

March 1915

We are 150yd from Fritz and the moon is bright, we bend and walk quietly onto the road running diagonally across the front into the Bosche line. There is a stream the far side of this – boards have been put across it at intervals but must have fallen in –about 20 yd down we can cross. We stop and listen – swish – and down we plop (for a flare lights everything up) it goes out with a hiss and over the board we trundle on hands and knees. Still.

A working party of Huns are in their lair. We can just see dark shadows and hear the Sergeant, who is sitting down. He's got a bad cold! We must wait a bit, the moon's getting low but it's too bright now 5 a.m. They will stop soon and if we go on we may meet a covering party lying low. 5.10. 5.15. 5.25. 5.30. And the moon's gone.

"Cot the bombs, Sergeant?" "No. Sir, I forgot them!" "Huns" and the last crawl starts.

The Bosch is moving and we crawl quickly on to the wire - past two huge shell holes to the first row. A potent row of standards are the first with a nut at the top and strand upon strand of barbed wire. The nut holds the two iron pieces at the top and the ends are driven into the ground 3ft apart. Evidently this line is made behind the parapet and brought out, the legs of the standard falling together. All the joins where the strands cross are neatly done with a separate piece of plain wire. Out comes the wire cutter. I hold the strands to prevent them jumping apart when cut and Stafford cuts. Twenty-five strands are cut and the standard pulled out. Two or three tins are cut off as we go. (These tins are hung on to give warning and one must beware of them.) Next a space 4ft then low wire entanglements as we cut on through to a line of iron spikes and thick, heavy barbed wire.

The standard has three furls to hold the wire up and strive as we can, it won't come out. "By love, it's a corkscrew, twist it round" and then, wonder of wonders, up it goes and out it comes! It is getting light, a long streak has already appeared and so we just make a line of "knife rests" (wire on wooden X-X) against the German parapet and proceed to return. I take the corkscrew and Stafford the iron double standard. My corkscrew keeps on catching and Stafford has to extract me twice from the wire, his standard is smooth and only 3ft so he travels lighter. He leads back down a bit of ditch. Suddenly a sentry fires 2 shots which spit on the ground a few yards in front. We lie absolutely flat, scarcely daring to breathe - has he seen? Then we go on with our trophies, the ditch gets a little deeper, giving cover! My heart is beating nineteen to the dozen - will it mean a machine gun, Stafford is gaining and leads by 10yd. "My God," I think, "it is a listening post ahead and this the ditch to it. I must stop him." I whisper, "Stafford, Stafford" and feel I am shouting. He stops, thinking I have got it. "Do you think it's a listening post?" There! By the mound - listen."

"Perhaps we had better cut across to the left Sir." "Are you all right Sir," from Stafford.

I laugh, "Forgot that damned wire." (Our own wire outside our listening post). Soon we are behind the friendly parapet and it is day. We are ourselves again, but there's a subtle cord between us, stronger than barbed wire, that will take a lot of cutting. Twenty to seven, 2 hrs 10 minutes of life - war at its best. But shelling, no, that's death at its worst. And I can't go again, it's a vice. Immediately after I swear I'll never do it again, the next night I find myself aching after "No Man's Land".

Charlie

Vocabulary

Fritz = Germans      Huns = Austria Hungarians      Bosche line = German front      parapet = wall like barrier