together in the drumfire, had been mown down, then the bodies had been buried under showers of earth sent up by shells, and then the relief company had taken their predecessors' place. And now it was our turn.

The defile and the land behind was strewn with German dead, the field ahead with British. Arms and legs and heads stuck out of the slopes; in front of our holes were severed limbs and bodies, some of which had had coats or tarpaulins thrown over them, to save us the sight of the disfigured faces. In spite of the heat, no one thought of covering the bodies with earth.

The village of Guillemonot seemed to have disappeared without trace; just a whitish stain on the cratered field indicated where one of the limestone houses had been pulverized. In front of us lay the station, crumpled like a child's toy; further to the rear the woods of Delville, ripped to splinters.

No sooner had day broken than a low-flying RAF plane whirled towards us, and, vulture-like, began drawing its circles overhead, while we fled into our holes and huddled together. The sharp eye of the observer must have noticed something anyway, because before long the plane began to emit a series of low, long-drawn-out siren tones, coming at short intervals. They put one in mind of the cries of a fabulous creature, hanging pitilessly over the desert.

A little later, and the battery seemed to have taken the signals. One heavy, low-arching shell after the other came barging along with incredible force. We sat helplessly in our refuges, lighting a cigar and then throwing it away again, prepared at any moment to find ourselves buried. Schmidt's sleeve was sliced open by a large shard.

With only the third shell the fellow in the hole next to ours was buried by an enormous explosion. We dug him up again right away; even so, the weight of the masses of earth had left him deathly tired, his face sunken, like a skull. It was Private Simon. His experience had made him wise, because each time anyone moved around in the open while there were aeroplanes about, I could hear his furious voice and a fist waving from the opening of his tarpaulin-covered foxhole.

At three in the afternoon my sentries came to me from the left and stated that they were unable to hold out where they were any longer, as their holes had been shot away. I had to display my full authority to get them back to their stations. What helped me make my case was the fact that I myself was in the place of greatest danger.

A little before ten o'clock at night, a fire-storm was directed at the left flank of the regiment, which, twenty minutes later, had moved over to us. Soon we were completely wrapped in smoke and dust, but most of the shells came down just behind or just in front of our trench, if one can use that word for our smashed hollow. As the storm raged around us, I walked up and down my sector. The men had fixed bayonets. They stood stony and motionless, rifle in hand, on the front edge of the dip, gazing into the field. Now and then, by the light of a flare, I saw steel helmet by steel helmet, blade by glinting blade, and I was overcome by a feeling of invulnerability. We might be crushed, but surely we could not be conquered.

In the platoon to the left of us, Sergeant Hock, the unfortunate rat-catcher of Monchy, aimed to discharge a white flare, picked up the wrong flare, and instead sent up a red barrage light, which was taken up in all quarters. Straight away our own artillery opened up, and it was a joy to behold. One shell after another came yowling down out of the sky and showered the field ahead of us in a fountain of shards and sparks on impact. A mixture of dust, stale gases and the reek of flung carcasses brewed up from the craters.
After this orgy of destruction, the shelling quickly flooded back to its previous levels. One man's slip of the hand had got the whole titanic machinery of war rolling.

Hock was and remained an unlucky fellow; that same night, as he was loading his pistol, he shot a flare into his bootleg, and had to be carried back with grave burns.

The following day, it rained hard, which was no bad thing so far as we were concerned, as once the dust turned to mud the feeling of dryness in our mouths wasn't so tormenting, and the great clumps of monstrous blue-black flies basking in the sun—they were like velvet cushions to look at—were finally dispersed. I spent almost the whole day sitting on the ground in front of my foxhole, smoking and eating, in spite of the surroundings, with a healthy appetite.

The following morning, Fusilier Knicke in my platoon got a rifle shot from somewhere through the chest and against his spine, so that he lost the use of his legs. When I went to see how he was, he was lying soberly in a hole in the ground, looking like a man who had come to terms with his own death. That evening he was carried back through the bombardment, in the course of which, when the stretcher-bearers suddenly had to dive for cover, he suffered an additional broken leg. He died at the dressing-station.

That afternoon one of my men had me come over and look in the direction of Guillemont station, from behind a torn-off British leg. Hundreds of British soldiers were running forward through a flat communication trench, little troubled by the weak gunfire we were able to direct at them. The scene was indicative of the inequality of the resources with which we had to fight. Had we essayed the same thing, our units would have been shot to pieces in a matter of minutes. While on our side there wasn't a single captive balloon to be seen anywhere, the British had about thirty clustered into one vast luminous-yellow bunch, watching with Argus eyes for the least movement to show itself anywhere in the crumpled landscape, to have a hail of steel directed against it.

In the evening, as I gave out the password, a large shell fragment came buzzing into my stomach. Fortunately, it was almost spent, and so merely struck my belt buckle hard and fell to the ground. I was so astonished that it took the concerned cries of my men, and their offers of water from their canteens, to show me that I'd had a near thing.

At dusk, two members of a British ration party lost their way, and blundered up to the sector of the line that was held by the first platoon. They approached perfectly serenely; one of them was carrying a large round container of food, the other a longish tea kettle. They were shot down at point-blank range; one of them landing with his upper body in the defile, while his legs remained on the slope. It was hardly possible to take prisoners in this inferno, and how could we have brought them back through the barrage in any case?

It was almost one o'clock in the morning when I was roused by Schmidt from my half-sleep. Instantly I leaped up, and reached for my rifle. Our relief had come. We handed over what there was to be handed over, and as quickly as possible made our way out of this fiendish place.

But no sooner had we reached the shallow communication trench than a first clutch of shrapnels blew up in our midst. One ball smashed the wrist of the man in front of me, sending the arterial blood spurting everywhere. He reeled, and made to lie down on his side. I took him by the arm, pulled him to his feet in spite of his complaints, and only let go of him when we'd reached the dressing-station next to battle headquarters.

Things were pretty 'hot' along both the defiles, and we were panting for breath. The worst place was a valley we ended up in, where shrapnels and light shells seemed to go up uninterruptedly. Prruch! Prruch! went the spinning iron, sending a rain of sparks into the night. Whee! Another volley! I gasped because, seconds
in advance, I knew from the increasing noise that the arc of the
next projectile was heading almost exactly for me. An instant
later, there was a heavy crash at my feet, and soft scraps of clay
flipped into the air. It was a dud!

 Everywhere groups of men, either relieving or being relieved,
were hurrying through the night and the bombardment, some of
them utterly lost, and groaning with tension and exhaustion;
shouts fell, and orders, and in monotonous repetition the long-
drawn-out cries for help from the abandoned and the wounded.
As we raced on, I gave directions to the lost, pulled some men
out of shell-holes, threatened others who wanted to lie down,
kept shouting my name, and so brought my platoon, as if by a
miracle, back to Combles.

 Then we needed to march via Sailly and Gouvernements-Ferme
to Hennois woods, where we would bivouac. It was only now
that the degree of our exhaustion became fully clear. Heads
brutishly down, we slunk along the road, often forced off it by
cars or munitions columns. In my unhealthy irritation, I couldn't
help but think that these vehicles followed no other purpose than
to annoy us as they sliced past us, and more than once I caught
myself reaching for my pistol.

 After our march we had to put up tents, and only then could
we throw ourselves on the hard ground. During our stay in the
forest camp, we endured great storms of rain. The straw in the
tents started to moulder, and many men got sick. We five com-
pany officers were not much put out by this external wetness,
spending our evenings sitting on our cases in our tent, with a few
goodly bottles that had been magicked up from somewhere. In
such situations, red wine is the best medicine.

 On one of these evenings, our Guards counter-attacked and
captured the village of Maurepas. While the two sets of artillery
were raging against each other over a wide area, a violent
storm broke loose overhead, so that, as in the Homeric battle of
gods and men, the disturbance below seemed to be vying with
that on high.

 Three days later, we moved back to Combles, where my pla-
toon this time occupied four smallish basements. These bas-
ements were hewn from blocks of chalk, long and narrow and
with arched ceilings; they promised security. They seemed to
have belonged to a vintner — or that, at any rate, was my expla-
nation for the fact that they afforded small fireplaces broken into
the walls. After I'd posted sentries, we stretched out on the many
mattresses that our predecessors had lugged into place here.

 The first morning, things were relatively calm; I took a walk
through the ravaged gardens, and looted delicious peaches from
their espaliered boughs. On my wanderings I happened into a
house surrounded by tall hedges, which must have belonged to a
lover of antiques. On the walls of the rooms hung a collection of
painted plates, holy water basins, etchings and wooden carvings
of saints. Old china sat in piles in large cupboards, ornate
leather-bound volumes were scattered about the floor, among them an
exquisite old edition of Don Quixote. I would have loved to pick
up a memento, but I felt like Robinson Crusoe and the lump of
gold; none of these things were of any value here. So great bales
of beautiful silks rotted away in a workshop, without anyone
paying them any attention. You had only to think of the glowing
barrage at Frémicourt-Ferme, which cut off this landscape, and
you soon thought better of picking up any extra baggage.

 When I reached my lodgings, the men were back from foraging
trips of their own through the gardens, and had boiled up a soup
in which you could stand your spoon out of bully beef, potatoes,
peas, carrots, artichokes and various other vegetables. While we
were eating, a shell landed on the house, and three others came
down near by, without us lifting our heads. We had seen and
been through too much already to care. The house must have
seen some bloody happenings already, because on a pile of rubble
losses. Unfortunately, one of ours happened to be NCO Mevius, whom I had discovered to be a bold fighter on the night of Regniéville. He was lying face down in a puddle of blood. When I turned him over, I saw by a large hole in his forehead that it was too late for any help. I had just exchanged a few words with him; suddenly a question I'd asked went unanswered. A few seconds later, when I looked round the traverse to see what was keeping him, he was already dead. It was an eerie feeling.

After our opponents had also pulled back a little, a protracted exchange of fire ensued, with a Lewis gun barely fifty yards away from us forcing us to keep our heads down. We responded with one of our own light machine-guns. For maybe half a minute, the two guns fought it out, with the bullets spraying and bouncing everywhere. Then our gunner, Lance-Corporal Motullo, collapsed with a shot in the head. Even though his brains were dribbling down past his chin, he was still lucid as we carried him into the nearest shelter. Motullo was an older man, one of those who would never have volunteered; but once he was standing behind his machine-gun, I had occasion to observe that, even though he was standing in a hail of bullets, he didn’t duck his head by so much as an inch. When I asked him how he was feeling, he was capable of replying in complete sentences. I had the sense that his mortal wound didn’t hurt him at all, maybe that he wasn’t even aware of it.

Gradually, things calmed down a little, as the British for their part were also busy digging themselves in. At twelve o’clock, Captain von Brixen, Lieutenant Tebbe and Lieutenant Voigt came by; they offered their congratulations on the company’s successes. We sat down in the pillbox, lunched off British provisions, and discussed the position. In between times, I was having to negotiate with about two dozen Britishers, whose heads appeared out of the trench a hundred yards away, and who seemed to want to surrender. But as soon as I put my own head over the parapet, I found myself under fire from somewhere further back.

Suddenly, there was some commotion at the British barricade. Hand-grenades flew, rifles banged, machine-guns clattered. ‘They’re coming! They’re coming!’ We leaped behind sandbags and started shooting. In the heat of battle, one of my men, Corporal Kimpenhaus, jumped up on to the parapet, and fired down into the trench until he was brought down by two bad wounds in his arms. I took a note of this hero of the hour, and was proud to be able to congratulate him two weeks later, on the award of the Iron Cross, First Class.

No sooner had we got back from this interruption to our lunch than there was more pandemonium. It was one of those curious incidents that can suddenly and unpredictably transform an entire situation. The noise was coming from a subaltern in the regiment on our left who wanted to line up with us, and seemed inflamed by a berserk fury. Drink seemed to have tipped his innate bravery into a towering rage. ‘Where are the Tommies? Lemme at ’em! Come on boys, who’s coming with me?’ In his insensate fury, he knocked over our fine barricade, and plunged forward, clearing a path for himself with hand-grenades. His orderly slipped ahead of him along the trench, shooting down anyone who survived the explosions.

Bravery, fearless risking of one’s own life, is always inspiring. We too found ourselves picked up by his wild fury, and scrabbling around to grab a few hand-grenades, rushed to form part of this berserker’s progress. Soon I was up alongside him, tearing along the line, and the other officers too, followed by riflemen from my company, weren’t slow in coming. Even Captain von Brixen, the battalion commander, was up there in the van, rifle in hand, bringing down enemy grenade-throwers over our heads.

The British resisted manfully. Every traverse had to be fought for. The black balls of Mills bombs crossed in the air with our own long-handled grenades. Behind every traverse we captured, we found corpses or bodies still twitching. We killed each other, sight unseen. We too suffered losses. A piece of iron crashed to
the ground next to the orderly, which the fellow was unable to avoid; and he collapsed to the ground, while his blood issued on to the clay from many wounds.

We hurdlesed over his body, and charged forward. Thunderous crashes pointed us the way. Hundreds of pairs of eyes were lying in wait behind rifles and machine-guns in the dead land. We were already a long way in front of our own lines. From all sides, bullets whistled round our steel helmets or struck the trench parapet with a hard crack. Each time a black iron oval broke the horizon, one's eye sized it up with that instantaneous clarity of which a man is only capable in moments of life and death. During those instants of waiting, you had to try to get to a place where you could see as much of the sky as possible, because it was only against its pale backdrop that it was possible to see the black jagged iron of those deadly balls with sufficient clarity. Then you hurled your own bomb, and leaped forward. One barely glanced at the crumpled body of one's opponent; he was finished, and a new duel was commencing. The exchange of hand-grenades reminded me of fencing with foils; you needed to jump and stretch, almost as in a ballet. It's the deadliest of duels, as it invariably ends with one or other of the participants being blown to smithereens. Or both.

In those moments, I was capable of seeing the dead – I jumped over them with every stride – without horror. They lay there in the relaxed and softly spilled attitude that characterizes those moments in which life takes its leave. During my leaping progress, I had a difference of opinion with the subaltern, who was really quite a card. He wanted to be first, and insisted that I supply him with bombs, rather than throw them myself. In amongst the short terrible shouts that accompany the work, and by which you alert the other to the presence of the enemy, I would sometimes hear him: 'One man to throw! And after all I was the instructor at the storm troop training!'

A trench that led off to the right was cleaned up by soldiers of the 225th, who were trailing in our wake. British soldiers caught in a cleft stick tried to flee across the open fields, but were mown down in the fire that straight away was directed at them from all sides.

And those soldiers we were pursuing gradually felt the Siegfried Line becoming too hot for them. They tried to disappear down a communications trench that led off to the right. We jumped up on to the sentry steps, and saw something that made us shout with wild glee: the trench they were trying to escape down doubled back on itself towards ours, like the curved frame of a lyre, and, at the narrowest point, they were only ten paces apart! So they had to pass us again. From our elevated position, we were able to look down on the British helmets as they stumbled in their haste and excitement. I tossed a hand-grenade in front of the first lot, bringing them up short, and after them all the others. Then they were stuck in a frightful jam; hand-grenades flew through the air like snowballs, covering everything in milk-white smoke. Fresh bombs were handed up to us from below. Lightnings flashed between the huddled British, hurling up rags of flesh and uniforms and helmets. There were mingled cries of rage and fear. With fire in our eyes, we jumped on to the very lip of the trench. The rifles of the whole area were pointed at us.

Suddenly, in my delirium, I was knocked to the ground as by a hammer blow. Sober, I pulled off my helmet and saw to my terror that there were two large holes in it. Cadet Mohrmann, leaping up to assist me, assured me that I had a bleeding scratch at the back of my head, nothing more. A bullet shot from some distance had punched through my helmet and only brushed my skull. Half unconscious, I reeled back with a hurriedly applied bandage, to remove myself from the eye of the storm. No sooner had I passed the nearest traverse than a man ran up behind me and told me that Tebbe had just been killed in the same place, by a shot in the head.

That news floored me. A friend of mine with noble qualities,
STORM OF STEEL

with whom I had shared joy, sorrow and danger for years now, who only a few moments ago had called out some pleasantry to me, taken from life by a tiny piece of lead! I could not grasp the fact; unfortunately, it was all too true.

In this murderous sector of trench, all my NCOs and a third of my company were bleeding to death. Shots in the head rained down. Lieutenant Hopf was another one of the fallen, an older man, a teacher by profession, a German schoolmaster in the best sense of the word. My two ensigns and many others besides were wounded. And yet, the 7th Company held on to the conquered line, under the command of Lieutenant Hoppenrath, the only able-bodied officer remaining, until we were relieved.

Of all the stimulating moments in a war, there is none to compare with the encounter of two storm troop commanders in the narrow clay walls of a line. There is no going back, and no pity. And so everyone knows who has seen one or other of them in their kingdom, the aristocrat of the trench, with hard, determined visage, brave to the point of folly, leaping agilely forward and back, with keen, bloodthirsty eyes, men who answered the demands of the hour, and whose names go down in no chronicle.

On the way back, I stopped with Captain von Brixen for a moment, who with a few troops was shooting at a row of heads over a nearby parallel trench. I stood between him and the other marksmen, and watched the bullets striking home. In the dreamlike mood that followed the shock of my wounding, it never occurred to me that my white turban-like bandage must be visible miles away.

Suddenly a blow to the forehead knocked me to the floor, while my eyes were drenched with blood. The man next to me fell at the same time, and started to moan. Shot in the head through steel helmet and temple. The captain feared he had lost two company commanders on one day, but on inspection could make out only two surface wounds near the hairline. They must have been caused by the bursting bullet, or perhaps splinters from the helmet of the wounded man. This same man, with whom I shared pieces of metal from the same bullet, came to visit me after the war; he worked in a cigarette factory, and, ever since his wound, had been sickly and a little eccentric.

Weakened by further loss of blood, I accompanied the captain, who was returning to his command post. Skirting the heavily shelled village of Moeuvres at a jogtrot, we got back to the dugout in the canal bed, where I was bandaged up and given a tetanus injection.

In the afternoon, I got on a lorry, and had myself driven to Lécluse, where I gave my report to Colonel von Oppen over supper. After sharing a bottle of wine with him, feeling half asleep but in a wonderful mood, I said good-night, and, following this immense day, hurled myself with a meritorious feeling on to the bed that my trusty Vinke had made up for me.

A couple of days after that, the battalion moved into Lécluse. On 4 December, the divisional commander, General von Busse, addressed the battalions involved, singling out the 7th Company. I marched them past, bandaged head held high.

I had every right to be proud of my men. Some eighty men had taken a long stretch of line, capturing a quantity of machine-guns, mortars and other matériel, and taken some two hundred prisoners. I had the pleasure of being able to announce a number of promotions and distinctions. Thus, Lieutenant Hoppenrath, the leader of the shock troops, Ensign Neupert, the stormer of the pillbox, and the brave barricade defender, Kimpenhaus, all got to wear the well-earned Iron Cross, First Class, on their breasts.

I didn't bother the hospitals with my fifth double-wounding, but allowed them to heal over the course of my Christmas leave. The scrape to the back of my head got better quickly, the shards in my forehead grew in, to provide company for two others that I'd got at Regniéville, one in my left hand, the other in my earlobe.
I felt so bad that day that I lay down in a little piece of trench and fell asleep right away. When I woke up, I read a few pages of Tristram Shandy, which I had with me in my map case, and so, apathetically, like an invalid, I spent the sunny afternoon.

At six-fifteen, a dispatch-rider summoned the company commanders to Captain von Weyhe.

'I have some serious news for you. We are going on the offensive. After half an hour’s artillery preparation, the battalion will advance at seven o’clock tonight from the western edge of Favreuil, and storm the enemy lines. You are to march on the church tower at Sapignies.'

After a little further discussion, and handshakes all round, we raced back to our companies, as the bombardment was to start in barely ten minutes’ time, and we still had quite a stretch ahead of us. I informed my platoon commanders, and had the men fall in.

‘By sections in single file twenty yards apart. Direction half-left, treetops of Favreuil!’

Testimony to the good morale we still enjoyed was that I had to nominate the man to stay behind to inform the cookers where to go. No one volunteered.

I marched along in the van with my company staff and Sergeant-Major Reinicke, who knew the area very well. Our artillery fire was landing behind hedges and ruins. It sounded more like furious yapping than anything seriously destructive. Behind us, I saw my sections advancing in perfect order. Alongside them, shots from aeroplanes sent up puffs of dust, bullets, empty shells and driving bands from shrapnels whizzed with fiendish hissing in between the files of the thin human line. Away on the right lay Beugnâtre, heavily attacked, from where jagged lumps of iron buzzed across and stamped themselves on the clayey soil.

The march got a little more uncomfortable still once we were over the Beugnâtre-Bapaume road. All of a sudden, a spate of high-explosive shells landed in front of, behind and in the midst of us. We scattered aside, and hurled ourselves into craters. I landed with my knee on something a frightened predecessor had left behind, and had my batman scrape off the worst of it with a knife.

Around the edge of Favreuil, the clouds from numerous shell-bursts congregated, and up and down in between them in rapid alternation went the geysers of soil. To find a position for the company, I went on ahead to the first ruins, and then with my cane gave a signal to follow.

The village was fringed with badly shelled huts, behind which parts of the 1st and 2nd Battalions gradually came together. During the last part of the march, a machine-gun had taken its toll. I watched from my vantage-point the little string of puffs of dust, in which one or other of the new arrivals would sometimes find himself caught as in a net. Among others, Vice-Sergeant-Major Balg of my company got a bullet through the leg.

A figure in brown corduroy strode with equanimity across this fire-swept piece of terrain, and shook me by the hand. Kius and Boje, Captain Junker and Schaper, Schrader, Schlager, Heins, Findeisen, Höhlemann and Hoppenrath stood behind a hedge raked with lead and iron and talked through the attack. On many a day of wrath we had fought on one and the same battlefield, and today once more the sun, now low in the Western sky, was to gild the blood of all or nearly all.

Elements of the 1st Battalion moved into the castle grounds. Of the 2nd, only my company and the 5th had got through the flaming curtain unscathed, or nearly so. We made our way forward through craters and debris to a sunken road on the western edge of the village. On the way I picked up a steel helmet off the floor and put it on – something I only ever did in very dicey situations. To my amazement, Favreuil seemed to be completely dead. It appeared as though the defensive line had
been abandoned, because the ruins had the oddly tense feeling of a place that is unoccupied, and that spurs the eye to utmost vigilance.

Captain von Weyhe – who, though we didn’t know this at the time, was lying all alone and badly hurt in a shell-hole in the village – had ordered the 5th and 8th Companies to form the first attacking line, the 6th the second, and the 7th the third. As there was no sign of the 6th or 8th anywhere yet, I decided to go on the attack without worrying too much about the plan of battle.

By now it was seven o’clock. I saw, against a backdrop of ruined houses and tree stumps, a line of men advancing across the field under moderate rifle fire. It must be the 5th.

I drew up my men in the sunken road, and gave orders to advance in two waves. ‘Hundred yards apart. I myself shall be between the first wave and the second.’

It was our last storm. How many times over the last few years we had advanced into the setting sun in a similar frame of mind! Les Eparges, Guillermont, St-Pierre-Vaast, Langemarck, Passchendaele, Mœuvres, Vraucourt, Mory! Another gory carnival beckoned.

We left the sunken road as if it had been the exercise ground, except for the fact that ‘I myself’, as I had expressed it just now, suddenly found myself walking alongside Lieutenant Schrader on open ground way ahead.

I felt a little better, but there were still butterflies. Haller told me later, as he said goodbye to me before leaving for South America, that the man next to him had said: ‘You know something, I don’t think our lieutenant is going to come out of this show alive!’ That strange man, whose wild and destructive spirit I so loved, told me things on that occasion which made me realize that the simple soldier weighs the heart of his commanding officer as in a goldsmith’s scales. I felt pretty weary, and I had thought all along that this attack was a mistake. Even so, this is the one I most often recall. It didn’t have the mighty impetus of the Great Battle, its bubbling exuberance; on the other hand, I had a very impartial feeling, as if I were able to view myself through binoculars. For the first time in the entire war, I heard the hissing of individual bullets, as if they were whistling past some target. The landscape was utterly pellucid.

Isolated rifle shots rang out in front of us; perhaps the village walls in the background kept us from being too clearly seen. With my cane in my left hand, and my pistol in my right, I tramped on ahead, not quite realizing I was leaving the line of the 5th Company behind me and to my right. As I marched, I noticed that my Iron Cross had become detached and fallen on the ground somewhere. Schrader, my servant and I started looking for it, even though concealed snipers were shooting at us. At last, Schrader picked it up out of a tuft of grass, and I pinned it back on.

We were coming downhill. Indistinct figures moved against a background of red-brown clay. A machine-gun spat out its gouts of bullets. The feeling of hopelessness increased. Even so, we broke into a run, while the gunners were finding their range.

We jumped over several snipers’ nests and hurriedly excavated trenches. In mid-jump over a slightly better-made trench, I felt a piercing jolt in the chest – as though I had been hit like a game-bird. With a sharp cry that seemed to cost me all the air I had, I spun on my axis and crashed to the ground.

It had got me at last. At the same time as feeling I had been hit, I felt the bullet taking away my life. I had felt Death’s hand once before, on the road at Mory – but this time his grip was firmer and more determined. As I came down heavily on the bottom of the trench, I was convinced it was all over. Strangely, that moment is one of very few in my life of which I am able to say they were utterly happy. I understood, as in a flash of lightning, the true inner purpose and form of my life. I felt surprise and disbelief that it was to end there and then, but this surprise had something untroubled and almost merry about it. Then I heard the firing...
grow less, as if I were a stone sinking under the surface of some turbulent water. Where I was going, there was neither war nor enmity.

We Fight Our Way Through

Often enough I have seen wounded men dreaming in a world of their own, taking no further part in the noise of battle, the summit of human passions all around them; and I may say I know something of how they must have felt.

The time I lay completely unconscious can’t have been that long in terms of chronometry – it probably corresponded to the time it took our first wave to reach the line where I fell. I awoke with a feeling of distress, jammed in between narrow clay walls, while the call: 'Stretcher-bearers! The company commander’s been hurt!' slipped along a cowering line of men.

An older man from another company bent over me with a kindly expression, undid my belt and opened my tunic. He saw two round bloody stains – one in the right of my chest, the other in my back. I felt as though I were nailed to the earth, and the burning air of the narrow trench bathed me in tormenting sweat. My kindly helper gave me air by fanning me with my map case. I struggled to breathe, and hoped for darkness to fall soon.

Suddenly a fire-storm broke loose from the direction of Sapignies. No question, this smooth rumbling, this incessant roaring and stamping signified more than merely the turning back of our ill-conceived little attack. Over me I saw the granite face of Lieutenant Schrader under his steel helmet, loading and firing like a machine. There was a conversation between us that was a
little like the tower scene in *St Joan*. Albeit, I didn’t feel amused, because I had the clear sense I was done for.

Schrader rarely had time to toss me a few words, because I didn’t really figure any more. Feeling my own feebleness, I tried to glean from his expression how things stood for us up there. It appeared that the attackers were gaining ground, because I heard him call out more frequently and with greater alarm to his neighbours, pointing out targets that must be very close at hand.

Suddenly, as when a dam breaks under the pressure of flood water, the cry went up: ‘They’ve broken through on the left! They’re round the back of us!’ going from mouth to mouth. At that terrible instant, I felt my life force beginning to glimmer again like a spark. I was able to push two fingers into a mouse- or mole-hole level with my arm. Slowly I pulled myself up, while the blood that was bogging my lungs trickled out of my wounds. As it drained away, I felt relief. With bare head and open tunic, I stared out at the battle.

A line of men with packs plunged straight ahead through whitish swathes of smoke. A few stopped and lay where they fell, others performed somersets like rabbits do. A hundred yards in front of us, the last of them were drawn into the cratered landscape. They must have belonged to a very new outfit that hadn’t been tested under fire, because they showed the courage of inexperience.

Four tanks crawled over a ridge, as though pulled along on a string. In a matter of minutes, the artillery had smashed them to the ground. One broke in half, like a child’s toy car. On the right, the valiant cadet Mohrmann collapsed with a death shout. He was as brave as a young lion; I had seen that at Cambrai already. He was felled by a bullet square in the middle of his forehead, better aimed than the one that he had once bandaged up for me.

The affair didn’t seem to be irrevocably lost. I whispered to Corporal Wilsky to creep a little left, and enfilade the gap in the line with his machine-gun. He came back straight away and reported that twenty yards beyond everyone had surrendered. That was part of another regiment. So far I had been clutching a tuft of grass with my left hand like a steering column. Now I succeeded in turning round, and a strange sight met my eyes. The British had begun to penetrate sectors of the line to the left of us, and were sweeping them with fixed bayonets. Before I could grasp the proximity of the danger, I was distracted by another, more startling development: at our backs were other attackers, coming towards us, escorting prisoners with their hands raised! It seemed that the enemy must have broken into the abandoned village only moments after we had left it to make our attack. At that instant, they tightened the noose round our necks; we had completely lost contact.

The scene was getting more and more animated. A ring of British and Germans surrounded us and called on us to drop our weapons. It was pandemonium, as on a sinking ship. In my feeble voice, I called upon the men near me to fight on. They shot friend and foe. A ring of silent or yelling bodies circled our little band. To the left of me, two colossal British soldiers plunged their bayonets into a piece of trench, from where I could see beseeching hands thrust out.

Among us, too, there were now loud yells: ‘It’s no use! Put your guns down! Don’t shoot, comrades!’

I looked at the two officers who were standing in the trench with me. They smiled back, shrugged, and dropped their belts on the ground.

There was only the choice between captivity and a bullet. I crept out of the trench, and reeled towards Favreuil. It was as in a bad dream, where you can’t pick your feet off the floor. The only thing in my favour was perhaps the utter confusion, in which some were already exchanging cigarettes, while others were still butchering each other. Two Englishmen, who were leading back a troop of prisoners from the 99th, confronted me. I aimed my
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pistol at the nearer of the two, and pulled the trigger. The other
blazed his rifle at me and missed. My hurried movements pushed
the blood from my lungs in bright spurts. I could breathe more
easily, and started running along the trench. Behind a traverse
crouched Lieutenant Schläger in the middle of a group of blazing
rifles. They fell in with me. A few British, who were making their
way over the field, stopped, set down a Lewis gun on the ground,
and fired at us. Except for Schläger and me and a couple of others,
everyone went down. Schläger, who was extremely shortsighted,
told me later that all he had been able to see was my map case
flying up and down. That was his signal. The loss of blood gave
me the lightness and airiness of intoxication, the only thing that
worried me was that I might break down too soon.

Finally, we reached a semi-circular earthworks to the right of
Favreuil, from where half a dozen heavy machine-guns were
spitting lead at friend and foe alike. Either the noose hadn't
been completely drawn tight, or else this was one last pocket of
resistance; we had been lucky to find it. Enemy bullets shattered
on sandbags, officers yelled, excited men leaped here and there.
A medical officer from the 6th Company ripped my tunic off,
and told me to lie down immediately, otherwise I might bleed to
death in a matter of minutes.

I was rolled in a tarpaulin and dragged to the entrance of
Favreuil, accompanied by some of my soldiers, and some from
the 6th. The village was already heaving with British, so it was
inevitable that we soon came under fire from very short range.
The medical officer of the 6th, who was holding the back end of
my tarpaulin, went down, shot in the head; I fell with him.

The little group had thrown themselves flat on the ground,
and, lashed by bullets, were trying to creep to the nearest dip in
the ground.

I stayed behind on the field, bundled up in my tarpaulin, almost
apathetically waiting for the shot that would put an end to this
Odyssey.
the sisters, and was able to carry on reading *Tristram Shandy* from where I had had to put it down for the order to attack.

Friendly solicitude got me safely through a period of setbacks — something that seems to be typical of lung shots. Men and officers from the division came to visit. Those who had taken part in the storm at Sapignies, admittedly, were no more, or else, like Kius, they were in British captivity. With the first shells landing in Cambrai as the enemy slowly gained the upper hand, M. and Mme Plancot sent me a kind letter, a tin of condensed milk they could ill afford to spare, and the only melon their garden had produced. There were bitter times ahead for them. My last batman was in the tradition established by his many predecessors; he stopped with me, even though he wasn't entitled to hospital rations, and had to go begging down in the kitchen.

During the endless hours flat on your back, you try to distract yourself to pass the time; once, I reckoned up my wounds. Leaving out trifles such as ricochets and grazes, I was hit at least fourteen times, these being five bullets, two shell splinters, one shrapnel ball, four hand-grenade splinters and two bullet splinters, which, with entry and exit wounds, left me an even twenty scars. In the course of this war, where so much of the firing was done blindly into empty space, I still managed to get myself targeted no fewer than eleven times. I felt every justification, therefore, in donning the gold wound-stripes, which arrived for me one day.

A fortnight later, I was lying on the rumbling bed of a hospital train. The German landscape was already bathed in the lustre of early autumn. I was fortunate enough to be taken off the train at Hanover, and was put up in the Clementine infirmary. Among the visitors who soon arrived, I was particularly glad to see my brother; he had continued to grow since his wounding, although his right side, which was where he was hurt, hadn't.

I shared my room with a young fighter pilot from Richthofen's squadron, a man named Wenzel, one of the tall and fearless types our nation still produces. He lived up to the motto of his squadron, 'Hard — and crazy with it!' and had already brought down a dozen opponents in single combat, although the last had splintered his upper arm with a bullet first.

The first time I went out, I went with him, my brother, and a few comrades who were awaiting their transport, to the rooms of the old Hanoverian Gibraltar Regiment. Since our war-worthiness was being put into question, we felt the urgent need to prove ourselves by vaulting an enormous armchair. We didn't do too well; Wenzel broke his arm all over again, and the following day I was back in bed with a temperature of forty — yes, my chart even threatened the red line beyond which the doctors are powerless to help. At such high temperatures, you lose your sense of time; while the sisters were fighting for my life, I was in those fever dreams that are often very amusing.

On one of those days, it was 22 September 1918, I received the following telegram from General von Busse:

'His Majesty the Kaiser has bestowed on you the order *pour le Mérite.* In the name of the whole division, I congratulate you.'