

The War Diaries of Dr Charles Molteno ‘Kenah’ Murray

Book 5: The Western Front, France & Belgium

1 January 1918 - 28 December 1918

Edited by Dr Robert Murray
Extracts selected and Endnotes by Robert Molteno

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Winter in the trenches

10 January 1918. Nurlu. Ever since we arrived in this area the weather has been very severe. There has been almost constant frost, with one or two thaws accompanied by rain, which have only lasted a few hours with the result that the whole surface of the country is coated with ice. Last night there was another blizzard and much snow which collected in great drifts. The snow gradually changed to rain, which washed away the snow, laying bare the ice once more and adding to it. At present it is continuing to thaw slowly, but still very cold....

17 January 1918. Nurlu. The wind increased to a gale during the night of 15th and 16th and did a lot of damage, blowing the roofs off two of our huts for patients. So we have had a specially busy time repairing the damage. I hear today that the trenches have become so hopeless that the front line has had to be evacuated. A patrol which visited the German lines found that they had evacuated not only their front line, but also their support lines. There is not a gun firing nor has there been one for the last 48 hours....

Rumours of the impending German offensive

10 Feb 1918. Suzanne.... The rumours floating about are that the Germans are preparing a big attack all along the front and we are busy preparing to meet it. The process of attrition and gradual wearing down of the enemy seems slow work if he is able to take the initiative like this at will....

26 February 1918. I managed to get my leave fixed up so as to leave France on the 21st arriving in London on the morning of the 22nd. The next day Hilda and I went to George and Margaret's wedding which took place in the Presbyterian Church off Edgware Road, and after at Palace Court.¹ It was a very simple quiet wedding with just the immediate friends and relatives present. Margaret looked lovely as she always does and both were radiant.

19 March 1918. Fins. Mairdressing Street.... We have also been posted in elaborate schemes of defence and exactly what to do in case of withdrawal. All this is very different to last year. Then we were all for attack and no thought of defence. Then we talked about having arrived by now at the winding up stages of the war. To be on the defensive now seems the abandonment of all hope of anything conclusive from a military point of view.... Every few days we get a warning that the Germans will attack "next morning".²

Mustard Gas

They had been using considerable quantities of gas shells with rather disastrous results. The division on our left (2nd) has already lost some thousands temporarily disabled. We've had about a 100 or so up to the present all in two days. The gas used is mostly what the Tommies³ call "mustard gas". It causes great pain and inflammation of the eyes, and later burning of the skin, causing blisters and at the same time causing great irritation of the bronchial tract and lungs. The bowels are also affected and a good deal of abdominal pain. The last few days the symptoms are less as regards the eyes and more pronounced as regards the chest and abdomen. It seems likely that mixed gases are being used. The Germans seem to be aiming at chemicals which impregnate the ground and continue for days to emit poisonous fumes with the result that the area becomes almost uninhabitable. The bulk of the men got gassed merely by passing over the ground that had been shelled a day or two before and where it seemed unnecessary to wear a mask, because the smell was so slight....

21 March 1918. Fins. This morning at 4.45 a.m. we were roused by a furious bombardment, along an extended front, which seemed in the bulk to be north of us. This was the opening of the long expected German offensive.

The Allied line buckles

24 March 1918. Bronfay Farm.... On the 22nd the shelling got more vigorous round about us, and seemed to be creeping round to our right flank. About 4 in the

afternoon we were warned by the RC's to be prepared to burn our huts that night so I went over to Nurlu⁴ to get news. There I heard that the 21st and 16th Divisions on our right were giving way and we were to fall back on the "Green Line". The Boche were already advancing on Heramont, which was only 3 kilometres away.... All the way back we have seen not a sign of any new line being formed, but latterly reinforcing Divisions and Artillery have been coming up. One is hearing all sorts of rumours....

25 March 1918. Bray-Corbie Road.... Yesterday afternoon the news came in that the SA Brigade, in holding back the Boche, had got surrounded. Rather than be party to the disgraceful retreat of the divisions on our flanks they decided to fight to a finish. A wounded man tells that after all their ammunition was done, Colonel Heale (the only battalion commander left) called on his men to fix bayonets which they did. He then led them in a last charge against the enemy. General Dawson and all his staff were with the Brigade, and it will go down in history that South Africans at any rate refused to fly before the enemy like the despicable divisions on our flanks. The last stand of the South African Brigade was made at the Bois Marrieres on the Boucnavesnes Clery Ridge.

Kenah's views of the fighting qualities of English troops

This battle has shown, what I have always feared, but never yet liked to express, and that is that English troops have no longer any real guts. Never have Scottish, or Colonial, troops given in like the English, and I feel very little reliance can ever be placed in them again. All through the war it is the Scottish first and latterly the colonial troops that have done all the fighting. Our failures in every case have been due to the cowardice of the English troops. Our Press had lauded up their failures and condoned their lack of patriotism and courage by fulsome praise of paltry incidents, and feeble excuses. Until this nation as a whole is prepared to call a spade a spade and cease to gloss over our shortcomings, we shall never be able to regain our prestige. We have descended to vituperation and guttersnipe criticisms of our enemy, whilst we have not been able to hold a candle to them for real esprit-de-corps and patriotism. The only comforting thing in it all is that Englishmen who have gone to other parts of the Empire, like old seed transferred to new soil, have there maintained the characteristics of the old stock, and kept them fresh. The blow to English prestige is stupendous and worse by far than the smash up now going on. Here are colonial troops, ready to die beside their home-born cousins, and to fight like men, whereas when it has come to the push they have deserted us like miserable cowards....

29 March 1918. Frehecourt.... For the present the progress of the Boche seems centred along the Ancre. However as far as our Division is concerned we have all along held them wherever it was necessary and only retired on orders to do so in conformity with the fleeing divisions on our flanks. Today the weather has broken and it is raining steadily.

Later - Since writing this morning we have moved again and are now at Raineville, and apparently on the way to getting well out of the battle area to refit. It appears that our Division will not have lost so very heavily after all as men are coming in from all sources, having become temporarily separated or cut off in the rapid retreat. I have

just been reading an account of events in *The Times* of 26th which on the whole is fairly accurate but of course talks in the most fulsome manner about the courage of our troops. Undoubtedly there have been many brave stands, but there has been far too large a proportion of cowardice and unfortunately this seems entirely confined to the English regiments. In no single case were Scottish or Colonial troops driven from their positions, against which the Germans hurled their greatest forces, whilst in innumerable cases divisions like the 21st and 16th fled before even they were attacked and never fired a shot in defence. If we are to regain our prestige acts like these should be held up to the scorn they deserve and our army be purged of such vermin....

10 April 1918. Voormezele.... Yesterday a very lively bombardment started up South of us. We got no news at all until late in the evening when we heard that the Germans had commenced another "push" on a front extending from Givenchy in the South to Fleurbaik in the North. Though news was scanty it seems that progress was made all along and at points to a considerable depth. The line is of course thinly held and our communiques have kept telling us in the "intelligence" that no attack was intended, that such preparations as were going on were meant only to deceive and were pure camouflage etc. Our division is spread out over a huge front considering the condition we are in, but even so I am sure they will give a good account of themselves. What will happen elsewhere is impossible to predict in view of the hopeless way in which all but a few divisions have recently behaved.... This will make it rather difficult for us to hold on here, and we are now rather anxiously awaiting events. As far as I can make out the Boche attacked our outposts during the latter part of the day in sufficient numbers to drive them back on our front line. This we shall probably be able to hold unless of course the flanks are driven in again.

The extent of the new front that the Boche is now operating on must be about 10 miles, so that he is attacking on something like a 60 mile front now. Some very interesting figures have come out in our communiques of the last few days. 87 German divisions were used in the first offensive on March 21st. The concentration was greatest on the north of the Somme where he used one division to every 2 kilometres (2400 yards). In our offensives we made use at Arras and Ypres of one division to every 900 yards and at that time our divisions were nearly 1/4 larger than the Germans. So it works out that he has used a concentration which is only 1/2 and in many cases only 1/3 of what we used. Added to this I think it is universally agreed that he had not nearly so many guns in concentration as we did. Yet in the face of this his troops were only driven back at great cost, whereas ours in many cases seem to have put up no defence at all.

I can't make up my mind exactly where the fault lies, because I know enough of the men to know that well led they would never have given way. I am more than afraid that the whole onus of defeat lies on the officers and bad leading. I can't believe that the men who have faced what they have done in the past would have broken had they been capably led. The success of our own SA Brigade has largely been due to a very careful selection of officers. Practically every one of them has had to serve in the ranks of the Bde. whereby they have got to know their men and be known by them.

German tactics

The Germans have shown many new methods in the attack. One of the main features was that they did not advance in "open order" as has usually been the case and still is with us, but came in small parties of about 50 and less. These all stuck together and advanced in short rushes. These platoons were preceded and followed by smaller groups of "specialists" who worked machine guns, bomb throwers etc. Another feature was that instead of waiting for whole batteries of guns to move up together, many of their field guns were taken forward singly and got into action as quickly as the infantry advanced.

The result of coming in the way they did, was that it was almost impossible for our scattered formations to shoot down the whole of a party before a considerable portion had gained their objective, whereupon they immediately outnumber our men in that particular spot. To say that they greatly outnumbered our men all along the front I am convinced is a gross exaggeration. Wherever a regiment of our men with sufficient determination to hold a position, made up their minds to do so, they did it easily, and I am convinced that if it could have been instilled into the whole Army (as it was with our Brigade) that an attack by the Boche gave them the very opportunity we have been looking for, and that so long as they stuck in their trenches and kept up a careful fire, an advance would be impossible, I am sure the German attack would have failed just as it failed before the French at Verdun.

English units retreat wholesale

12 April 1918. Voormezele.... During the afternoon most disquieting news has been arriving, culminating finally in the arrival of an officer on a motor-cycle, who had been sent down towards Steenwerk with his tunnelling company in order to help dig trenches. On arriving there he said he found everything in the greatest confusion. Our troops were streaming away, and hardly a gun firing, and not an attempt at resistance being put up anywhere. He was told to come back as it was no use trying to do anything. The Germans are pushing on with nothing but a disorganized rabble of soldiers and civilians in front of them.

I am afraid my expressions as to the morale of English troops, written in the heat of feeling in the last retreat, are proving only too true. The men are all right but the officers are hopeless. They seem devoid of grit, courage and initiative and so have no control of their men. It is now 11.30 p.m. and a most remarkable telegram has just come in a part of which I shall note down as showing the gravity of our position.

"Relieving troops are at hand. 1st Australian division is detraining at Hazebrouck to be followed shortly by the 8th Div: one French division and French Cavalry Corps will arrive tomorrow. Our whole efforts must be directed to maintaining our present line and preventing the enemy from breaking through."

It will be noticed – Colonials and French to the rescue once more. It is galling beyond measure to think of British troops having to be stiffened up and helped by any other ally. All yesterday our Div. beat off attacks, and we hear that the 1500 South Africans sustained 500 casualties in their splendid work of recapturing Messines

Ridge. Our Div. has been spread out over a front of about 8000 yards or more in the work of bolstering up the faltering English troops and has accomplished the almost superhuman task of doing this. I don't think England as a whole will ever realize what she owes to Scotland and the Colonials. Without them I don't think even the French, splendid as they have shown themselves, could have coped with the task.

The Germans have already pushed right in to St. Venant on the road to Aire and if they get a very little further the whole British Army will be in a most serious position. It seems now that Hindenburg was saying what he really meant when he said he intended to smash the British Army. The whole weight of the available German Army is being thrown against us, and it seems to me only a matter of a few weeks, in which he will be able to carry out his threat unless the army will turn round and fight. As it is we have received a blow to our prestige which it will take an entire reformation of our "morale" to put right. A matter of a generation or two at least.⁵

13 April 1918. Voormezele.... A captured German officer yesterday said that officers (of whom he was one) have been told off all along the line to watch for signs of our men leaving the trenches and then immediately to attack. They did not intend originally to attack us here but saw the men of some of the Divisions on our right making off, though they had not as yet been attacked, and so according to plan, the Germans pushed in. It was at this juncture that our reserve battalions (notably the S Africans) were rushed into the line to stem the rot, and the Germans found themselves met by unexpected resistance.

Further South the panic seems to have been even worse if possible than that which took place in the attack on the 21st of March. Divisions have run away long before the Boche could even get at them. The sum total of it all is that we have now shown ourselves on a par and possibly worse than the Italians, whom we criticized so freely last year....

French and Colonial troops turn the tide

14 April 1918. Voormezele.... The news from the southern part of the attack is more reassuring. The arrival of the Australians and French troops has put a different complexion on things, and it look as if the rot has been stemmed once again....

16 April 1918. Voormezele.... Last night was also quiet, but about 8.30 the Germans began a heavy bombardment of our area and to our right flank. This he has kept up all day and we have had a rather unpleasant time. He attacked our front twice but was beaten off on each occasion with heavy losses. The 21st Division ran off again in Wyttschaete Wood, and heavy fighting has been going on there all day. We hear that French troops have arrived and are going in to help the weaklings on our right. At dusk there was a very lively attack going on and we are in hopes that the French have retaken the lost position. Things are very critical as if the Germans succeed in taking any considerable portion of the ridge which runs from Neuve Eglise to Wyttschaete and thence to the Neighbourhood of Hill 60, we shall have to withdraw. This was the scheme actually decided on yesterday and we hear that our Division asked to be allowed to hold on. If it can be held it is going to make a very substantial bar to the progress of the Germans....

17 April 1918. Voormezele.... One of our MO's⁶ was with our Bde when it counter-attacked Messines a couple of days ago. He said that as soon as the Germans shelled the position, which was held by a composite formation of 19th and 21st Div, they ran. In one case one of our company commanders, a great big burly looking fellow, met the Colonel of one of these battalions coming back at the head of his men saying they had been shelled out of their position. The SA Captain drew his revolver and said if you don't take your men back I shall shoot you. The Col. went. This illustrates what has been going on and how it might be remedied. The SA Troops pushed forward and met the Germans coming over, but soon drove them back, causing them heavy casualties. Along our front now are all sorts of mixtures of units. Divisional commanders have sectors to defend, but as many as 10 different Divisions are represented by the troops in the line. There is no question of relief, but everyone has to fight on, until the French reserves can come to our aid. For the last 2 days we have not had a word of what is going on elsewhere....

News of George Murray – badly wounded in the German offensive

20 April 1918. Remy.... A letter has come from Uncle Percy⁷ this afternoon, saying that George has been badly wounded by a shell splinter in the abdomen. This seems to have happened some time about the 5th, the news coming by letter from the Adjutant of his battery, but so far there has been no more news, nor can he be traced in hospital. It is most upsetting news as he must be bad indeed not to have been able to get a letter sent by someone in hospital to Margaret. Hospital arrangements like everything else have been chaotic in the 5th Army and all sorts of things may have happened.



George Murray and Margaret Molteno had only got married the month before (in March 1918). In this wedding photo, Kenah, George's eldest brother, is standing on the left. Margaret's brother, Jervis (back row 3rd from right) and his wife, Islay (back row 2nd from left) and her parents, Bessie and Percy (extreme right), also present

21 April 1918. Remy.... There is very little news coming through beyond the fact that the Germans are not making any substantial progress....

22 April 1918. Remy. Tonight it is pouring. This is the first really heavy rain since the German offensive began.... I also got a letter from Margaret saying George was reported to have been wounded on the 4th April. So I have sent wires to the Hospitals through which he would have been likely to pass, and if I can hear any news I shall try and get leave to visit him....

23 April 1918. Remy. Today has come a letter from Uncle Percy bearing the distressing news of George's death.

25 April 1918. Remy. Yesterday evening there was a furious and prolonged bombardment which died down a little towards midnight. Then a number of Hun planes visited us and dropped a lot of bombs making a great disturbance. No sooner had they gone when the bombardment started up again with more prolonged fury than I think I have ever heard before. From about 2 am till about 10 am there was incessant and very intense gunfire, as well as hundreds and hundreds of heavies going too.

News has come through at last. It seems that the French attacked in order to recover ground lost in front of Kemmel, at 2 a.m. They drove the enemy back about 1

kilometre. At 4am the Huns attacked and drove ourselves and the French back and the latest news is that they now hold Kemmel and the Hill of the same name. The line runs from there via La Clytte and Vierstraat. The left wing of the 9th Division is said to be still holding its former position so it looks very much as though the 64th Bde of 21st Division has done a bolt again. It is really awful to think our men have fallen so low in morale. The worst of this news is that Kemmel Hill is the key to the Ypres Salient and unless we can retake it, it will probably mean falling back on a line through Omer.

28 April 1918. Remy. For the last 3 days the guns have been much quieter. The position around Kemmel has remained "obscure", which generally ends up meaning that we have lost. As a matter of fact I see Gen. D Haig announced its loss in his despatch of 26th, though there were rumours even today that the French were still holding the Hill. A most furious bombardment which started about 7 p.m. is now (10 p.m.) just dying down. It sounded most intense just SE of Ypres, so I suppose the Germans have done an attack there for a change. We have now got the French alongside us, rushed up by General Foch to try and stiffen up our wavering or worse than wavering troops. On the whole the French soldier is a much taller and finer looking man than ours. Their methods are more like the Burghers,⁸ the men having much more individuality and initiative than ours, but paying very little attention to cleanliness or general orderliness....

29 April 1918. Remy. About 2 am another extensive and very intense bombardment started. This was kept up until about 8 am, when it slackened a bit but has never really died down altogether or to what can be called normal.... We have never experienced such bombardments before as the heavies seem almost as numerous as the field guns, and how the Boche manages to come through it I don't know.

1 May 1918. Camped Near Watou.... It seems that the Boche launched a very heavy attack along the whole our Corps (22nd) Front, supported by the biggest concentration of artillery he has yet employed. We had in the meantime likewise increased our artillery and from information picked up, managed to shoot so successfully, that the attack was crushed. It is said that this is the most severe check the Boche has yet received since the offensive started.... Very large numbers of French troops are now in the area, and very fine they look too.

2 May 1918. Haringhe..... In fact, with the exception of the Scottish, Colonial, and a very few English divisions, the rest of our army must be regarded of a very inferior type of fighting force....

8 May 1918. Le Rons.... we are now 2 over strength and I shall be free to return to the base. It is rather a wrench to come away, but on the whole I shall be glad to get a respite from the ceaseless movement of front line life.

George Murray is dead

11 May 1918. Le Rons.... The day before yesterday I got a letter from the OC 44th FA⁹ saying that "Captain Murray was brought in to the collecting post Fouilloy (S.W. Corbie) on April 5th. Captain A. Scott RAMC who saw him on admission states that

he was pulse-less, collapsed, and incapable of giving any message. He had a shell wound of abdomen and died 10 minutes after admission. He did not wear an identity disc, and his particulars were furnished by the bombardier who brought him in. There was no clergyman at the Post to bury him, and his body was handed over to a Field Ambulance of the 3rd Cavalry Division on the night of 5/6 April....."

22 May 1918. No. 1 South African General Hospital (S.A.G.H.). The day before yesterday I got a communication from the ADMS 3rd Cav. Div. to whom I had written. From this it appears that George was buried on April 5th in the churchyard at the village of Aubigny which is the next village east of Fouilloy on the road to



The little church at Aubigny in France where George Murray was buried in April 1918

Amiens. I am having a cross made and intend going there when it is ready. There was a letter from the padre who buried him, giving the map reference of the spot as 62D 02D 97 and a rough diagram of the position of the grave in the churchyard. It was No. 7 Cav. Div Bde. FA which took over from the 44th FA. The padre's letter says he was buried on the evening of the same day as he was killed. The padre's name is Rev. Captain A.L. Edwards of 7 Cav. Bde....

28 May 1918. No. 1 S.A.G.H. Yesterday I succeeded at last in overcoming all obstacles, and visiting George's grave.... Major Kindersley sent me in his car to Flixecourt where I met Major Goodwin who took me in his car to the village of Aubigny where he left me for 1/2 an hour while I placed the cross I had made. The cross was made by Ptes. J. Tomlinson RE (11 Sunnybank St. Hashingden, Lancs.) and J.F. Smith RE (73 Holnscroft St., Greenock N13). The carving was done by Pte. Jas Marshall and the painting and staining by Pte. Tester SAMC. The cross is of seasoned oak 1 ½ inches thick and measures 3 feet by 2 feet fixed on a pedestal of oak. The church lies on the northern outskirts of the village on the east side of the road. The accompanying plan [not included here] shows where the grave lies. Everyone has been most kind in helping me in every way. The men who made the cross took the greatest pride in making it exactly as I wanted it and they have now nearly finished an exact model of it about 9 inches high.

The church is rather a quaint looking one quite small with walls built of alternate bands of red brick and white chalk blocks, now nicely toned down by the weather. The spire is simply a wood and slate erection. The building is not much damaged at present. From the eastern door of the church runs a little grove of young elm trees, which yesterday were clad in the new fall leaf, making a cool dark tunnel of shade down the centre of the graveyard. At the western end of the grove stands a crucifix



The Memorial Cross that Kenah Murray had made to mark the death in battle of his youngest brother, George, April 1918

and beyond comes the boundary hedge marking off the enclosure from the fields outside. At the N.W. corner is a gate and between this and the elm grove George lies between some others who fell in the same action. Despite the presence of guns, some of which were firing, and the noise of some shells coming into the lower end of the village, the scene was a peaceful one. A sort of oasis in the strife that was going on outside and I could not but help feeling thankful to think of George lying there in that quiet little village churchyard instead of one or other of the huge cemeteries now so common along the line. The oaken cross now stands at the head of the grave while the official one of the GRC is placed at the foot so that the grave is doubly marked in the event of the area being heavily shelled later on. It was a glorious bright day and the country looking its best....

The onslaught renewed

2 June 1918. No. 1 S.A.G.H. The German Paris offensive seems to be developing with even greater rapidity than their first this year against Amiens. This time they have again attacked a part of the line where both the French and ourselves have divisions resting from the recent battles. This is exactly what they did in the North except of course that there were no French troops there. The attack again (as in the North) seems to have taken the Allies quite by surprise. The Germans again are developing their successes with great promptness. At the outset the attack seems to have been started by the addition of a very few reinforcements to the troops already in the line and that as soon as they found they were not being resisted, they have flung in more and more divisions to keep up the advantage once gained.... .

4 June 1918. No. 1 S.A.G.H.... Today I saw the Birthday Honours List and see that Barkly [Molteno] has got a CB.¹⁰ Oswald Barry a DSO, myself, Col. Dawson, Majors Hanau and Hemming DSO's.... The German offensive in the South against Paris, seems to be gradually being brought to a standstill in the region of the Marne. It is early however to be too sanguine about this.

27 June 1918. No. 1 S.A.G.H. The weather this summer is really wonderful and one can scarcely realize that it is the same country in which we experienced such

continuous bad weather last year. The Austrians have launched a great attack on the Italians by whom they have been repulsed with heavy loss. Last week we proposed an attack in the neighbourhood of the Foret de Nieppe, but on the very day fixed there was a short break in the weather with rain and cold wind, added to which a widespread epidemic of influenza so depleted the Divisions that the attack had to be postponed. The way in which the elements were against us is becoming more than a byword. Now that the attack has fallen through the weather is perfect again and on top of this we hear that the Germans are massing again for another attack. Certainly the superstitious can have every ground for drawing the conclusion that the Almighty is not on our side and very much on that of the Germans.

16 July 1918. Today we hear that the Germans have started another offensive this time on a front extending from near Chateau-Thierry to Verdun. There is only scanty news at present....

The Allies turn the German offensive at last

25 July 1918. The German offensive has been successfully resisted. At the outset they made a little headway here and there and then the French launched a vigorous counter-attack on a big scale which has been most successful, driving the Germans back along the greater part of the sector of attack and are now continuing to follow up their advantage and are driving the Germans steadily out of the salient they made originally between Soissons and Reims. This is the most successful repulse the Allies have succeeded in making since they began....

4 August 1918. After gradually slowing down and almost coming to a deadlock in their counter-offensive, the French have once more attacked vigorously aided by American reinforcements and today the Germans have been driven back to the Vesle....¹¹

2 September 1918. No.1 S.A.G.H. On August 31st I returned from 3 weeks leave spent mostly at Glen Lyon with Hilda and the children. Quite the best break since the war started. Whilst on leave I visited the War Office in regard to the arm splint and there met Col. Stiles, Col. Gray, Col. McMann and Col. Brackett (American). They all approve of the splint and it is now to be universally adopted in the army. The American Colonel said they had found it most satisfactory, and are also making it universal in their army. During the month our offensive has been developing most splendidly and the Germans are now on the move on a front nearly 120 miles, which looks as if they meant to fall back on their old lines. I find the hospital very full and have been plunged into plenty of work. I have 3 wards with about 120 cases, and about 1/2 are serious and require much work.¹²

Postscript: The Circumstances of George Murray's death

28 December 1918. Alice Holt, England. Letter from George Murray's batman: On Xmas day I received the following letter from George's batman, whom I have at last succeeded in getting in touch with.

"At the time of his death I was Captain Murray's batman. The bombardier you mention I do not know anything about as the only NCO who left the battery in the ambulance car was a Sergeant who I believe died shortly afterwards. This is just what happened. We were in action on an open road at Viller's Bactoncaux and we were covering some American troops. At about 5 o'clock in the morning SOS was signalled. Your brother was in bed fully dressed so you can guess he was one of the first out. Half an hour afterwards he asked two of us to go out and carry ammunition as the men were having rather a rough time of it. We were still carrying the ammunition at 8 o'clock when there was a salvo dropped right in amongst the battery, a piece catching your brother full in the stomach, also killing one man and wounding 4 others. At the time this happened your brother was stood (? standing) on the outside of an old house. After he had been hit your brother was carried into the cellar, where everything that was possible was done for him. It was sometime after that the doctor came to give him an injection, and that was the only few minutes that he allowed me to leave him. It was quite 2 hours before we managed to get your brother away as the shelling was the worst I have ever seen, and I have said ever since that delay was the cause of his death. All this time your brother was giving orders to the battery how to carry on when he was gone as the other officer had been knocked out with shell shock, which left us without an officer in charge. Your brother was the bravest and most respected officer in this battery and I am sure that all join me in expressing our deepest sympathy at your great loss. His last thoughts were of his wife saying these words just before we put him in the ambulance "But for my wife I would not mind", which shows he was nearly gone. If there is anything more you would like to know I will do my best to tell you. I am, Yours obediently, Gunner SG.Kite 706290, D/47 Brigade RFA. France 18/12/18.



George Murray's Tombstone in France

Endnotes

¹ George Murray and his cousin, Margaret Molteno, had been in love for years. As the war dragged on year after year, they eventually despaired of its ever ending and decided to get married regardless. George got a few days leave for the wedding at Margaret's parents home in Palace Court (London), and his brother, Kenah, too. Within weeks of returning to his unit, George was killed during the German Spring offensive. The full story is told elsewhere in this website.

² Kenah puts his finger on the fundamental change in attitude among Allied troops by early 1918. Up until then, the promise by the High Command of yet one more great 'push' making victory over the Germans certain had buoyed up morale. But now, three and a half years on, ordinary soldiers no longer believed there was any serious prospect of military victory. At the same time, however, as Kenah points out, for them to see their commanders making active preparations for effective defence rather than for going on the offensive was devastating. Little wonder that when the Germans launched a huge offensive of their own in the Spring of 1918, many Allied units broke. For a couple of months, it was touch and go whether it would not be Germany, not the Allies, that would emerge victorious from the carnage.

³ The term for rank and file British soldiers.

⁴ Kenah's spelling of French and Flemish place names is not always reliable. I have not checked them in every instance.

⁵ It is worth noting that even so confident an English patriot as Winston Churchill, Britain's Prime Minister during the Second World War 25 years later, seems to have accepted this conclusion. He was determined to delay the D-Day landings in France until he could be reasonably confident that British military morale had recovered, a process not encouraged by the routing of the Expeditionary Force in France in 1940, the surrender of tens of thousands of British troops to the Japanese in Singapore in early 1942, or the initial defeats at the hands of German and Italian forces in North Africa.

⁶ Medical Officers.

⁷ Percy Molteno, a Liberal Member of the House of Commons. Percy was Margaret's father, and so had only two months previously become George Murray's father in law.

⁸ South Africans, mainly Afrikaners organised previously in commandos.

⁹ Officer Commanding, 44th Royal Artillery.

¹⁰¹⁰ Captain Barkly Molteno, Kenah's uncle. He had spent all his professional life in the Royal Navy. He commanded H.M.S. Warspite in Admiral Beattie's forward squadron at the Battle of Jutland, which was the Royal Navy's only encounter with the German Imperial Fleet during the war. See elsewhere in this website for accounts of what happened.

¹¹ It was only at this late stage in the War that the full weight of the United States having joined the Allies against Imperial Germany began to be felt. The presence of fresh American troops dealt a final coup de grace to Germany's huge Spring offensive.

¹² By the time Kenah's leave in England was up, the end of the War turned out to be only eight weeks away. In early November, Germany sued for an indefinite ceasefire, and the Allies, equally exhausted, accepted it. Kenah's Diaries end at this point.