

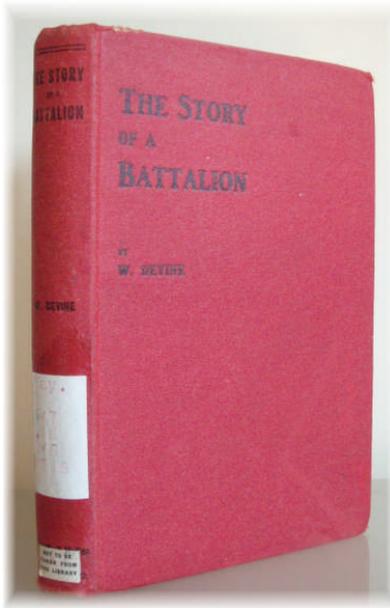


## Story of a Battalion

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THE  
STORY OF A BATTALION

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" They were for the most part of the country . . . . they were not a kid-glove lot of men . . . . "

*Facing page 4*

" . . . . those men came to the desert as clumsy novices . . . .  
And the desert had no pity on them."

*Facing page 8*

" The Australian soldier is an adaptable being . . . . At night when the day's work was finished he would sit by the kitchen fire in the French farm-houses, received by them as one of the family."

*Facing page 24*

" By that route came back the wounded . . . . Ever did the German artillery play on it, taking toll of all its traffic, of runners, ration-carriers, stretcher-bearers, wounded."

*Facing page 40*

" Its surroundings peopled by so many of Australia's dead, the site of the old wind-mill has since been sacred to Australian soldiers. But it was unlucky as a landmark and a thing of ill-omen in those days . . . . "

*Facing page 48*

" . . . . the passage of the river of mud which led to Mouquet Farm. And those at the tail end of the column waited for clearance . . . . waited in the gathering darkness when shells seem to fall so closely, and blunted sense of direction gives such false judgment of their location."

*Facing page 54*

" . . . . trench feet . . . . their feet wrapped in cotton-wool, they limped along or negotiated a particularly difficult bit of ground on the shoulders of a passing digger. A weird sight presenting a sordid picture of war, weirder for the suggestion it obtruded on the onlooker of a schoolboy game in some happy play-ground."

*Facing page 66*

“ Such was the Colonel, a man who lived ‘ with men and they despised him not’.”

*Facing page 84*

“ Seen against the dull glowering sky of the October evening, ruined Ypres looked a dreary place.”

*Facing page 96*

“ . . . . Captain Cumming . . . . An officer who loved a puzzling situation for its own sake.”

*Facing page 124*

“ In the shelter of one such ravine . . . . the men had a prolonged halt, and as the early morning had put appetites on edge all sat down to bully-beef and biscuits with much relish. Whilst so engaged, a low-flying enemy aeroplane swooped over and fired its machine-gun on them. . . . .”

*Facing page 138*

“ Down by the small spur known as Dean Copse some of them were laid to rest. . . . .”

*Facing page 152*

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# The Story of a Battalion.

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## CHAPTER I.

### FORMATION OF THE BATTALION.

THIS tale of "arms and the man" opens on the 3rd of March, 1916. A party of officers and men of the 16th Battalion stood lined up on the parade-ground in the large Australian camp at Tel-el-Kebir. Altogether they numbered but four officers and three hundred and fifty of other ranks. The colonel of the 16th was addressing the assembled men. With blunt but sympathetic directness he was telling them that they were leaving the 16th Battalion, they were going on the strength of a new formation to be known as the 48th Battalion, they were all right good fellows whom he was very sorry to lose, but that the exigencies of the service demanded it, and he was quite certain they would give a good account of themselves in their new unit and prove worthy of their old Battalion.

The brief speech apparently so conventional was full of unwelcome significance to all present ; to the intently listening soldiers it had the pathos of a farewell. No man is more susceptible to a bit of manly sentiment than the Australian soldier. The men liked their old colonel. Personal courage counts much with the soldier, and this colonel's courage had given his name to a bit of ground on Gallipoli. They liked their old Battalion, for the 16th had come through the campaign on Gallipoli, and that was at the time their criterion



## CHAPTER VI.

### POZIERES RIDGE.

THE 48th Battalion had not as yet any experience of life in the immediate front line trenches on the western front. Whilst it lay near Fleurbaix in reserve or in the support trenches, duty had taken some members of the Battalion to the front line. Others were induced by curiosity to make stolen excursions. The sight did not impress nor interest them over much. The construction of the defence works was interesting. In that marshy country where the spade so readily struck water, a deep wall of sand-bags rising some eight feet above the ground had to take the place of the impracticable trench. Mounting the fire-step of its deep traverses, they could see over the parapet to where the enemy's wire entanglements began some eighty yards away. The dull grey wall stretched further north and away towards the south, and the enemy's defences maintained their parallel course with it.

The enemy contained himself within his strong line, secure in its power of defence and confident in its advantage as a jumping-off ground for further advance. That strong line entered the *department de la Somme* on the north of Beaumont Hamel. It then crossed to the left bank of the Ancre and enveloped in its course the high and advantageous ground around Thiepval, which stretched to Pozières some two miles eastward and there reached its greatest altitude. From Thiepval the enemy's line ran south. Passing through the western outskirts of Fricourt it made the village the apex

## CHAPTER XI.

### BULLECOURT.

**W**HEN the Battalion left the trenches on the night of the 24th, it began its journey back to the rest area. Stopping at Mametz Camp for a few days, it continued the march through Albert to a wood near Henencourt on the 1st of March. The men showed all the signs of fatigue, for from the 7th of January till the 25th of February they had been continually in the front line or working immediately behind it. Winter in all the rigour of that winter of 1916-1917 still prevailed, and life in the huts in Henencourt Wood was dull and uninspiring.

The district around them, however, presented a very pleasant contrast to the scene of their recent labours. They were in the midst of a peaceful, undulating country, that showed none of the havoc and ruin of war. Villages were near at hand and farm-houses were plentiful, where the men made many friends. Moreover, despite the unfavourable weather conditions, there was as much outdoor training as possible, which is perhaps the best antidote against the tedium of military life.

By this time the enemy had begun his retirement from that part of the line which the Battalion had last occupied. The middle of the month saw him leave Bapaume, and for a time it looked as if there was some chance of a war of movement having begun. So during the period of training at Henencourt, the Battalion practised attacks and following-up tactics in conjunction with the other units of the Brigade ;

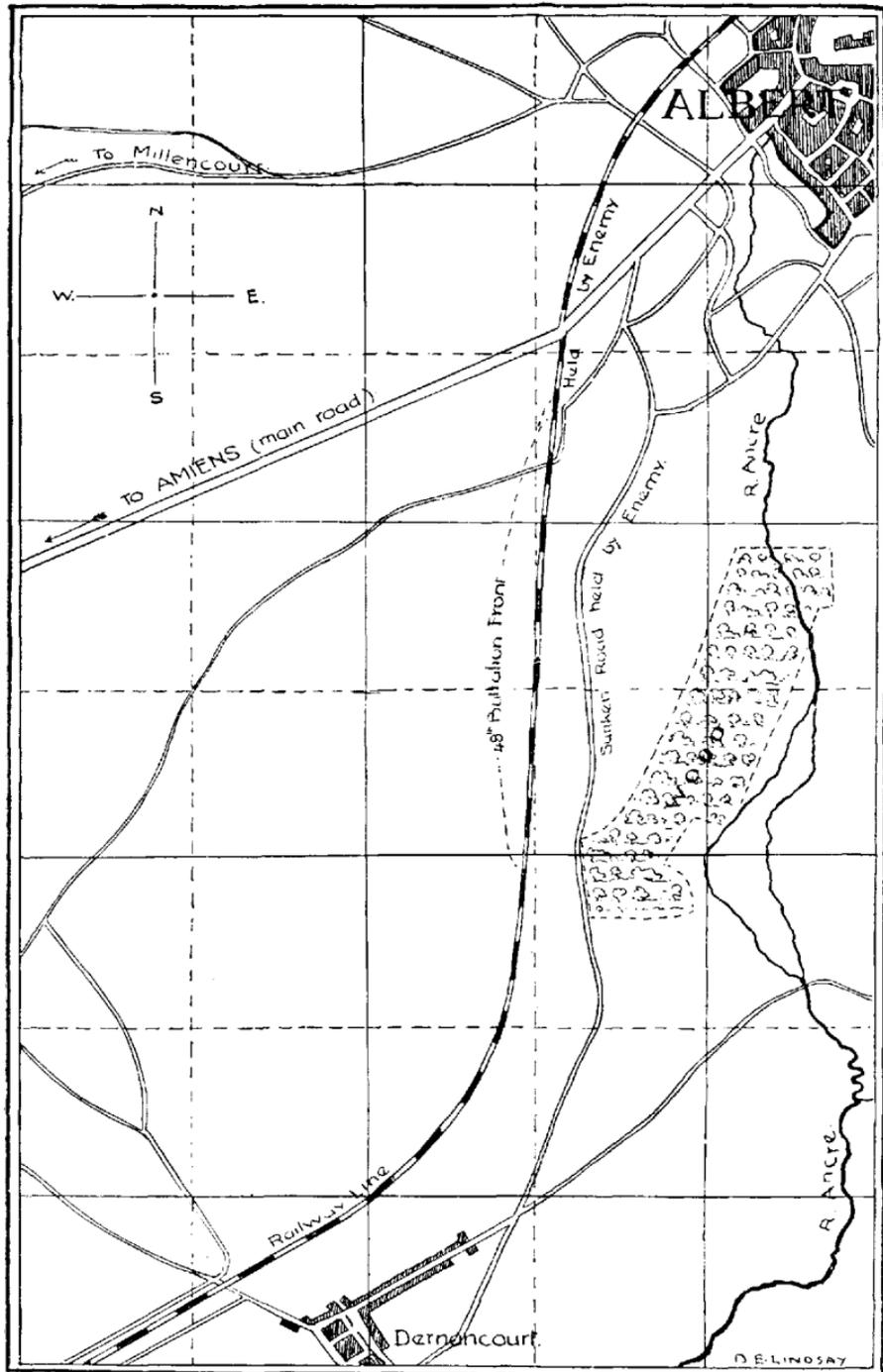
## CHAPTER XIV.

### PASSCHENDAELE RIDGE.

ON the 10th of October the Battalion marched away from Steenvoorde to Abeele, where it entrained for Ypres. There was a light but fairly constant fall of rain during the day; and it required little rain to reduce that battle-swept area to a condition of sloppy mud. Seen against the dull glowering sky of the October evening, ruined Ypres looked a dreary place. The same evening after 8 o'clock the Battalion set out for Westhoek Ridge, when it was sufficiently dark to make movement of troops prudent. There it settled down in trenches and such scant shelter as the place afforded.

Next day the operation-order was received, according to which a section of the enemy's defences between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele Ridge was to be attacked. The 47th and 48th Battalions were the units of the 12th Brigade involved. On the left of the Brigade front the 3rd Australian Division was to operate whilst the 13th Brigade was to be on the right flank.

The operation was to be an extensive one involving a great number of troops. Yet time for preparation was very short as the attack was to be launched on the morning of the 12th. At midnight the Battalion left Westhoek Ridge, and started on its long journey to the line from which the advance was to take place. The journey in the dark over country broken up by shell-holes filled with water, and deep enough to drown unwary wounded who might fall into them, recalled some of the worst memories of Pozières Ridge. Those of the



Map showing the Battalion's Defence of the Amiens Road (drawn to scale).

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  - what other activities were there in the community?
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