

( A letter home from Noel Chavasse, doctor with the British Army, June 20, 1915)

I have not been able to write for some time, but I have much to tell you now. All leave was cancelled, and we were told confidentially that in a few days the Battalion would take part in a charge on the German trenches.

So we prepared for it. The men charged 'dummy' trenches, and practised bomb-throwing. The machine gun officer went through all his guns, and I took all extra precautions. The men were in excellent spirits, and sharpened their bayonets and cleaned their rifles most industriously. Sick men tried to get well for it, and a sick Officer who heard of it came out of hospital; but they all realised its gravity.

We went up to the trenches from which we were to jump up on the night of the 14th. It was an eight-mile walk, and the pipers played us for four miles. There was a tremendous stream of men along the road, as a whole brigade was to attack. The men were in the best of spirits, and sang all the way. My stretcher-bearers who had had their number increased to 24 making as usual a joyful noise, and had finally to be silenced. We halted at last, for we had to go up to the trenches by a by-path, and I said Goodbye to as many Officers as I could. I had been ordered to stay back on a main road half a mile behind the trenches, and felt very sore about it, but I went up to see what the ground was like.

At 2 a.m. a terrific bombardment began, and went on till 4 a.m., but I was so tired that I dozed through it. But at 5 a.m., I was woken up by the first batch of wounded coming down. They came along a long communication trench in a steady stream. Meanwhile the Huns began to put crumps and shrapnel down the road. Our C.O. arrived with an artery bleeding in his head, which was troublesome to stop, and we had to lie him down at the back, as a crump landed too near the dressing-station for safety. Then news came that a Captain Cunningham was lying exhausted at the top end of the communication trench. So he had to be fetched down. I then found the trench blocked with men who had dropped exhausted trying to drag themselves along. The Huns were putting big shells into the trench, and making direct hits, so that in places the trench was blown in, yet not a single wounded man was hit all day. It was a weary job helping poor Cunningham down the trench. He was hit in the leg and arm, and was very brave. We got some more men back at the same time, but when we arrived at our place we found that another crump had burst just outside our dressing station, and wrecked it, and had killed four men next door.

When I got out of the trench it was getting dusk, so I went off with a trusty man, and searched for the wounded. I knew where the charge had taken place. We found most of them in a little coppice. They lay behind trees, in 'dug-outs', and in the bottom of trenches. They were so weak that they could not call out. Their joy and relief on being found was pitiful, and fairly spurred me on to look for more. It was awful work getting some of them out of their trenches and 'dug-outs'. It was hard to find men enough to carry them away. I had to appeal for volunteers for the men were dead beat. Finally, at dawn, we got our last wounded away from a very advanced point, at 4 in the morning. Altogether, we had collected 18 men behind the trenches, and were pretty well certain that none were left.

### Vocabulary

sore = mad, upset

Hun = Austria – Hungarians

crump = bomb, shell

C.O. = Commanding Officer