

**War Diary or Intelligence Summary: Army form
C. 2118
1918**

DIVISION MAIN DRESSING STATION—Remy Siding
Map Sheet 28; Grid reference: L.22 d.6.3

December 25th – Church Parade at which the following messages were read to the Battalion:

**CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FROM
THEIR MAJESTIES THE KING AND QUEEN**

Another Christmas has come round and we are no longer fighting. God has blessed your efforts. The Queen and I offer you our heartfelt good wishes for a happy Christmas and many brighter years to come. To the disabled, sick, and wounded, we send a special greeting, praying that with returning health you may be comforted and cheered by the vision of those good days of peace for which you have sacrificed so much.

GEORGE, R.I.

**MESSAGE TO HIS MAJESTY THE KING FROM
FIELD MARSHAL SIR DOUGLAS HAIG**

Your Majesty's gracious message has given universal pleasure to all ranks of the Armies in France. They join with me in sending most respectful thanks, and beg to be allowed to send to their King and Queen the earnest hope that the years to come

may bring your Majesties all happiness. The never failing confidence and encouragement which we have received from you, Sir, throughout the fluctuating fortunes of four and a half years of war have been ever a source of strength to us, and the gracious message which your Majesty has sent to the disabled, sick, and wounded will bring them comfort and reward.

Signed, D. Haig, F.M.

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FROM FIELD MARSHAL SIR
DOUGLAS HAIG TO ALLIED TROOPS

This Christmas Day sees our united efforts crowned with a glorious victory. I desire to wish all ranks of the Armies under my command a very happy Christmas and a brighter and happier New Year. The self-sacrifice, endurance, and devotion to duty of our troops have gained the admiration of the whole world, and at this time, when everything is being done to accelerate demobilisation, I feel sure that the same splendid qualities, which have carried us through these past years of war, will help strengthen us in reconstructing our Empire. My thoughts are with you all on this memorable Christmas Day, and I wish you God Speed.

Signed, D. Haig, F.M.

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‘I’m going to have to take his head off, sir!’

Jack plants a shovel in the soil. The flag by the open grave flaps in the breeze like an injured bird. A match flares and Jack cups his hand around the flame to light the Woodbine hanging from his lips. He shuts his eyes, inhaling deeply, turning his face to feel the warmth of the sun on his skin. ‘I’m sorry, lad.’ He looks into the hole and shakes his head. ‘I’m never going to get you out o’ there in one piece.’

Towards the top of the slope an officer in hand-tailored uniform is briefing the rest of Jack’s platoon. ‘Look for the signs,’ the man nods, pointing to a rathole with his swagger stick. ‘And take your time.’ A few of the soldiers look up. One picks dirt out of his fingernails, another watches as a group of starlings stab the ground with open beaks. A noisy squabble suddenly breaks out over grubs and worms, and then the birds are gone.

The bare strip of land below the crest of the hill west of Zonnebeke has been searched now two, three, four times, but that doesn’t mean the team don’t expect to find more bodies. Only now, they’ll be harder to spot. ‘Take care too.’ The sergeant – Townend – is narrowing his eyes as he looks at the men. ‘Remember to watch where you’re treading. There’s still

live shells lying around in these fields. Maybe pockets of gas, too.'

Each of the Army search teams is organised in the same way – a platoon commanded by a junior officer but with an NCO to supervise the dirty work. A survey officer from the Army Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries divides the featureless landscape into map squares, marker tapes are laid across the mud, then the men split up into their sections and line up. A whistle blows. The line moves. Heads are bowed, shoulders hunched. The pace is slow, the scrutiny meticulous.

'Body!' someone calls out, holding up a hand and stopping. The whistle blows again and the search line shuffles to a halt. Townend strides across to take a look. Another white marker flag is planted.

'Location, Sergeant?' Lieutenant Ingham, safely back aboard the little duckboard raft, waits – blue pencil poised above the 1:20,000 trench map.

'Er . . .' Townend squints at the compass he is holding, pushing back his cap and scratching his head with a muddy finger.

'Belgium, sir,' a voice shouts out.

The whistle blows. The laughter stops. The line moves on. And Jack Patterson appears with a shovel and a sack to start the digging.

'So, sir, as I were saying.'

'Saying, Patterson?'

'Yes, sir. About 'is head.'

'Couldn't quite catch what you were asking me back then.' Ingham – his boots now muddy – crouches by the hole Jack has been digging, staring at a skull that seems to be growing

like a swollen fungus out of the sodden ground. ‘What with the men—’

‘Aye, sir,’ Jack smiles. ‘Likes his little jokes does Ocker.’

‘Ocker?’

‘Private Gilchrist, sir.’

‘Ah, yes, yes. Gilchrist. Yes, of course.’ Ingham nods grimly.

‘It’s in the blood, y’know.’

‘The blood, sir?’

‘*Australian* . . .’ Ingham taps his nose. ‘Gilchrist, that is. “Ocker”, as you men call him.’

Jack squints into the low sun. Above his head the January sky is clear. From time to time small green-brown clouds of smoke drift from ammunition dumps the ordnance teams are detonating.

‘Well, sir. As I was saying—’

‘Yes, yes. Carry on.’

‘Well, sir . . . if you’d just take a look, sir, you’d be able to see for yourself.’ Jack nods towards the open grave, but Ingham isn’t coming any closer.

‘That’s the top of his head, sir, that is.’

‘Really? Yes, yes, I can see—’

‘Which means—’

‘Which means?’

‘Well you see, sir, that means he’s stuck fast, sir.’ Jack stands up, rubbing the small of his back, taking a long, last drag on his cigarette. ‘I’ll never get him out o’ here in one piece. Reckon I’m going to have to take his head off before I can even think about doing any proper digging.’

‘Yes, yes . . .’ Ingham shuts his eyes tight but the image still flashes vividly across his retina. ‘I see.’

‘Perhaps if I could have a bit o’ help, sir? Ocker – Gilchrist, sir – he’s right handy with a shovel.’

‘Mm, mm.’

‘Aye, sir. And Ocker don’t mind rummaging around in a dead fella’s pockets, neither, getting his hands all mucky feeling round for the cold meat ticket along with any other little bits and pieces.’

‘Cold meat ticket?’

‘Sorry, sir. Identity bracelet.’

‘Yes, man, I know what it is.’

‘Sir?’

‘I’m just not sure, well . . . Let’s show a little more respect shall we, Patterson?’

‘Aye, sir. Very good, sir.’

Ingham stands up, a little too quickly. ‘I’ll see if Sergeant Townend can spare someone,’ he rocks on his heels. ‘Private Fuller might be—’

Jack clears his throat and coughs, loudly.

‘Look – do you want some help extracting this corpse or don’t you, Patterson?’

‘Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.’

‘Very well then,’ Ingham swallows hard. ‘Continue with the exhumation for the time being.’ He clasps a gloved hand over his mouth. ‘And I’ll see if any of the search . . . team . . . can be . . . spared to help you.’

‘Very good, sir.’ Jack salutes casually. ‘Thank you, sir.’

Ingham nods quickly. In a splash of muddy boots he is gone, hurrying back to the top of the field, not bothering this time to avoid the puddles.

Little has changed here since the Armistice. Twisted clumps of rusted, tangled wire lie scattered where the last artillery bombardment tossed them. The ground is as wet as it was two years ago at Third Ypres. Why isn’t Ingham sinking? Jack is

wondering. Why aren't the enemy machine-guns cutting him down to size? Where is the Hun* artillery?

The men at the top of the slope are in no-man's-land, struggling to maintain a straight line as they walk through mud, across shell-holes and over the top of old trenches, prodding the ground with sticks every step of the way. Now and then one of them will stop and, crouching down, start probing the thick, green slime with a long, thin blade improvised from an old machine-gun cleaning rod. The sharpened point slices through the mud like a rapier and is sensitive to the slightest touch of what might be a body – but might equally be an unexploded shell.

‘Sergeant Townend?’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Can you spare a couple of your men? Patterson needs assistance with the latest body that he is exhuming.’

‘The search team’s gone and got another for him here, sir,’ Townend sighs, nodding to the latest marker flag he’s planted. ‘Sir?’

‘Sergeant Townend?’

‘We really can’t spare any more men for digging, sir.’

‘Yes, yes, I know we’re short of manpower, Sergeant. I’ve put in a request.’

‘There’s six – six – in Patterson’s section,’ Townend shrugs. ‘And one of them is worse than useless. And as for Gilchrist . . .’

‘We have to do what we can with the tools that we’ve got, Sergeant. It’s not ideal, I know . . .’

‘We’re going to run out of tarpaulins soon, sir, an’ all.’

‘Well then, in that case we’ll sew the bodies into sandbags,’

* See Glossary, page 380.

Ingham snaps. ‘Christ knows there’s not much left of these poor blighters any more.’

‘No, sir.’

‘And in the meantime, Patterson has a body—’

‘I’ll have to call “B” section’s search off, sir. There won’t be enough of ’em left to cover their map square.’

‘Then let “B” section concentrate on what’s already been found,’ Ingham says, ‘helping Patterson with the exhumation. The other men can carry on with their searches.’

‘Very good, sir.’ Townend blows the whistle and all the men stop walking. The flares of half-a-dozen half-smoked fags are followed by quick, desperate puffs of smoke. “B” Section – Gilchrist, MacIntyre?’

‘Yessir.’

‘Get down that hill and give Patterson an ’and, will you?’

‘Which one, Sarge?’

‘You what?’

‘Which hand?’

‘Ha-bloody-ha,’ Townend shakes his head. ‘And as for you’ – he turns on Fuller – ‘I don’t find anything here to laugh about, do you?’

‘N-n-no, sir!’

‘No! So you can just piss off down to that hole Patterson’s digging an’ all . . . before I dig you one of your own right here.’

‘Ye-es, sir!’

‘And Skerritt?’ Skerritt nods quickly, like a dog. ‘You might as well go with ’em. You’ll be bugger all use here on your own. And as for the rest o’ you’ – he turns back to the men in the other sections – ‘show’s over. Back to work.’

The whistle blows. The line moves on.

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‘So what have we got here then, Jacko?’ Ocker says, pulling on a large pair of thick rubber gloves and striding down the hill.

‘Boy or girl?’

‘You what?’ Jack pushes his cap back, scratching his forehead with a muddy finger.

‘Jeez! Not flamin’ twins, is it?’

‘Why don’t you take a look for yourself, Ocker lad.’ Jack steps to one side, leaning on his shovel. ‘Be my guest.’ The men gather round the hole. Someone whistles through his teeth.

‘Here you go, mate.’ Ocker is crouching by the corpse, taking the cigarette stub from his lips.

‘Don’t you—’

‘Yer bloody daft—’

‘Oh come on, mate,’ Ocker looks up, still holding his fag end to the corpse’s teeth. ‘He was bloody gasping! Looks like he hasn’t had a smoke in years!’

‘Aye, and it looks like young Fuller here is about to donate him a bit o’ second-hand breakfast to go with the baccy you’ve just given him,’ says Jack.

‘Oh Jeez, you’re right – he’s gonna perk.’

‘Then get him away from my trench – quick!’

MacIntyre is suddenly dragging Fuller by the collar. ‘Well done, Jacko,’ he shouts over his shoulder. The sound of Fuller’s retching is growing louder. ‘Lovely turn of phrase, as usual.’

‘Sorry, Mac.’

‘Don’t mention it, son.’

Jack steps back into the hole, picking up his shovel. ‘Aye, well. I’ve enough on getting this landowner out of here in one piece without clearing up the contents of that lad’s stomach an’ all. There’ll be six foot o’ shovelling just to get down to this fella’s boots, I reckon. If he’s wearing any.’

‘Then let’s hope that he is,’ says Ocker, climbing back into the shallow trench.

‘For your sake, maybe.’

‘For all our sakes, Jacko. A nice pair of boots and a maker’s name’ll make everything we have to do a lot easier. Let’s face it, there’s not a lot else here to go on.’

But Jack is crouching down beside the body, idly rubbing his thumb against one of the remaining brass shoulder titles. ‘Not so fast, Ocker. We might not need to dig so deep to find out t’fella’s shoe size after all – look!’ A glint of metal flashes briefly in the sun. ‘What d’you make o’ this then, lad? I reckon you can just about make out t’regiment here, if you look close enough.’

‘It’s down to my quick work that you can make out anything at all, Jacko.’ Mac joins them, squatting on his haunches, watching as Ocker slowly wipes away another layer of sticky filth accumulated on the tattered epaulettes. ‘If I hadn’t given young Fuller the order of the boot just now, you’d not have seen anything for his bellyful of bacon and eggs.’

Ocker nips out his cigarette and leans forward, polishing the brass letters on the tattered fragment of army uniform with a gloved finger. ‘What do you reckon, mate. Is that an “F” or a “B”?’

‘Can’t tell. We ought to get Skerritt over to take a dekkoo.’

‘Eyes like a eagle, that fella!’

‘Eyes is about all Fritz left intact on him an’ all, poor sod. Hey, clean a bit more o’ that crap off it, will you?’

Ocker blows the last of the remaining dirt from the metal letter. ‘It’s an “F”, mate – look! A flamin’ “F” . . . for certain.’

‘Bloody hell!’

‘Yup, and there’s an “R” and an “F” and then . . . nothing. But there would’ve been something . . . there, look – the last letter’s broken off, you can see where it’s snapped.’

‘Flying Corps?’

‘Reckon so, mate. That’s why he’s flamin’ well standing to attention. Must’ve fallen out of the sky and sunk straight into the mud like a Mills bomb.’

‘Rubbish, son – he’s a Fusilier, surely?’ Mac squints to take a closer look. ‘That’s all there is – “R” and “F”. Why do ye have to go imagining a “C” that’s snapped off?’

‘What does an Aussie know about the British Army anyway?’

‘Leave off, fellas – look, there’s no trace of a hackle!’

‘No? He’s right, Mac. There’s no hackle here.’

‘Rifle Brigade, then?’

‘It’s an “F”, Mac, not a flamin’ “R”. I’ve already told you.’

A deep thud shakes the earth. A cloud of brown smoke, much nearer now, drifts across the battlefield. Instinct kicks in and the men all duck briefly for cover, before standing up and carrying on as if nothing’s happened. Fuller, however, is lying flat in the grave with his fingers in his ears.

‘You must be desperate, mate,’ says Ocker. ‘That’s all I can say.’

‘You what?’ The boy looks up, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

‘You and this fella.’ He nods in the direction of the grinning skull, just inches away from Fuller’s moist face. ‘I just hope you’ll both be very happy together.’

‘Aye,’ says Jack. ‘And we’ll all be invited to t’wedding. But let’s just get him out of this shithole shall us, before you two decide to start arranging anything?’

‘Oh . . . Jesus . . . fuckin’ . . . Christ!’ Fuller is scrambling to get out of the hole as quickly as he got in.

‘I reckon the wedding’s off,’ Jack laughs.

‘Hey, Fuller?’ The boy turns. ‘Make yourself useful. Go and fetch us some sandbags, will you?’

‘OK, skip!’

‘And bring us a bucket while you’re at it?’

‘A bucket?’ Fuller shouts over his shoulder. ‘What the fuck d’you want a bucket for?’

‘So you can build some flamin’ sand castles,’ Ocker calls out. ‘What the bloody hell do you think I want it for?’