

# ALFRED EDWARD SYSON – PART TWO – FIRST WORLD WAR – 1914 AND EARLY 1915

## START OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR:

The spark that led to the First World War, the assassination in Sarajevo, took place on 28 June 1914. Russia mobilised on 30 July, the Germans on 1 August and the French on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Germany invaded Belgium on 3 August and Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August.

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF), comprising 4 Divisions and the Cavalry Division crossed to France between the period 9 and 17 August, landed mostly at Le Havre and by the 22<sup>nd</sup> had taken up positions aligned along the canal west of Mons (see Maps One and Two – pages 2 and 5). On 23 August, the German advance came up against the BEF. Notwithstanding that the British stopped the German attack in their area, they were required to retire to keep abreast of the withdrawal of the French (the Fifth Army to their right and some French Territorial Divisions between them and the sea). Thus the “Retreat from Mons” started. This withdrawal ended at the Battle of the Marne during the period 6 – 9 September. The Allies subsequently advanced again but were held by the Germans on the Aisne. By 16 September the British were digging in and the static warfare started. During the period 1 to 14 October, the BEF were transferred West from the Aisne to Flanders and were in positions between Bethune and Ypres. Filling the gap between Ypres and the sea was the British 7<sup>th</sup> Division (about which more later) and the Belgian Army, which had withdrawn from Antwerp. (see Map Five page 19). There is also a rather complicated map at the end of this Section page 22)

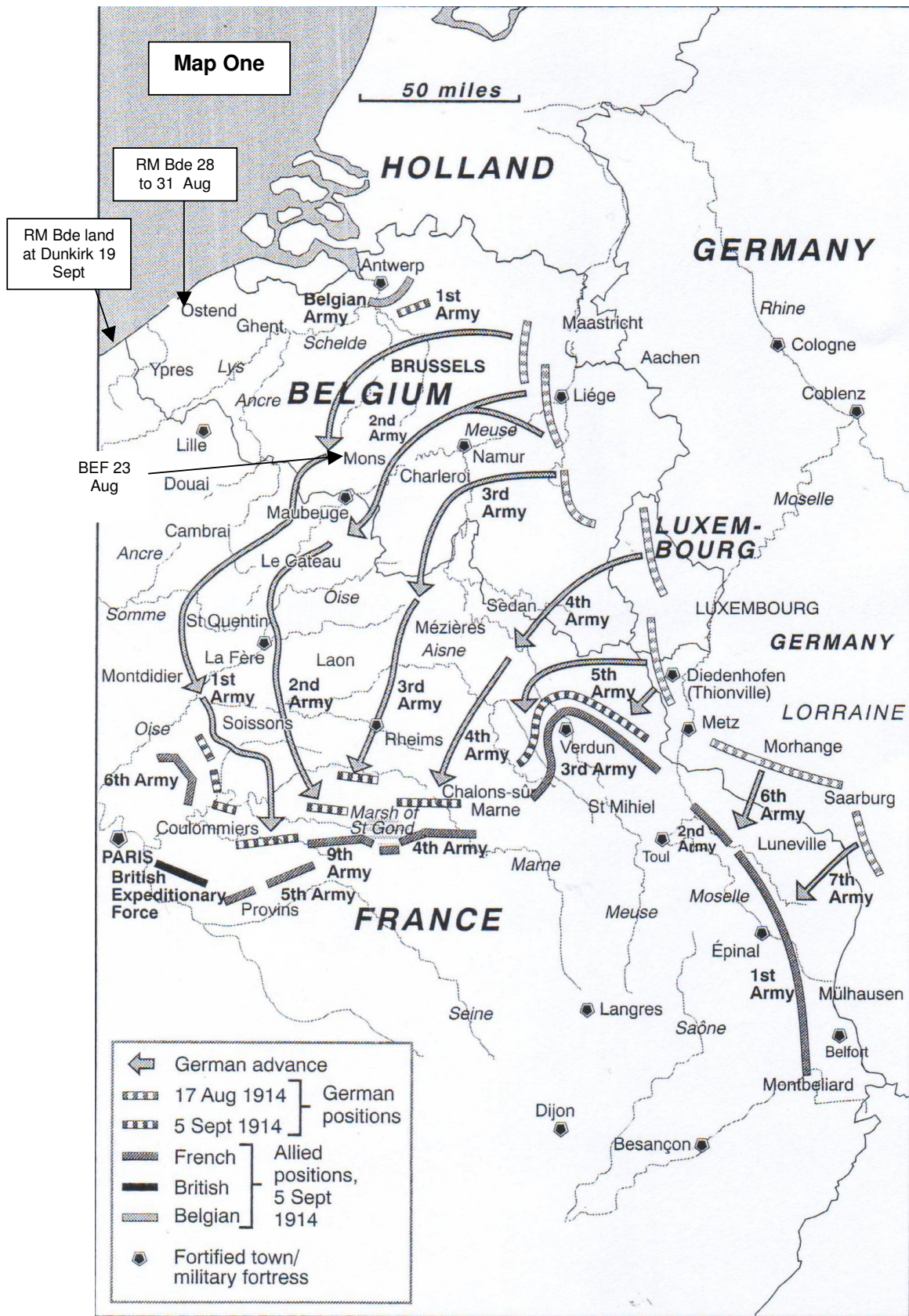
## INITIAL RECALL

On 31 July 1914, AES was recalled to the RMLI, though he apparently didn't rejoin then, because on that date, Mabel just records “Serious news”. On 2 August Mabel records that AES was called out of the 11 o'clock Chapel Service during the last hymn, with orders from the Admiralty. They left at 3 pm to Oxford and then on to Woodcote to get some keys from “Ada”, arriving at 9.15 and were packing his uniform till 1.30 in the morning

His Service Record shows that he went initially back to the Portsmouth Division of the RMLI at Forton and was then transferred to the Royal Marine Brigade (Portsmouth Battalion) on 13 September. It is probable that the 13 Sept date related to an administrative change for his pay arrangements, as he had already joined the Brigade in August. His Record of Active Service shows that he was at Ostend 26 August to 1 September and at the defence of Antwerp on 13 October. Apart from his Service Records, our knowledge of AES as an individual during this period is scanty. There are a couple of relevant diary entries by Mabel and in a letter to Mabel in 1915, after he was wounded he referred briefly to Antwerp. A description of the withdrawal from Antwerp, by a Major in the Portsmouth Battalion of the RM Brigade mentions Syson by name. But, for the rest, we are dependant on histories of the Marine Brigade.

Plans for a Royal Marines “Flying Column” had been drawn up by the Admiralty in 1912-13. It was decided that 50% of the RM detachments of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Reserve Fleets were to consist of Royal Fleet Reserve personnel, so that Active Service Marines could be released for service in the Column, which was to be completed by Reservists. On 2 August, the Admiralty ordered the formation of this flying Column, which was to become the Royal Marine Brigade. The Royal Marine Artillery and each of the Depots: Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth each provided a Battalion. The original Brigade Commander was Major General EL McCausland RMLI and the CO's of the Battalions were:

RMA	Lt Col GM Campbell
Chatham	Lt Col C McN Parsons
Portsmouth	Lt Col FW Luard
Plymouth	Lt Col GE Matthews



*The German advance, 1914*

It is not clear why the Royal Marine Artillery (RMA) should have provided an Infantry Battalion, maybe there were no guns for them at the time. AES must have joined the Portsmouth Battalion as OC C Company at some time between 2 and 7 August.

By a great deal of exertion by all concerned, the Brigade was concentrated in the area of Portsmouth on 7 August: the RMA and Chatham at Eastney; Portsmouth and Plymouth at Forton and Browdown. Training started and the organisation began to get into shape. Until after the Ostend deployment great difficulty was experienced in finding equipment for the Battalions and they were pretty well equipped as Infantry only. The Battalions were very short of officers and many of the Reservists were too old. On 20 August for some reason, the Battalions were returned to their own Headquarters and the Brigade staff were dispersed.

## DEPLOYMENT TO OSTEND

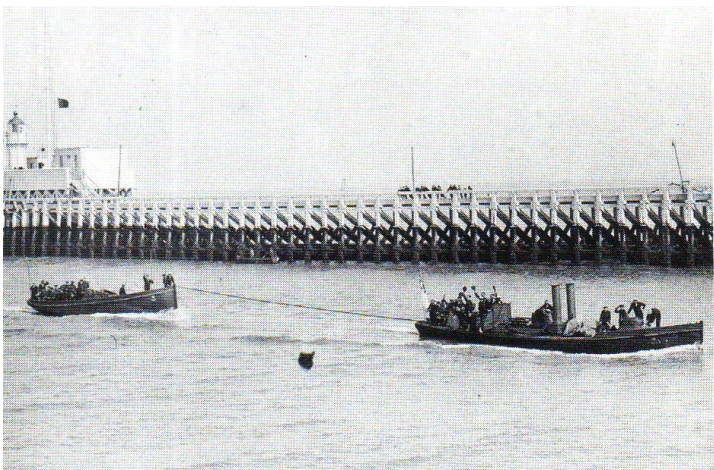


Then at 1900 on 25 August orders were given that the Brigade were to proceed to Ostend that night. Brigadier Sir George Aston (from the Admiralty Plans Division) was appointed in command and went to Chatham to take over. The Chatham Battalion was embarked that night at Sheerness in the Cruisers of the Southern Force EURYALUS and ABOUKIR under Admiral Christian. The RMA and Portsmouth Battalions were embarked at Portsmouth in Ships of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron (under Rear Admiral Curry) HM Ships PRINCE OF WALES, VENERABLE, FORMIDABLE and

IRRESISTABLE. The Plymouth Battalion embarked in VENGEANCE, GOLIATH, PRINCE GEORGE and CAESAR under Admiral Bethell.



HMS FORMIDABLE of the  
7<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron



**Troops from the RMA Bn  
going ashore at Ostend**

All 4 Battalions landed at Ostend on the 28<sup>th</sup>. (see Map Two, page 5) There were no Brigade staff, so Capt Sketchley, Adjutant of the Portsmouth Battalion, became Brigade Major and Captain MC Festing took over as Adjutant.

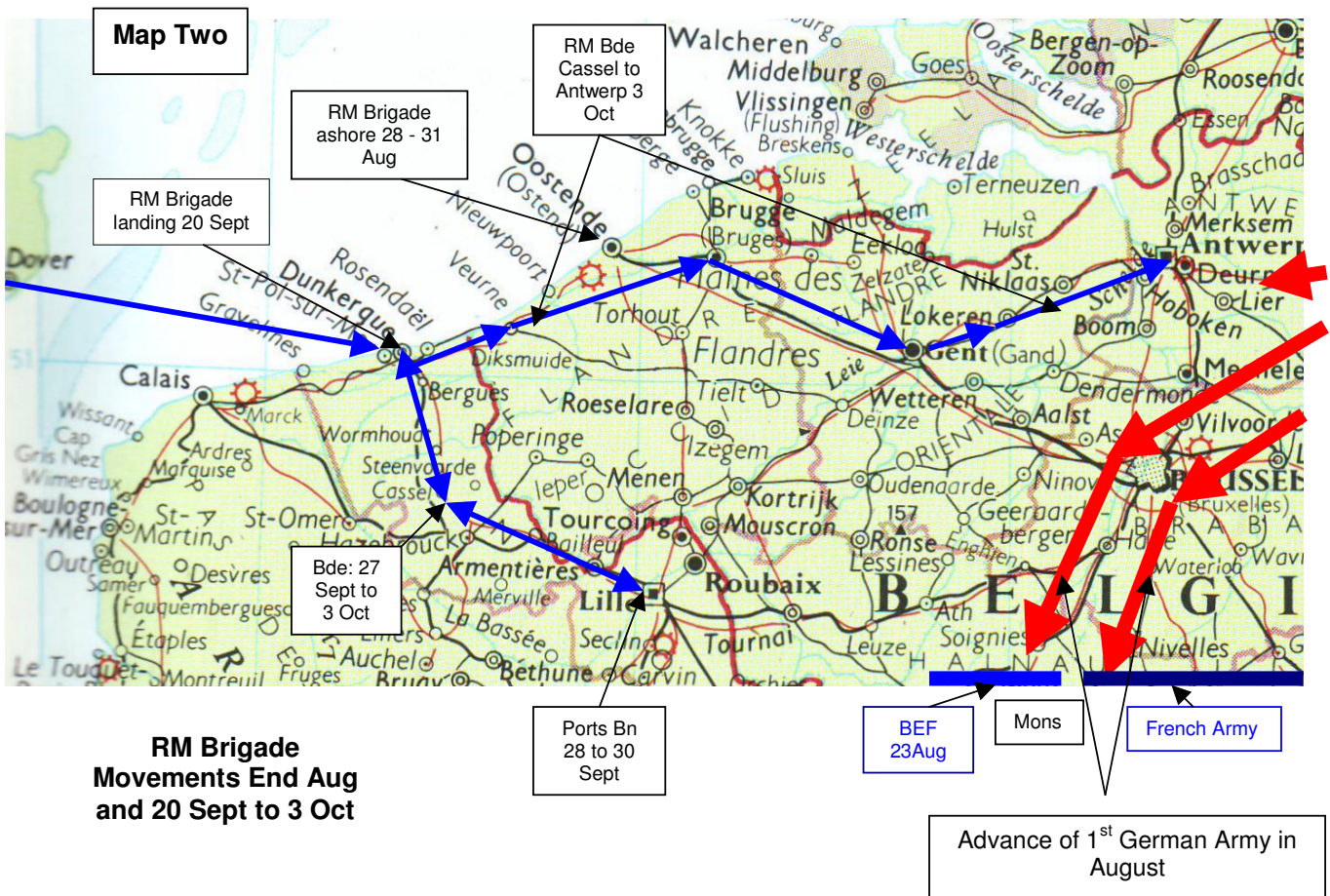
The Brigade took up positions outside Ostend along a line Mariakerke, Bruges Railway, Bassin de Chasse, Seacoast and started digging. The roads leading to Ostend were occupied and cyclist patrols were pushed out to try and gain touch with the enemy. By 1300 on 28<sup>th</sup> General Aston reported that they were established. Positions were strengthened on the 29 and 30<sup>th</sup> and reconnaissance took place. At 2200 on the 30<sup>th</sup> Aston reported that the area between the sea and the line Dunkirk, Lille, Tournai and Ghent was clear of the enemy. Some cars of the RNAS were with them and one car got as far as Menin where there were still German troops.

By this time, however there was concern for the 7<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron. Because of the limited depth of water, the Squadron had to remain some miles off the coast and were open to attack by submarines. As the Brigade could not affect anything more, at midnight on 30<sup>th</sup> they were ordered back to UK. The orders were received at 0400 on 31<sup>st</sup> and by 1700 they and their stores had re-embarked and were on passage back to their home ports.

This deployment took place as a diversion during the Allied withdrawal from Mons; the Battle of Le Cateau having taken place on the 26th. The purpose was to divert the Germans away from their main line of advance as they marched into France executing the Schlieffen Plan. Accounts published after the war showed that the Germans believed they were the Advanced Guard of a larger force and this had some effect on German plans, it being considered possible that it might be a precursor to a Russian landing.

## DEPLOYMENT TO FRANCE:

On return to UK, the RMA Battalion was withdrawn from the Brigade and absorbed into the Howitzer and Anti-Aircraft Brigades. A fourth Battalion, Deal, was formed by taking one company from each of the other Battalions. The Deal CO was Lt Col RD Beith. All men with gunnery ratings were withdrawn from the Brigade, together with the older Reservists and some of the Regular Officers. For a short time, the Battalions were numbered 9, 10 11 and 12 but soon reverted to the names of Chatham, Portsmouth, Plymouth and Deal. The Battalions were ordered to be raised to a strength of 750 each, but this could only be done by drafting in recruits from Deal who had not completed their training. 605 joined that way, of which 265 were under the age of 18. Sir George Aston RMA remained in command with Major Sketchley as BM and Lt Col HD Farquharson as DAQMG. The Brigade was concentrated at Freedown, Walmer on 12 September and settled down to assimilate its recruits and get on with its training. Clothing and equipment began to come in, but no transport. It was now known as the Third Brigade of the Royal Naval Division. The First and Second Brigades were RN with men from the RNR and RNVR. The Division appeared also to be infantry only without supporting arms or services.



During the German advance to the Marne, Antwerp had been besieged, but only by second-line German formations. The coastal area of Belgium and France south west of Antwerp had been generally bypassed by the forces of both sides. However once the line had stabilised about the time of the middle of September, the "Race to the Sea" started, with both sides aiming to outflank the other and reach the sea along the Belgian/French coast as far forward as possible. From the allied viewpoint, the ideal would be to have a line that ran northward including keeping Antwerp in Allied hands. However the Germans too were extending to the West.

At midnight on 18/19 September, only a couple of weeks after returning from Ostend, the Royal Marine Brigade was ordered to leave for Dunkirk the following morning. On the 19<sup>th</sup> Mabel received a wire from AES not to go back to Deal as they were "off again". The role of the Force, in General Joffre's words were "to act effectively and constantly against the enemy's communications". At noon on the 19<sup>th</sup> they embarked at Dover in the LAKE MICHIGAN and the CITY OF EDINBURGH, crossed the Channel again and landed at Dunkirk on the 20<sup>th</sup>. (see Map Two) They were billeted there for 4 days and then went under canvas to the Champs de Manoeuvre. Some transport had been provided, 90 buses had been purchased by the RN Division and they went by road to Southampton where they were shipped across the Channel. There were also 50 motor owner drivers who went over with their cars.



Twin Screw Steamer  
LAKE MICHIGAN

On 25 September General Aston was placed on the sick list and his place was taken by Colonel A Paris CB RMA who at some stage became a Brigadier General. On 27<sup>th</sup>, Paris moved his headquarters 20 miles inland to Cassel and concentrated the Chatham, Deal and Plymouth Battalions there. The recruits were left at Dunkirk. The Portsmouth Battalion was moved forward to Lille to cover the retirement of some French detachments at Douai, Tournai and Orchies. The Brigade was supported by the Oxfordshire Hussars, the first Territorial Army Unit to deploy to France. At this stage, the main Allied front extended only to Arras with the 50 miles between there and Dunkirk very weakly held. Apart from the RM Brigade, there was a French formation at Tournai, but these forces were negligible compared to the German forces that might come up against them.

## THE DEFENCE OF ANTWERP

On 25 September the Belgians had made preparations for a major attack from Antwerp. This was reduced when it was obvious that the Germans too were going to attack. Some allied progress was made but the operation was brought to an end when the Germans, supported by heavy artillery, reacted strongly. By 28 September, the Germans were attacking Antwerp again and by 2 October, the Belgians were considering withdrawing their Field Army out of Antwerp to the South West to Ostend, leaving only the Fortress troops there.

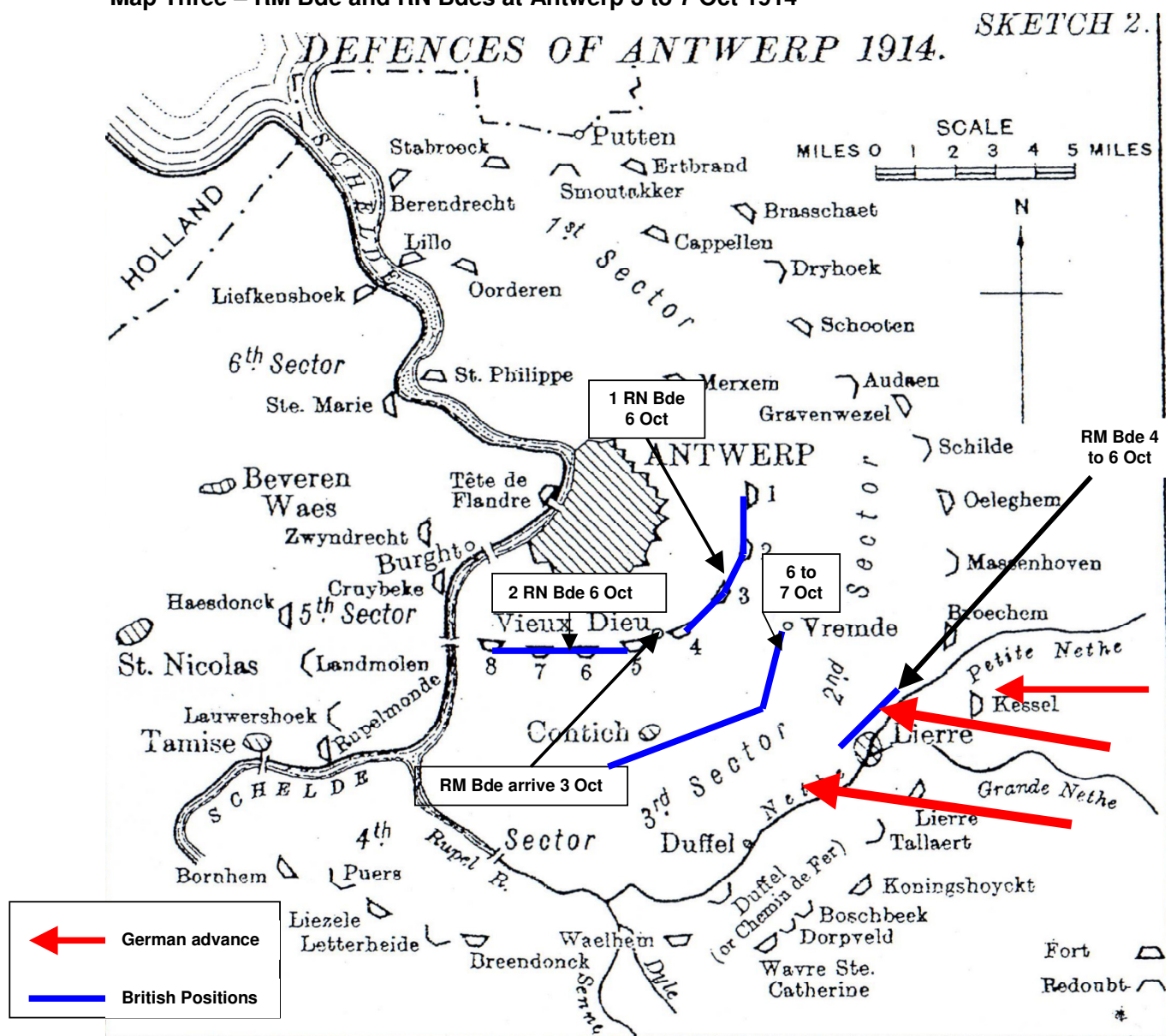
By this time the RM Brigade were concentrated back in Cassel, having withdrawn the battalion from Lille under the increasing menace of the German advance. To attempt to dissuade the Belgians from leaving Antwerp, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty went over to Antwerp for discussions with their Government. Early on the morning of 3 October (Map Two), the Marine Brigade was ordered to proceed to Antwerp to assist in holding the place. They entrained in cattle trucks at 0830 and travelled via Dunkirk and Bruges with machine guns mounted in the trucks in case of attack. At 2300 they arrived at Vieux Dieux Station about six miles East of Antwerp and between Numbers 4 and 5 of the Inner Forts. (See Map Three page 8) They went into billets at Edyghem at about 0400.

#### **4 October**

The Brigade as a whole comprised only 69 Officers and 2016 men (equating to about 500 per Battalion). The Brigade was put under command of Lieutenant General Guiette, commanding the 5<sup>th</sup> Division and early on the morning of 4 October they marched along the Lierre Road to take the place in the line of the exhausted 21<sup>st</sup> Belgian Infantry Regiment behind Lierre (South East of Antwerp) in the trenches north of the Petit Nethe. The Belgian Infantry to the left (7<sup>th</sup> Belgian Infantry) and some guns were put under General Paris' command. The 7th Regiment, Chatham, Plymouth and Deal were in the line. Portsmouth Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Carbineers and the machine guns of the RNAS were in reserve. The trenches were wide and not good, 6 feet wide and only 3 feet deep with no dugouts and no protection from shrapnel or HE shells. The Brigade immediately set to to improve them. The position was the key to the defence of Antwerp because it was the sector in which the Germans had broken through the outer line of forts. As long as the line of rivers was held though, the Germans could not get their guns across to bombard the city.

Left to right the Battalions were Deal, Plymouth and Chatham. Each Battalion found a company to hold the crossings of the river. The Deal Company Outpost was commanded by Major WH Pryce Brown and held the third crossing. Pryce Brown was mortally wounded that afternoon and there were other casualties. The advanced post of Plymouth (Maj AE Bewes) was placed in the village of Lierre so that it commanded the bridge over the River Nethe. The post was attacked by Germans, who came under fire from machine guns and about 200 were killed. However the Germans brought up a gun, which destroyed the outpost position and the Company had to withdraw. The Chatham Advanced Post was commanded by Maj Shubrick and they and the Battalion machine guns were at the canal bridge covering the road into Lierre. Chatham had a good deal of fighting with rifle and machine guns and suffered several casualties.

Map Three – RM Bde and RN Bdes at Antwerp 3 to 7 Oct 1914



That afternoon (the 4<sup>th</sup>) Fort Kessel, East of Lierre was abandoned and destroyed by the Belgians. Half of the Portsmouth Battalion were then also sent into the trenches. During the night 4/5 October, The Germans brought field guns up to the banks of the rivers and opened fire at short range, so the advanced posts were ordered to retire.

On the same day (4 October), the Germans crossed the River Dendre and endeavoured to cross the Scheldt at Schoonarde and Termonde (see map Four, page 15) all about 20 miles South West of Antwerp.

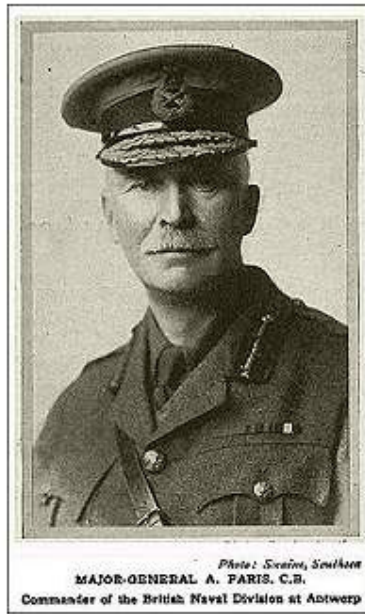
*THE TIMES HISTORY OF THE WAR.*



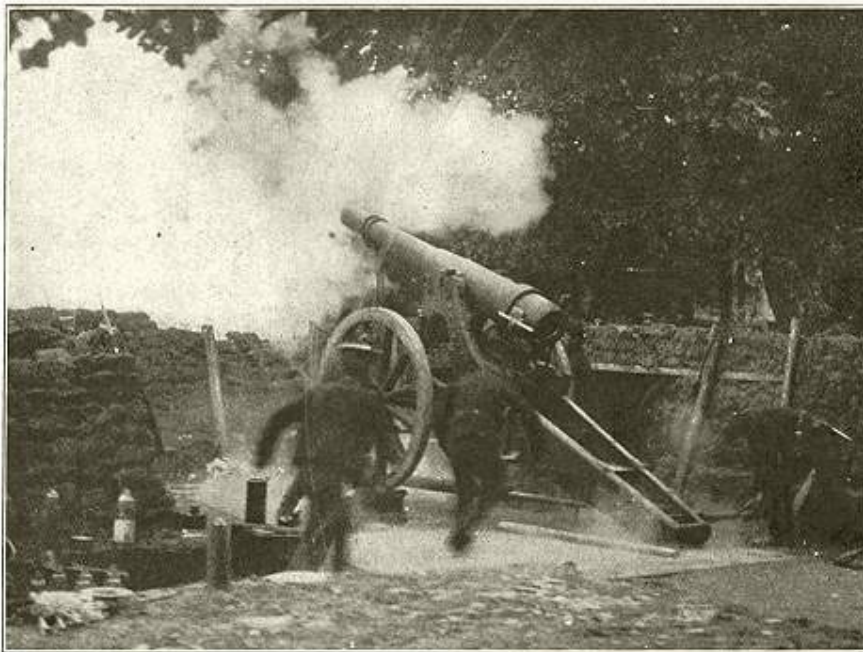
**MARINES MARCHING TO THE TRENCHES.**



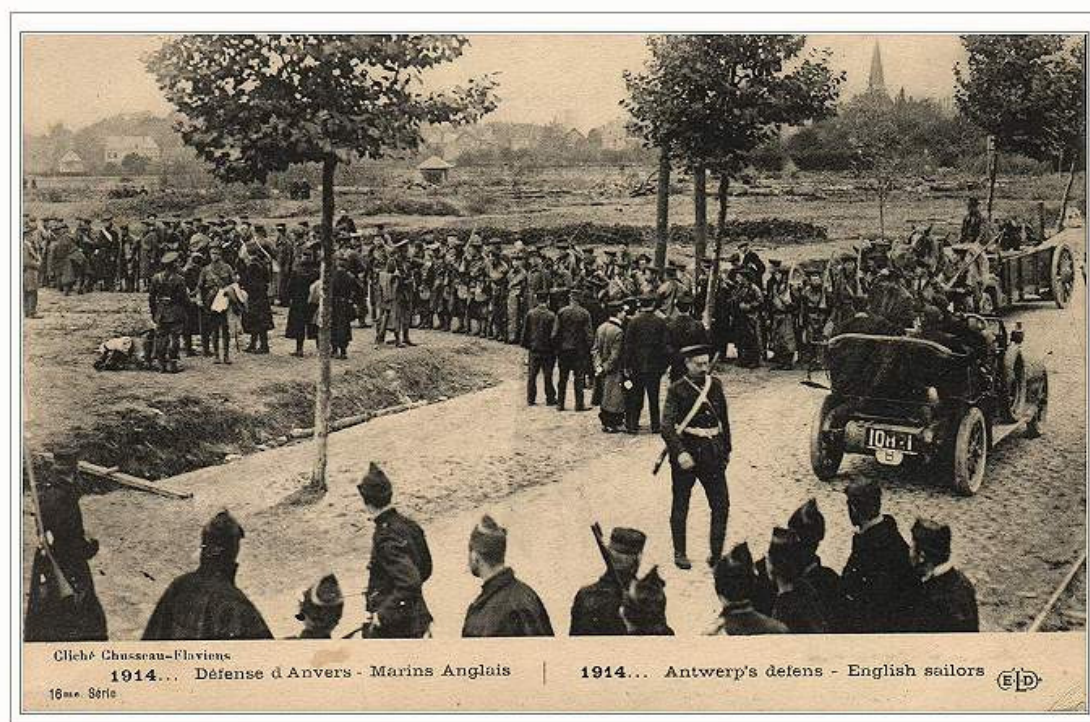
**British entrenchments at Lierre, outside Antwerp**



*THE TIMES HISTORY OF THE WAR.*



**BRITISH AND BELGIANS JOIN HANDS IN WORKING THE GUNS.**



British Marines on the outskirts of Antwerp. Note the tower of the cathedral in the distance.  
 Belgian soldiers look on while a car with civilians (perhaps news reporters) passes



## NAVAL HEROES OF ANTWERP DEFENCE.



Men of the British Naval Division which made a gallant effort to save Antwerp. Top: Marines and sailors in the trenches. Inset: Marines with a Maxim gun holding the road to Lierre. Bottom: bringing ammunition to the trenches

## With the Antwerp Garrison in the Town and in the Trenches



A British armoured motor-car in the town. To the very last the sight of a British sailor or Marine was an occasion for cheers, even though those who cheered knew that our men were too few in numbers, and too short of big guns, to be materially helpful.

### NAVAL BRIGADE HEROES IN ANTWERP.



A photograph taken on the outskirts of Antwerp after it was decided to evacuate the town. British sailors are to be seen riding in the familiar London omnibuses.

### 5 October

Early next morning on the 5<sup>th</sup>, the enemy succeeded in crossing the river in the area of Lierre and the 7<sup>th</sup> Belgian regiment were forced to evacuate their trenches. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Chasseurs, the 7<sup>th</sup> Regiment and the Portsmouth Battalion counterattacked that afternoon at 1630 and drove the

Germans back across the River. The 7<sup>th</sup> and the two Companies of Portsmouth reoccupied their trenches and the other two Companies went into reserve.

## 6 October

At dawn on the 6<sup>th</sup>, the Germans attacked the Belgians on the right of the RM Brigade in force, in the vicinity of Boomlar and De Holst and the Belgians withdrew. During the 6<sup>th</sup> the trenches of the RM Brigade were subject to very heavy shelling, causing a great many casualties and in the afternoon they became untenable. As there was now no support on the right, the Marine Brigade was withdrawn and retired about 4 miles to the line Vremde-Boschoek, where they dug in. Positions had already been partly prepared by Belgian Engineers. The retirement was carried out in good order with rearguards of a Company from each Battalion and the positions were taken up by dusk. From the right the line was Chatham, Plymouth, Portsmouth and Deal. First Naval Brigade were to the right of Deal. (This last sentence doesn't entirely tie in with the statement below which puts the RN Brigades further in on the line of the Inner Forts, one comes from Blumberg and the other from Land Operations. The careful reader will notice further minor inconsistencies later in the descriptions which I have lifted from various documents, without being able to determine which is more accurate)

Late on 5 October the Naval Brigades arrived in Antwerp. On 4 October, the decision had been taken to deploy the two Naval Brigades of the Naval Division (the RM Brigade being the third). This formation had been approved on 14 August. The RN Brigades were a hotch potch of Seamen and Stokers of the RNR and RNVr reinforced by about 2,000 New Army recruits. The Naval Brigades were largely untrained, were poorly equipped and the Division had virtually no supporting arms or services. The two Brigades crossed from Dover to Dunkirk on the night of 4/5 October. On 6 October the Brigades were deployed between the Inner Forts, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade between Forts 1 to 5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade between Forts 5 to 8, close to the Scheldt.

At this time General Paris assumed command of the whole Naval Division, as an Acting Major General. Maj Sketchley became GSO2 of the Divisional HQ, Captain Festing became the Brigade Major and Major Burge was Adjutant of the Portsmouth Battalion. Lt Col Ollivant, an Army officer, was the GSO1 of the Divisional HQ. Lt Col Blumberg (author of Sea Soldiers) had been appointed the AA and QMG on 2 October. Colonel AE Marchant was appointed to command the RM Brigade, but until he arrived from UK late on the 6<sup>th</sup>, Lt Col Parsons (CO of Chatham) commanded the Brigade.

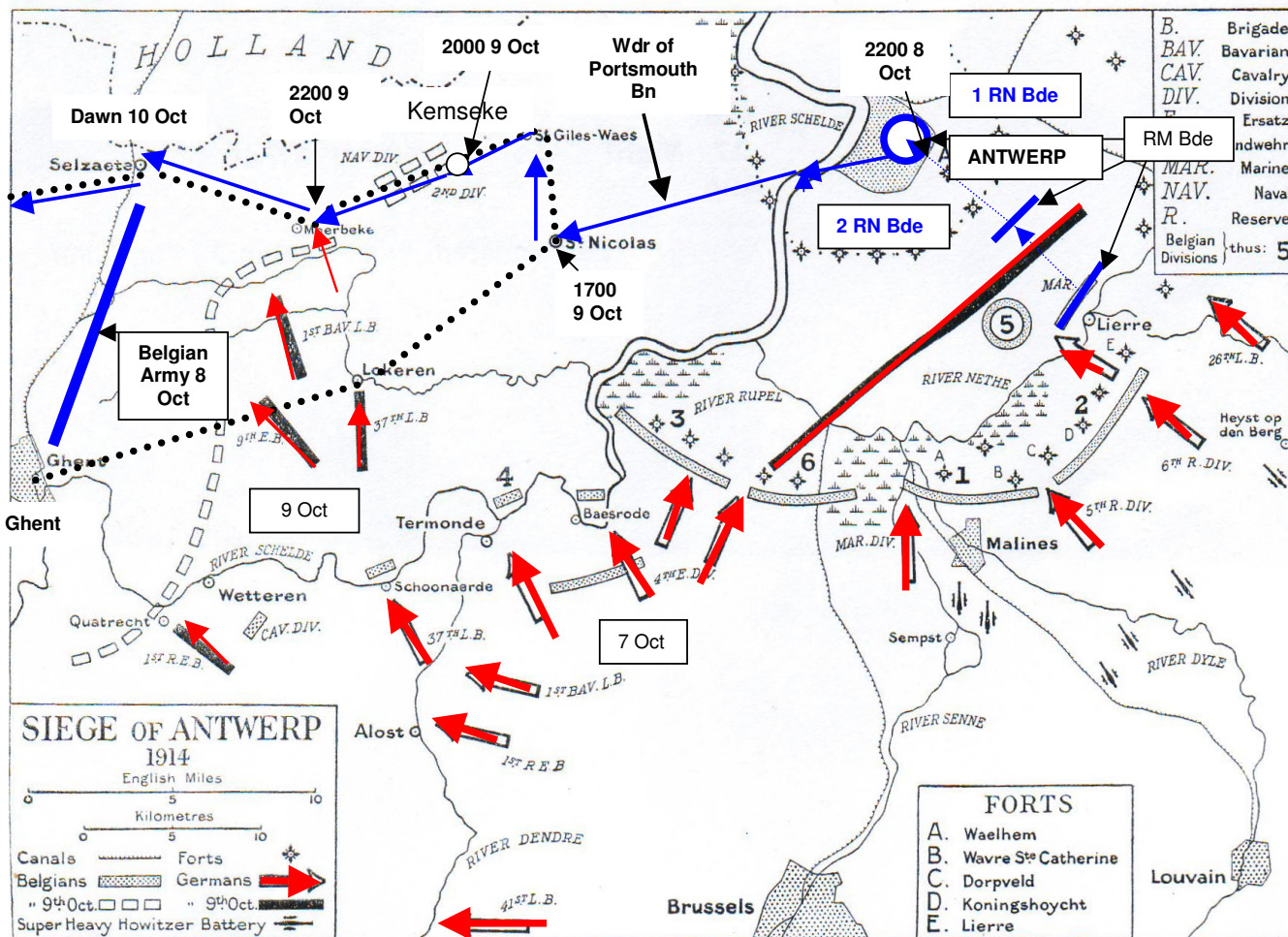
The new Belgian line ran South from Vremde to the Antwerp-Lierre road and then SW passing South of Contich. The RM Brigade then held positions East of the Antwerp Lierre road. Unfortunately this new defensive line, only 5 miles from the City, meant that the City of Antwerp would be in range of the German Heavy Artillery once it was moved up, so the fate of the city was pretty well sealed.

During the 5 and 6 October the Germans had made serious, though unsuccessful attempts to force the Scheldt SW of Antwerp at Schoonarde, at Termonde and at Bessrod. Furthermore 60 miles to the West the Germans were advancing towards Ypres. At this stage the BEF were only beginning to leave the Aisne so there was a serious danger that the corridor from Antwerp south of the Dutch border to the sea and thence to the remainder of the Allied line might be cut.

At this time the 7<sup>th</sup> Division plus the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry Division were on their way from UK to land at Ostend and Zeebrugge and then operate, with other Allied troops, along the Coastal area of Belgium west of the Scheldt to relieve Antwerp (See Map Five, page 19). However by 6 October they still hadn't reached Belgium. At that stage Lieutenant General Sir Henry Rawlinson was given command both of this relieving force and of the British force in Antwerp. Churchill had offered to command the latter, but this was declined by the British Government.

It was agreed between the Belgian authorities, Churchill and Rawlinson that the Belgian Army should evacuate to the West side of the Scheldt on the night of 7 October, with the Belgian 2 Division and the RN Division covering the withdrawal. Rawlinson left Antwerp with Churchill on 6

October. By this time there was only a narrow corridor 100km long down which the Allies could withdraw to Ostend and beyond into the Westhoek.



**Map Four – Antwerp 7 to 10 Oct – The Withdrawal**

- ..... Railway line
- ← Withdrawal of Portsmouth Battalion
- Allied positions
- German advance

## 7 October

About two hours before dawn, the RM Brigade were ordered to evacuate the trenches and retire to the inner defences of the city (see Map Four). This was fortunate as at dawn the German Artillery "made mincemeat of the trenches they had vacated".

The RM Brigade withdrew into reserve near the Cinema Film Factory at Chateau Rouge, West Donk. The RN Brigades occupied the trenches and forts of the inner line in conjunction with the Belgian fortress troops.

By 7 October, the British 7<sup>th</sup> Division had landed and took up positions at Brugge near the Belgian Coast, before being moved forward to hold Ghent (half way to Antwerp) while the Belgians withdrew (Map Five). However on 8 October the Division were still around Ostend. It was now clear that they would not be able to relieve Antwerp. .

On 7 Oct, the Germans did succeed in crossing the Scheldt at Schoonaarde in boats and the Belgian 6 Division were unable to dislodge them. By this time the corridor between the Germans at Schoonaarde and the Dutch border was only 12 miles wide. So the Belgian Field Army had only withdrawn from Antwerp just in time. It was then decided that the Belgian Army should withdraw behind the Terneuzen Canal, which runs north from Ghent to the Dutch border.

On 7 October Mabel records, somewhat cryptically, in her diary "Marines at Antwerp".

### **8 to 10 October and Withdrawal from Antwerp**

From 8 October the deliberate bombardment of Antwerp by the Germans started. During the next few days, 500,000 civilians left the city in the direction of Ghent, Ostend and Holland. On the same day the Germans reinforced their forces at Schoonaarde and advanced guards were nearly at Lokarden, 8 miles North of the Scheldt and the same distance from the Dutch border. (See Map Four)

On 8 October, the German Infantry also began a fresh assault on the old fortress line. On the right, the Belgian Fortress troops had retired and at 0700, their place was taken by Chatham Battalion, between the Scheldt and Redoubt Number 6.

That day it was agreed that the Belgian 2 Division and the Naval Division should withdraw out of Antwerp across the Scheldt. By this time the Germans were up against and in some places through the line of the Inner Forts.

There were 2 lines of railway available out of Antwerp. Starting at St Nicolas on the West side of the Scheldt and about 8 miles from Antwerp, a double line ran through Lokeren to Ghent and there diverged. However because of the German advance that was considered unusable. The other, single, line ran close to the Dutch border from St Nicolas via St Gilles Waes, Moerbeke and Salzaete to Bruges and beyond. General Rawlinson's staff made what arrangements they could for trains to meet the Division outside Antwerp.

During the day the Belgian Army west of the Scheldt began their withdrawal and by the night 8/9 most were back on the line of the Ghent Selzate Canal. Rear guards were left at Loochristy and Lokeren to assist the withdrawal of the British and the Belgian 2 Division.

Between 2030 and 2130 the Belgian 2 Div withdrew across the lower (North) Bridge. They then marched westward via Vracenne (8 miles west of the Scheldt), where they rested for 3 hours, then on to St Gilles Waes, to Morboeke which they reached about midday on the 9<sup>th</sup> and rejoined the main Belgian Army at Salzaete. This was a thirty mile march which they achieved without trouble apart from the congestion on the roads caused by the columns of refugees.

General Paris gave orders for the withdrawal of the Naval Division at about 1830. At the time, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Naval Brigade were on the right from Fort 7 to midway between Forts 4 and 5, 1<sup>st</sup> Naval Brigade on the left of it up to Fort 2 and the RM Brigade in reserve in the centre. The orders required the 3 Brigades to withdraw by different routes across the Scheldt and to rendez-vous at Zwyndrect 2.5 miles West, where roads from the two bridges met (see Map Three, page 8). There was no Divisional Signal Company so officers were required to take the orders. The officer taking the orders to 1<sup>st</sup> Naval Brigade told the CO of Drake Battalion but not Commodore Henderson, the Brigade Commander. So when the orders were received, the RM and 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigades moved off but only Drake from the 1<sup>st</sup>. The mistake was only discovered when the GSO1, Lt Col Ollivant, went round later to confirm that all had gone and so 1 Brigade didn't start their move till 2200.



Wounded British marines leaving the trenches before Antwerp.

The RM Brigade (less the Portsmouth Battalion who formed the rearguard) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade crossed the river via the Upper (southern) Bridge at about 2200 and reached the RV at 2330. Drake used the Town Bridge and got there at about the same time. After an hour's halt the formation moved on to Beveran Waes and finding no trains there moved on to St Nicolas (map four). Only at 0230 did the General discover that the trains were waiting at St Giles-Waes 6 miles to the North. The troops arrived there at daylight and by 0900 they were on their way West to Ostend.

The remainder of 1 Brigade moved off at about 2200 and Hawke Battalion got across the Upper Bridge, but when the other Battalions got to the river at about midnight they discovered that the bridges were being destroyed and had to cross by ferry steamers and barges. All the three Battalions reached Zwynndrecht between 0330 and 0400 on the 9 October. They then went on to St Gilles Waes arriving in dribblets between 1130 and 1545. By this time they were without water and had little food. A train had been arranged, but then at 1615 when many of the men had embarked, it was learnt that the Germans were attacking Moerbeke, further down the line. The men of these Battalions (Hawke, Benbow and Collingwood) were neither trained nor equipped for field operations, were exhausted by the night march and lack of food and were virtually out of ammunition. Commodore Henderson therefore decided to march them to the Dutch border to face internment rather than become Prisoners of War. There about 1500 men, roughly half of the Brigade, arrived at the border, were stopped and were disarmed.

At 1900, the Portsmouth Battalion had been ordered to reinforce the 1<sup>st</sup> Naval Brigade, as the Belgians on their right were hard pressed. They were to occupy the trenches, carry out some firing and then to act as the rearguard, moving off after the First Brigade. At about 2200, Portsmouth followed 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, which lost its way during the long march through the city and arrived at the river where there were neither bridges nor a boat. Colonel Luard found a bridge further up, had it

cleared of refugees and got both 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade and his own Battalion across just before dawn. The last bridge was blown after Portsmouth had crossed. They arrived at St Nicholas at about 1700 on the 9 October. They were then 12 miles west of the river and 24 miles from their start point. The Battalion halted to rest and requisition food, not having eaten for 24 hours. However news was received that the Germans were in Lokaren about 5 miles to the West and firing could be heard. The Battalion therefore started off again northwards, without their food, where there was a railway station.

When they reached St Giles-Waes, they were told that there were no trains so they went on to the next station Kemseke, which they reached at about 2000. By this time, they had marched 32 miles. Col Luard had telephoned ahead for a train and they entrained at about 2000 on the 9<sup>th</sup>. The train comprised a long line of open trucks already filled with refugees. The Battalion about 400 strong with about 600 stragglers from 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, whom they had picked up, were crammed into the train, being much scattered.

After the train had been going about 20 minutes, it was fired on from both sides. A mile further, the engine driver and stoker disappeared. They were replaced by a Stoker and AB of the Naval Brigade, who restarted the train. About 10 minutes later, however it pulled up in a side track at Moerbeke at about 2200. The Germans had put over the points and removed a rail so the leading trucks were derailed. Rifle fire broke out in all directions and it was clear that they had fallen into an ambush. The officers got the Marines Companies out as best they could. The scene was terrible with women and children screaming and clinging to everyone and the confusion was extreme.

A Major French and Lt Gowney organised a party and were joined by Lt Crossman RN and a few RNVR and they drove off the Germans who were advancing in close order. Later firing began from all sides. Col Luard and the officers got as many as possible out of the train and they replied vigorously. After 15 minutes, firing died down but the train was immovable. Some of the women and children and some of the men were wounded and a few of the women were killed.

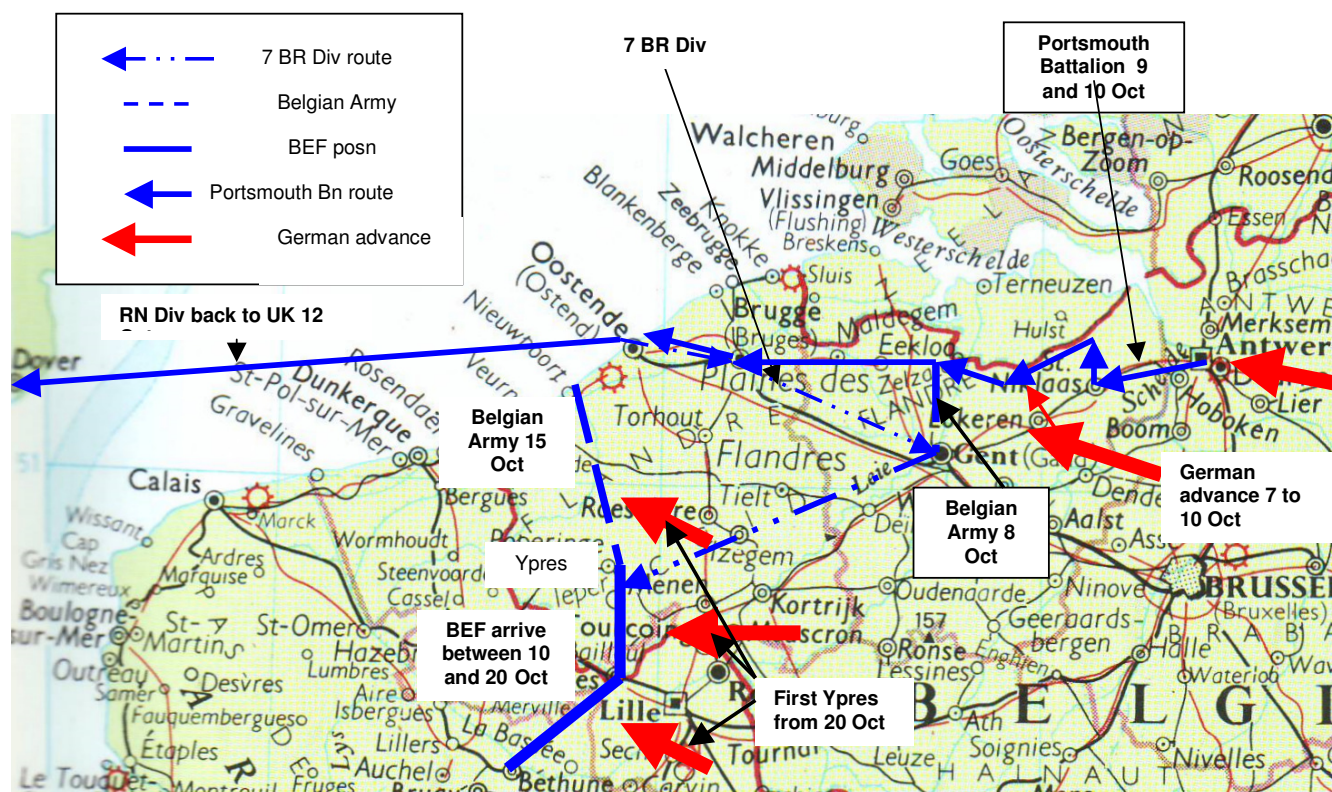
The officers tried to get the men formed up near the head of the train and about 100 were collected together with 12 of the RNVR, but many were too exhausted to leave the train. Some, having taken off their boots, were unable to get them back on. Others got out on the other side of the train and mistook the direction, falling into the hands of the enemy. About 300 NCOs and men of the Marines and seven officers and 600 RNVR were captured, including Lt Crossman who had been wounded.

Col Luard with the remainder marched down the track, covered by Major French's party. They reached Selsaete eight miles further on, at dawn on the 10<sup>th</sup>, having walked 40 miles in all. Here they obtained a train to Bruges and their first food and water for 48 hours. They rejoined the Brigade at Ostend.

Owen's PhD thesis on AES contains a description of the withdrawal of a party of the RN Division that included AES. The report is from Major NO Burge Second in Command of the Portsmouth Battalion (but he is referred to earlier as the Adjutant) and concerns the attack on the train at Moebeke. Borge had joined the train in the dark but reckoned there were 250 – 300 seamen and between 300 – 700 refugees. Burge described how the train came under fire and there were civilian casualties. Some RN members of the Brigade tried to surrender to avoid further civilian casualties. However Burge stopped those in his vicinity from surrendering. He made contact with Major French RMLI, who ordered AES to clear the road leading away from the station. More fighting ensued and the fighting men were moved away from the train. Burge and French decided that the troops should fight towards Ostend. Captains Syson, Stockley and Teague were informed. All the Marines then advanced without further incident to Salzaete.

It isn't clear what Maj AH French's job in the Battalion was. If Burge was the Adjutant, he could have been the Second in Command. Shortly after the Antwerp operation, a Cyclist Company was formed, which would have equated to a Recce Company, with Major French as the OC and Major Burge as the Second in Command, but that Company wasn't in place at Antwerp so they must both have been part of the Portsmouth Battalion. For their work at Antwerp, Major French was awarded

the DSO and Lt Gowney the DSC, presumably for their work in getting people out of the train and fighting off the Germans.



**Belgium and NE France 7 to 20  
Oct 1914 – RM Withdrawal and  
start of First Battle of Ypres**

**Map Five**

On 9 October Col Parsons again took over command of the Brigade, after Colonel Marchant was placed on the sick list. By this time the 7<sup>th</sup> British Division had occupied Ghent, the Belgian Army had completed its withdrawal and rested and the left wing of the Expeditionary Force had reached Bailleul, South West of Ypres.

## 11 OCTOBER ET SEQ AND BACK TO UK

The Naval Division, amounting now to 5,000 to 6,000 men including the Marines, withdrew to Ostend. On 12 October, the Division were embarked and crossed the Channel back to England. On that day Mabel recorded that she had caught the 10.41 to town with C (presumably Charlie) who saw her off. She then went to the Barracks, presumably Deal, to watch the troops return. AES was the last to march in and she noted that others had thought him cut off as they (presumably Portsmouth Battalion or maybe specifically C Company) were the last over the Antwerp Bridge.

Total losses of the RN Division were:

	Officers	Other ranks
Killed	7	50
Wounded	3	135
Interned	37	1442
Taken Prisoner	5	931

As far as I can determine about 500 of Portsmouth Battalion landed in France, 400 left Antwerp and only 100 to 200 got back. Of the 500, some might have been the recruits left behind at Dunkirk.

The First RN Brigade, which had started with 3,000 plus, had had 1,500 interned and ended up as follows:

- Drake Bn was practically complete with 800
- Benbow Bn had less than 70
- Collingwood and Hawke had 50 between them



Bavarian Troops in Antwerp

Antwerp had surrendered on 10 October. The Belgian Army subsequently withdrew again, this time to the Yser, covered by 7 Division and the other Allied troops, who were assembling about Ghent. 7 Division remained in Flanders ending up in Ypres and joined the remainder of the BEF. The loss of Antwerp released the German investing troops who were then able to advance West. At the end of the Race to the Sea, the Germans had advanced through Zeebrugge and Ostend, but were held short of Nieuport and Dunkirk.

The general feeling in UK at the time was that Winston Churchill had acted impetuously in sending an ill equipped, ill trained formation to Antwerp which was clearly a lost cause and which caused needless casualties. However the longer the Allies stayed in Antwerp the longer that the attacking German forces were unable to take part in the Race to the Sea and First Ypres. After the war the King of the Belgians wrote justifying the involvement of the Naval Division and thanking them for their efforts.

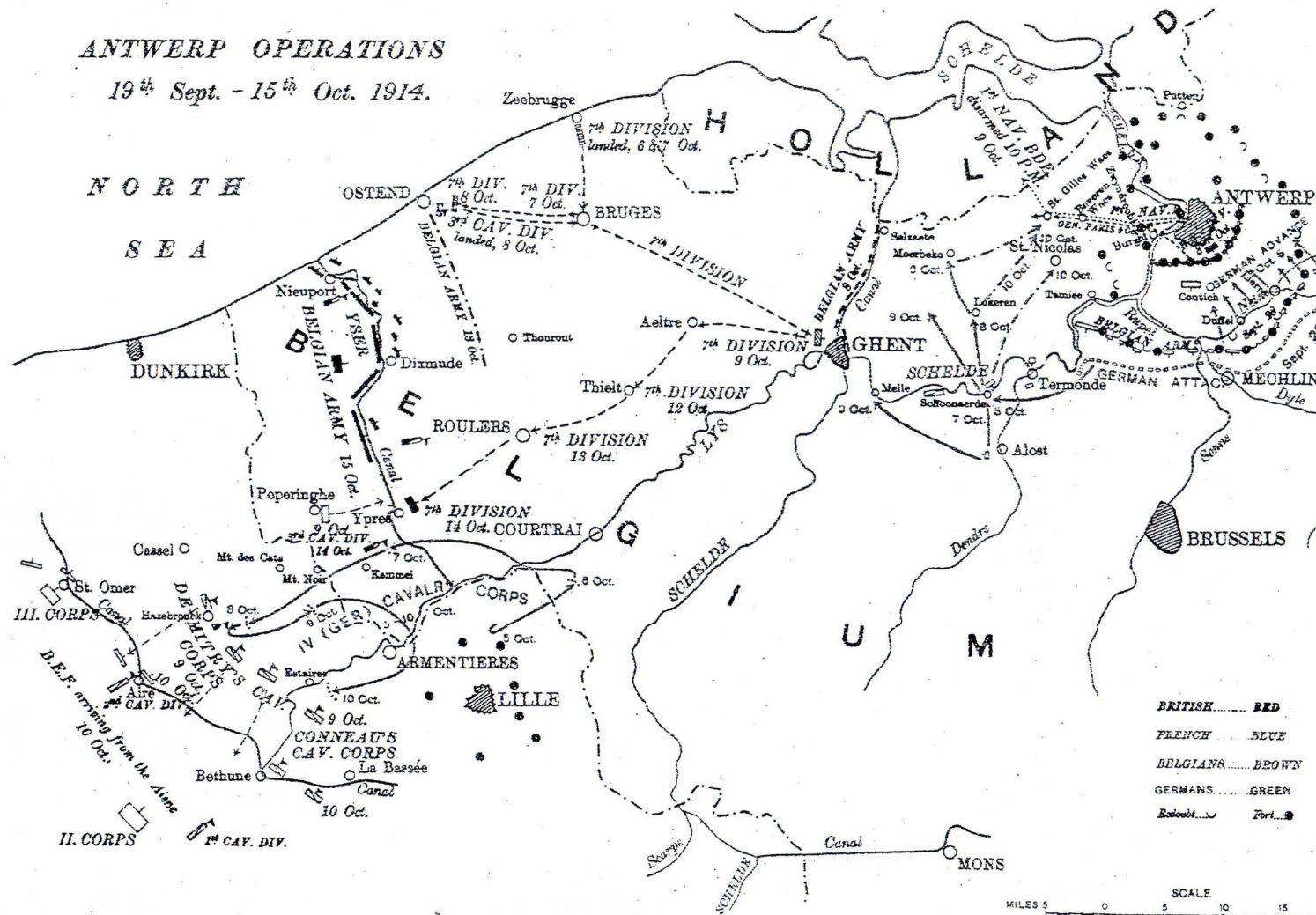
On return to UK, the RM Brigade appear to have gone initially to Deal and thereafter their individual Battalion locations. These were: Chatham at Gravesend, Portsmouth at Browdown (also referred to as Titchfield), Plymouth at Tavistock and Deal and Brigade HQ at Deal. There is a postcard showing C Coy in Titchfield Square. However AES' description says that they went from Forton rather than Browdown, the two are about 5 miles away.

The main RN Division Camp was at Blandford in Dorset. During the last week in January the RM Brigade were ordered to concentrate at Blandford. However as there wasn't enough accommodation at the Blandford Camp, they were billeted in Shillingstone and the surrounding villages, about 5 miles away.

The Division was reviewed at Child Oakford in late December 1914, early January 1915 by King George V. This probably took place on Hambledon Hill, just East of the village. In the late 1980s, I remember my mother-in-law Hope describing vividly this Review and Inspection that took place in 1915. So much so that I thought that she had been there, not having done my sums on her date of birth. I cannot recall though the significant parts of the Review, but it does reinforce how important her father was to her and how she remembered what he had told her. I do remember her pointing up to high ground off the road, hence my deduction of Hambledon Hill, which is North East of the A357.

# ANTWERP OPERATIONS

19<sup>th</sup> Sept. - 15<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1914.



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