

**World War 1 and the experiences of my Father,
136208 Pte. Egbert John COPE, 50th Battalion Machine Gun Corps.**

My Dad would never talk to me about his W.W.1 experiences as they were obviously too painful and I assume now that he wanted to shield me from such horrors when I was a child. In later years he did manage to mention a few things to my sister's son, Jonathon.

The story told by Mother was that a message had to be got back to H.Q. and Dad was sent off, but the battle movements were so confused and fast moving that by the time he got back, his platoon's position was occupied by Germans. Jonathan wrote the following note to me about 15 years ago:- "... I often asked him about his capture and he was very reluctant to talk about it, but once when I must have been about the same age he was when captured, he told me he was sent back to his H.Q., either to convey a message or collect ammunition, but when he got there he found it occupied by Germans.

He hid and spent a while deciding what to do. He wasn't foolish enough to jump half a dozen Germans on his own, but managed to return to his post undiscovered, finding it (and presumably some of his comrades) had been destroyed. He then lived rough behind enemy lines for a while living off scraps and eventually the whole place swarmed with Germans. Realising he wasn't going to get anywhere like that he decided to give himself up.

He didn't give any more details of what must have been the most frightening and humiliating events of his life and he was very close to tears at the end."

One of the many documents that were left to me after Dad's death in 1983, 4 days before his 84th

birthday and 3 months before what would have been his diamond wedding anniversary, was a little black note book containing all kinds of information written in his hand in indelible pencil. There is the address of a Mr. G. Christie with a note alongside "M.G.C. Captured with me. Same Gun." So not all his platoon were killed.

I'm somewhat confused by this story because if he was on the run for a few days before capture, then the incident he describes MUST have occurred several days before 27/5/1918. You will see from the notebook entry at the bottom of the page a skeleton narrative of events. I only discovered in 2010 what the abbreviation Kmdo. meant

"Duff" i.e. Pudding recipes - these had to be made after Red Cross Food parcels had arrived!



May 27 (Monday) **Captured on Craonne Plateau.** Camped at Ramecourt.

May 30 Arrived at Pontevvert. Built our own bivouacs.

June 22 Arrived Bucy le Long. Billeted in ruined house,

July 21 Arrived near Chailvert.

July 22 Paraded sick. At night arrived Anizey.

July 23 Laon Clearing Station

July 29 Trelon Hospital, Belgium.

Aug 15 Entrain for Germany. (2½ months after capture!)

Aug 18 (Sunday) Arrive Guben Kriegsgerfangenenlager

Sept 18 Barracks

Sept 23 HORNO Kmdo.

Oct 13 Lager

Oct 14 Jessnitz Kmdo.

Nov 10 Lager at 6 a.m.

Nov. 17 Togne & 3 others go to Lahmo

Nov. 30 D. Red Cross repres. in camp to inspect. (What was this about? I'm sure it meant Danish rather than "darned".) I say this as my parents only had one swear "word" or rather letter - "D."

Dec. 18 Dawn to unload 4,500 ?? Rec'd 5 ? per man. 1 box American food between 6 men.

Dec 19. ??? per man. Dec 25 1918... Xmas Day in Guben Lager. (Still there 45 days after the Armistice was signed!)

More about CHEMIN DES DAMES, the 3rd AISNE BATTLE & GUBEN P.O.W. Camp.

Trying to piece things together 90 years after the event is a lengthy process and as it isn't possible to substantiate many of the facts, one can only hope most are approximately right!

From the British Army 1914 - 1918 website for Family Historians under the heading - P.O.W. Camps states:-

"In addition to these POW camps many men were taken out of camps to go on work *kommandos*, which were located in many other towns, villages, mines, quarries, factories and so on." This throws light on the comments for Sept 23 and Oct. 14 in Dad's "Little Black Notebook."

I've found Horno on the map about 15 Km SW of Guben, but Jessnitz or Jeßnitz I'm not sure about yet. If you look at the Google satellite map of the area nowadays it looks like a moonscape and the reason is that a Swedish Power company who run a very large power station nearby are devastating the area by open cast mining Lignite on a vast scale. Very much against the wishes of locals and ecologists.

From a Historical Calendar of Guben (Translated from the German ?By Google?)

11/09/1914: The first transport of Russian prisoners of war arrived in Guben. For these prisoners are at large set Breesen the "prisoner of war camp Guben," which housed until the beginning of its dissolution in July 1921 about 15, 000 inmates, mainly prisoners of war Russians, English and French, but also Belgian civilian prisoners, of which more than 500 died.

From the Manchester Regiment site written by Mrs. Pope-Hennessy about GUBEN.

"Pleasantly situated on the Neisse, with extensive cloth and hat factories. As at Krossen, the prison camp is arranged round a central guard tower with barracks radiating from it. It is five miles from the city."

GUBEN.

(Copied from the "Love to Know" Classic Encyclopaedia website - based on the Britannica.)

GUBEN, a town of Germany, in the kingdom of Prussia, at the confluence of the Lubis with the Neisse, 28 m. S.S.E. of Frankfort-on-Oder, at the junction of railways to Breslau, Halle and Forst. Pop. (1875) 23,704; (1905) 36,666. It possesses three Evangelical churches, a Roman Catholic church, a synagogue, a



ICRC

DC/ARCH/ime

Geneva, 23.09.2010

ATTESTATION

The International Committee of the Red Cross has received the following information :

Name and First name	COPE Egbert John
Date of Birth	17.03.1899
Place of birth	West Hamstead (sic)
Rank	Soldier
Unit	50th Machine Gun Corps, coy D
Date and place of capture	27.05.1918 in Craonne
Place(s) of detention	Prisoner of war in German hands detained in Guben (according to a list dated 02.09.1918)
From	One list issued by the German authorities.



More about CHEMIN DES DAMES, the 3rd AISNE BATTLE & GUBEN P.O.W. Camp.

gymnasium, a modern school, a museum and a theatre. The principal industries are the spinning and weaving of wool, dyeing, tanning, and the manufacture of pottery ware, hats, cloth, paper and machinery. The vine is cultivated in the neighbourhood to some extent, and there is also some trade in fruit and vegetables. Guben is of Wendish origin. It is mentioned in 1207 and received civic rights in 1235. It was surrounded by walls in 1311, about which time it came into the possession of the margrave of Brandenburg, from whom it passed to Bohemia in 1368. It was twice devastated by the Hussites, and in 1631 and 1642 it was occupied by the Swedes. By the peace of Prague in 1635 it came into the possession of the elector of Saxony, and in 1815 it was, with the rest of Lower Lusatia, united to Prussia.

It is now a “split” town, Guben to the west of the river Oder and Gubin, east of the Oder being in Poland.



This print of a World War 1 painting of the “Desolated Battlefield at Craonne showing the Plateau Cliffs” is by Francois Flameng (1856 - 1923). He was a very successful artist becoming Professor at the French Academy of Fine Arts. Received the Legion d’Honneur. Was renowned for his World War 1 paintings, becoming Hon. President of the Society of Military painters and documenter for the French War Ministry.

JIM PARKER, AN ENTHUSIASTIC ARMY HISTORIAN, was extremely helpful a few years ago now in establishing that Dad’s Machine Gun company, “D” company of 50th Battalion of the Machine Gun Corps, was attached to the 50th (Northumbrian) Division which joined the IX Corps under the Sixth (French) Army. While I haven’t yet found any War Diary that involves groups that I know were an integral part of the 50th Northumbrian Divn. I have come across the War Diary for May 1918 of the **6th BATTALION NORTHUMBERLAND FUSILIERS**.

From Dad’ Army Pay Book it is shown he “went into the Field” on 22nd April 1918 and entrained for the AISNE front on 26th April. On Monday 6th May, the 50th Division moved into the line and took over the Beaurieux Sector from the 51st French Divn. The 3rd Battle of the AISNE took place between 27th May, 1918 and 6th June. Beaurieux is 4 miles SW of Craonne.

From a document called “Mobilisation Battles & Engagements - 50th (Northumbrian) Divn., Jim Parker established that 156 Machine Gunners were actually captured on that fateful 27th May!

More about CHEMIN DES DAMES, the 3rd AISNE BATTLE & GUBEN P.O.W. Camp.

The following extract, again downloaded from the internet, gives some idea of the kind of timescale and events that occurred in this Battle. On pages 5 to 7 are some narrative details which I think may have been written or researched by Jim Parker.

6th BATTALION NORTHUMBERLAND FUSILIERS - War Diary - May 1918

CONCEVREUX (NOTE added by Michael Cope - "this place is only 2 miles east of Beauvrieux!")

25th May 1918 Training. The Battalion relieved 4th Northd. Fus. in support on night of 25th/26th.

Dispositions:-

'A' Coy between B. de la MUSETTE & B. D'ISSOUDIN

'B' Coy in line of Redoubts.

'C' Coy between B. D'ISSOUDIN & B. DES MILLEJOURS.

'D' Coy in P.C. Kleber.

26th May 1918. In front line.

About 7.30p.m. Orders received to 'Take preliminary defensive measures'.

11.0p.m. Artillery commenced counter preparatory scheme.

27th May 1918.

1.0a.m. Enemy put down barrage of extraordinary intensity on the whole area - mixed H. E. & gas.

This fire was very accurate and caused heavy casualties to the troops 'Standing to'. Counter battery work was very effective putting many of our guns out of action. All communications with Brigade H.Q. were out by 3.0a.m.

3.45a.m. Enemy attacked all along the line. The first attacks seem to have been in a South Easterly direction parallel with Route 44

4.15a.m. Battle Line came into action. By this time the Counter battery work had been so successful that our artillery was totally ineffective in supporting the infantry.

4.45a.m. The battle Line was taken in the rear from the direction of LA VILLE AU BOIS. No one returned from the centre and right Coys of this line. Remainder of Left Coy. under Lt. Col. GIBSON, 4th Northd. Fus. withdrew at 5.0a.m. This party consisted of 40 men.

5.30a.m. Redoubt line and P.C. KLEBER outflanked and cut off from BOIS DE BUTTS.

8.0a.m. Remainder of battalion formed part of Composite Brigade which withdrew to CHAUDARDES.

8.30a.m. All details of Transport Lines billeted in CONCEVREUX organised under MAJOR ROBB, 4th Northd. Fus. and MAJOR ROGERS.

9.0a.m. Enemy crossed PONTAERT Bridges and advanced down both banks of the Canal.

10.0a.m. Party in CHAUDARDES withdrew across AISNE owing to enemy advance on to high ground to N. W. and advance down river from PONTAERT. Details and remainder of brigade organised on line CONCEVREUX bridge - Canal Bank - to bridge at 47.47 (BERRY AU BAC 1/20,000) thence to West end of wood.

May 28th, 29th, 30th & 31st. Driven from this line about 4.0p.m. The remnants of the Battalion, now incorporated in Composite Coys and submerged in other Divisions, including 6th, 21st & 25th Divisions, took part in rearguard actions until the end of the month. L. D. SCOTT Lt. Col. Commanding 6th Batt. Northd. Fus. 21st June 1918.

Appendix.

Casualties 6th Battn. Northd. Fus.

May 1918

Killed in Action - OFFICERS - 2 OTHER RANKS - 8

Wounded - OFFICERS - 8 OTHER RANKS - 71

Missing - OFFICERS - 13 OTHER RANKS - 541

Wounded & Missing - OFFICERS - 5 OTHER RANKS - 12

Officer casualties are named and dated and all except one casualty is 27/05/1918.

Other ranks are totalled and not named or dated.

Strength of Battn. on 1st May 1918 - Officers - 34 Other Ranks - 947

Strength of Battn. on 31st May 1918 - Officers - 12 Other Ranks - 323.



Not Again' The German Offensive on the Aisne, 27 May 1918.

50th Division had the misfortune to be involved in three German Offensives in the Spring of 1918. It was part of Fifth Army during the Michael offensive on the Somme (March 1918), it had been moved to the Lys and was caught in the Georgette offensive (April 1918) and was sent to the Chemin des Dames as part of IX Corps to rest and “embed” the new recruits (having lost so many men). Unlike the earlier battles, 50th Division was now in the front line and not held in reserve when the Blucher Offensive opened on 27 May 1918.

IX Corps was part of the French Sixth Army commanded by General Denis Ducheme. Ducheme ignored Petain and d'Esperey's instructions for holding the line in the new defensive 'defence in depth' - he pushed all his men up to the front which left them exposed to the German artillery when the battle opened, something he would be sacked for when the Blucher offensive was over. The Chemin des Dames ridge is between the Ailette (north) and Aisne (south) rivers, and 50th Division was holding part of the eastern section, the Plateau de Californie. Brigadier-General Rees (150 Brigade, 50th Division) records the division having to hold 11,000 yards of

frontage with companies whose officers were completely untrained. Although the newly formed RAF (from the RFC) had failed to observe the German build up, the signs of a major German offensive were becoming apparent to experienced officers. The German artillery was suspiciously quiet, and when it did score a hit on a gun emplacement, the shelling would stop. This was a sure sign that the Germans were calibrating new guns. By 26 May 1918 the German offensive was expected within 24 hours as German deserters and prisoners confirmed that the next German offensive would be on the Chemin des Dames. Officers recorded waiting during the ominous silence from the German guns in a scene reminiscent of that from 'Journey's End'

At 0100 on 27 May, over 3,700 German guns opened up in the fire pattern devised by Colonel Bruchmuller, saturating the gun emplacements, isolating the HQs as the communication lines were broken, and disorientating the defenders. The effect of gas shells was not to kill, but to cause every possible form of nuisance to the key personnel of the British Army in carrying out their duties. Everything was made more difficult, everything was more uncomfortable, everything was more tiring and stressful.

More about CHEMIN DES DAMES, the 3rd AISNE BATTLE & GUBEN P.O.W. Camp.

Captain Sydney Rogerson of the neighbouring headquarters, 23 Brigade, 8th Division, reported that:

'Crowded with jostling, sweating humanity the dugouts reeked, and to make matters worse headquarters had no sooner got below than the gas began to filter down. Gas masks were hurriedly donned and anti-gas precautions taken - the entrances closed with saturated blankets and braziers were lighted on the stairs. If gas could not enter, neither could the air.'

The barrage went through its phases until the storm-troopers burst out of their trenches at 0340. No one in either 8th Division or 50th Division Headquarters had any idea of what was happening. Officers like Captain Lyon (1/6 Durhams, 151 Brigade, 50th Division) had to emerge from their dugouts to check for themselves. When he looked at the German lines he could see that the new German tactics were to put the advance troops immediately behind the barrage so that the British defence had no time to recover. He observed files of German troops immediately in front of his own line. They were advancing leisurely meeting with little or no resistance. When he looked up he could see German aircraft sweeping the trench line with machine gun fire. It soon became apparent that the British defence had crumpled.

Brigadier General Edward Riddell (149 Brigade, 50th Division) left his brigade headquarters at Centre d'Evreux to speak to Brigadier General Martin of 151 Brigade. After a few paces in the open a shell burst very close to them. Riddell was seriously wounded (later he found he had a hole in his face) and Martin was killed. Riddell initially refused treatment as a bandage around his head would have prevented him from giving orders.

All along the British front the Forward Zone had been overrun and German infantry were still pushing ever onwards. 24 Field Ambulance, 8th Division, found their dressing station was too far 'advanced'. When fewer and fewer casualties reached them after the barrage lifted, they found they were surrounded by German storm-troopers and had little choice but to surrender. Captain Lyon (1/6 Durham Light Infantry, 151 Brigade, 50th Division) had been told to make a stand with the 1/5 Durhams on a wooden hill, the Butte de l'Edmonde. As they advanced on the hill they became aware it was already in German hands. As he led his men in retreat under machine gun fire from both the hill and from aircraft, Lyon lost men until his group was reduced to a handful of wounded men. Eventually he instructed them to surrender as they were clearly surrounded by German with levelled rifles.

Brigadier General Rees was still in his headquarters, cut off from everyone except a group of 5th Yorkshires on the Plateau de Californie. When the Yorkshire's Colonel told him that counter attacks launched with the reserve company had been swept away and his remaining men were now being fired on from Craonne in their rear, he instructed the Yorkshires to make a run for it. Eventually, Rees himself decided to withdraw. He set off with his orderly for Croannelle. They set off as the barrage lifted, using trenches filled with gas so their progress was slow. Their group was well behind the advancing Germans and it was only time before he was taken prisoner. His story does not finish here. He was taken in a car and driven without explanation to Craonne. Here he was told that the Kaiser wished to speak to him! Rees remembers being asked many questions with regard to his personal history. When he revealed he was a Welshman, he was promptly asked 'Are you a kinsman of Lloyd George?' After further comments regarding the intense hatred the Kaiser felt the French had for Germans, he asked Rees whether England wished for peace. 'Everyone wishes for peace' Rees replied. With this the interview was over, the Kaiser bowed to Rees and Rees withdrew.

A last comment about the day's fighting goes to the 2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment, 23 Brigade, 8th Division, who made a spectacular but ultimately useless last stand for the bridge at Pontavert. Holding off the oncoming Germans meant that fleeing French, Middlesex and West Yorks were able to cross the River Aisne. The Devonshires fought until their battalion lost its cohesion. Small groups of isolated Devonshires would pull back with their Lewis guns and have another go. When the gunners ran out of ammunition, single individuals would creep forward to ransack the packs of their dead and wounded lying between them and the Germans. Eventually when the men were down to a few rounds each, Captain Burke and his sergeant major led a group of 23 in a charge on the Germans. Captain Burke was almost immediately wounded in his legs, otherwise he would have died. He was soon picked up by the Germans, his wounds dressed before he was sent back to join the other prisoners. This action of the 2nd Devonshires won them the Croix de Guerre.

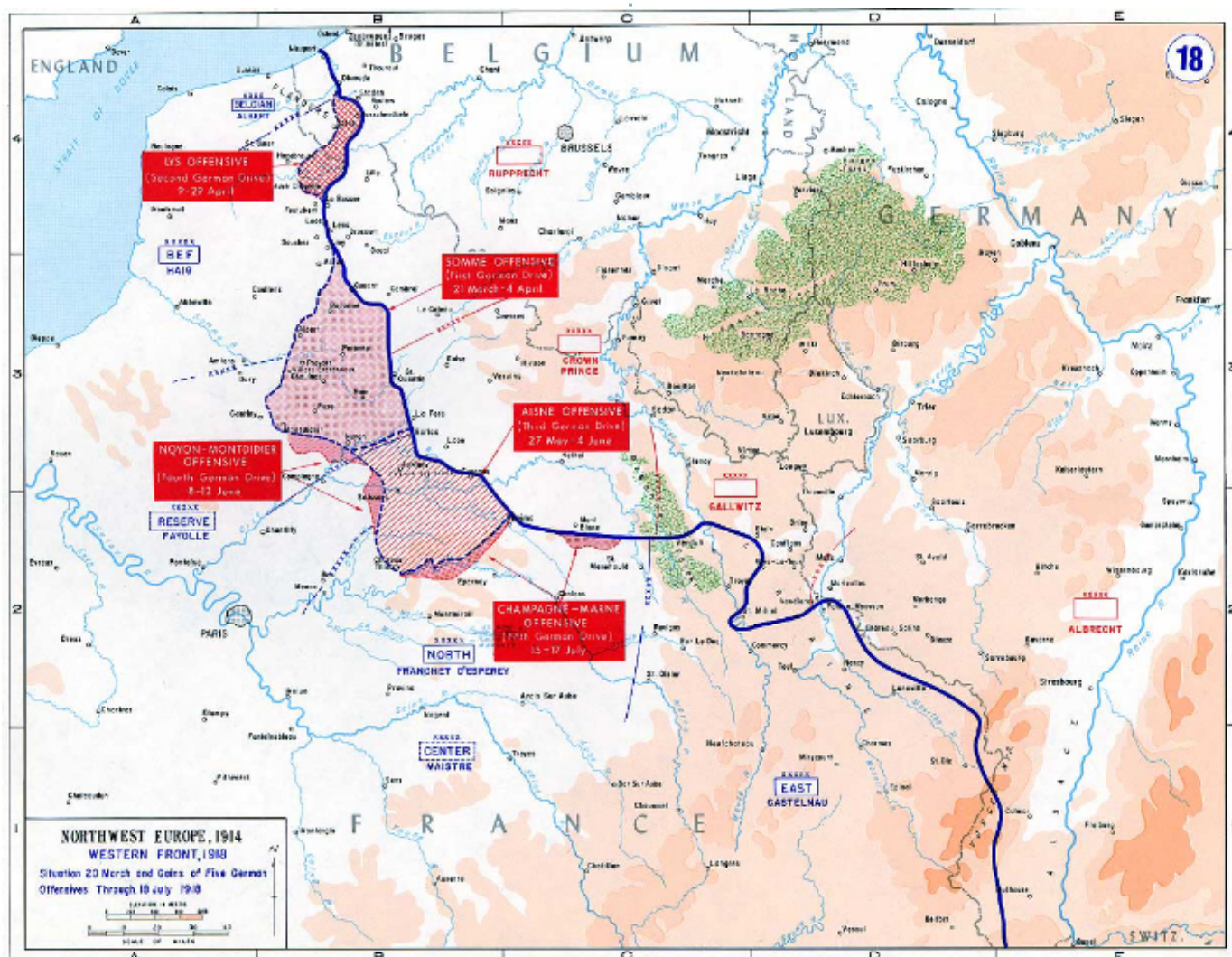
The German army had had a startlingly successful first day - it had ripped a hole in the Allied lines 35 miles wide and 12 miles deep. By the 30th May the Germans had advanced 40 miles and reached the Marne. It would appear that Ludendorff fell for his own trap and started to move his reserves to reinforce the Aisne Offensive. Foch decided the German's Aisne offensive made no strategic sense so he decided to wait before he moved reinforcements. When French

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resistance stiffened and the battle spluttered to a conclusion in June, the Germans were left holding a rather large salient. Then Ludendorff attempted to widen the salient with Operation Gneisenau. The French Third Army, holding the ground he intended to take, was fully aware of what was coming. Their tactics were not to hold the front line in depth, to allow the Germans to advance into artillery fire and eventually to counter attack behind a creeping barrage

supported by tanks and low flying aircraft. In the end Ludendorff was forced to call off the offensive.

This article is based on a talk given by Peter Hart to the Yorkshire branch of the WFA.



This extract comes from a separate description of the German Barrage and is included for its statistics only.

The battle began with one of the most intense artillery bombardments of the war. The Germans fired some two million shells in four hours on the morning of 27 May and then launched their attack with seventeen divisions. The Allied lines on the Chemin des Dames were shattered. The Germans were able to advance thirteen miles on the first day of the battle, the single biggest advance since the beginning of trench warfare in 1914. The bridges across the Aisne were captured

intact and the Germans began an advance towards the Marne.

See page 8 for Google's satellite map and more old photos of the area on page 9.

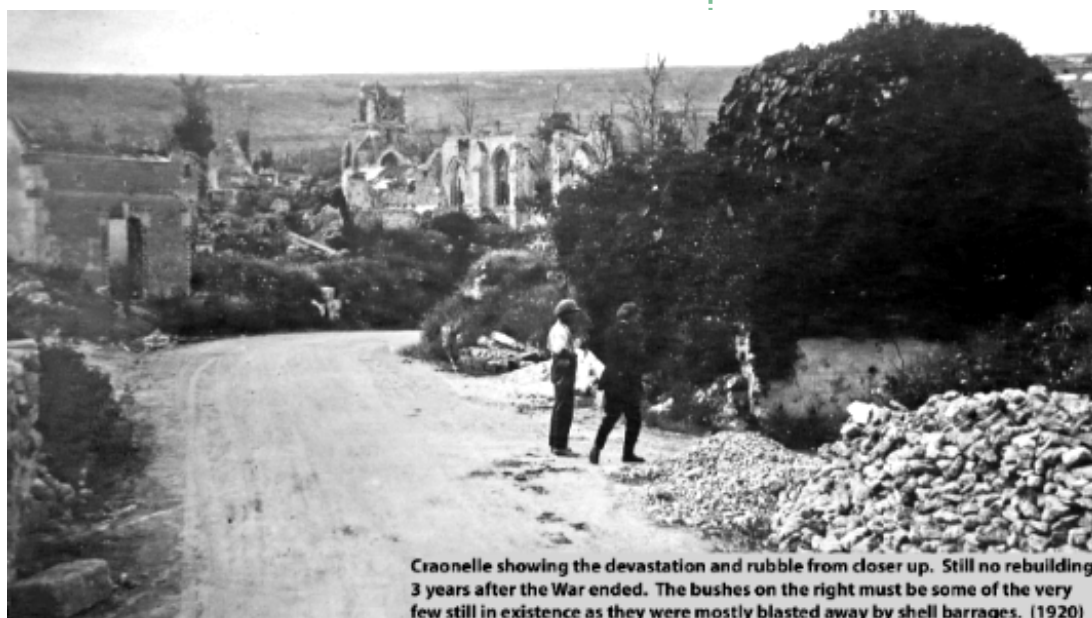
More about CHEMIN DES DAMES, the 3rd AISNE BATTLE & GUBEN P.O.W. Camp.

If you Google Satellite Maps for “Craonne, France” or cut and paste the following into your web browser you get an idea of the current land layout.

http://maps.google.co.uk/maps?f=q&source=s_q&hl=en&geocode=&q=Craonne,+France&ll=51.502678,-0.830229&sspn=0.006612,0.019205&ie=UTF8&hq=&hnear=Craonne,+Aisne,+Picardie,+France&ll=49.428617,3.8344&spn=0.072348,0.154324&t=h&z=13



On the rest of this page, and the next, I have incorporated some digitised photos that my Dad's sister took in the early 1920's when she undertook a battlefield tour of the Craonne area with her Mother. They also bought local postcards of the aftermath about 4 of which I still have. The war memorial below right is to the 2nd Devonshires.



Craonnelle showing the devastation and rubble from closer up. Still no rebuilding 3 years after the War ended. The bushes on the right must be some of the very few still in existence as they were mostly blasted away by shell barrages. (1920)



Le 2nd Bataillon de Regiment de Devonshires, near RHEIMS.



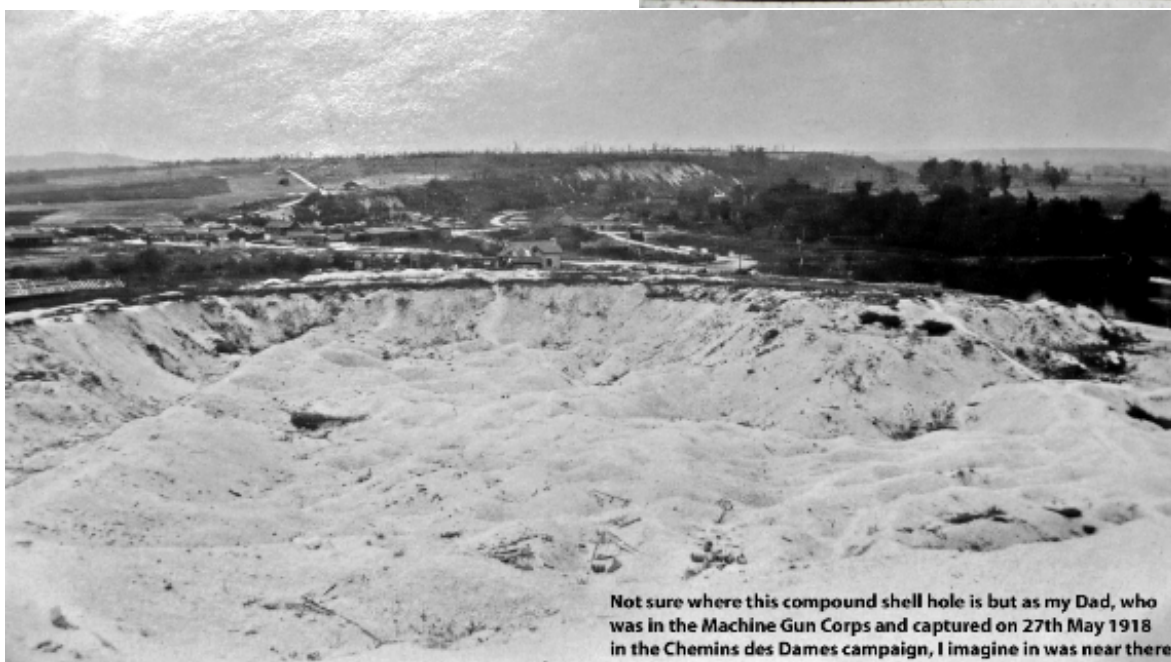
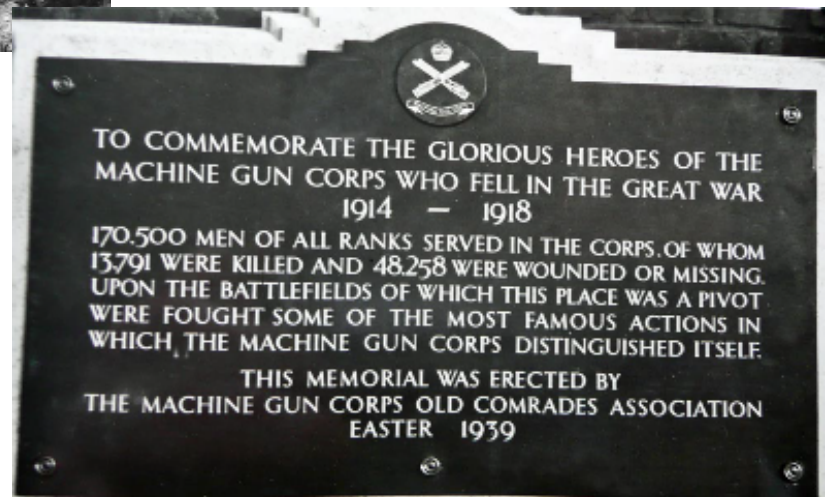
Craonelle from Chemins des Dame

A Block-house on the Fismes road



There has obviously been a certain amount of damage but the fabric of Rheims Cathedral appears to be in tact. There is a certain amount of debris on the pavement. (1920)

The Memorial on the right is at Grantham which was the Machine Gun Corp's Base.



Not sure where this compound shell hole is but as my Dad, who was in the Machine Gun Corps and captured on 27th May 1918 in the Chemins des Dames campaign, I imagine it was near there.