

# The 286th Machine Gun Company

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*Love and the Loveless* contains more description of fighting in France than any other of the *Chronicle* war novels, covering as it does Phillip's period of duty with the 286th Machine Gun Company. Following a brief period of training at Grantham, almost the entire book is devoted to the 286th MGC's activities from their arrival in France in December 1916 until the end of the battle of Cambrai in November 1917. One brief chapter in the middle covers Phillip's 10-day leave to England in June 1917. This article describes the factual background to the events described, which, as would be expected from HW's usual meticulous regard for the facts, have a sound historical basis.

In the novel, the 286th MGC was allocated to the '2nd East Pennine' Division in France. At this period of the war, following the formation of a separate Machine Gun Corps, each infantry Brigade (3 Brigades to a Division) maintained its own Machine Gun Company of 16 guns. Normally a fourth MGC was additionally attached to Divisional HQ. Each MGC generally remained with its Brigade, providing covering fire when required for Brigade operations, and moving in and out of the line with the infantry.

In the novel, the 286th initially moves into the front line at Beaumont Hamel in January 1917. Following the withdrawal of the Germans to the Hindenburg line in March/April the company moves into the new front line around Bullecourt. It remains here for the next few weeks, participating in the attack on Bullecourt on 3 May. The events described here follow closely the experience of 208th Machine Gun Company, in which HW was transport officer at this time.<sup>1</sup> The 208th actually arrived in France on 1st March, somewhat later than depicted in the novel, but their itinerary thereafter virtually matches that of the fictitious 286th. Moreover, some of the minor local events described in the novel are confirmed as actually having occurred by the 208th MGC War Diary. A few examples of the correlation of events are as follows:

<i>Page</i>	<i>NOVEL</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>208th WAR DIARY</i>
123	'the company moved its transport line forward ... to Mory.'	8/4	'move to Mory about 9 am.'
124	(enemy shelling — Cutts suffers shell shock)	17/4	'heavily shelled in afternoon and during night ... one man suffers shell shock.'
129	'the company moved a mile and a half away, to lower ground (at) Ervillers.'	22/4	'Company moves to Ervillers on account of hostile shelling at Mory.'
126/7	(a German bomb mistakenly mixed in with some lumps of coal is put on a fire, and explodes, injuring Cutts)	29/3	'During the feeding of a brazier a German bomb was put in the fire along with pieces of wood. An explosion took place resulting in wounding of one man.'
130	(German plane shoots down three balloons in flames, observers escape by parachute)	3/4	'a German monoplane attacked two of our balloons ... and brought them down in flames. The observers of each escaped unhurt by means of parachutes.'

140	(9/5) 'Two new officers arrive.'	9/5	'Arrival of one officer reinforcement.'
	(9/5) 'Wind-up at midnight Strombos horn wailing, gas attack.'	10/5	'Gas alarm proclaimed by Strombos horn ... but nothing happened.'
141	(23/5) 'Two new officers killed.'	22/5	'Lt. Tremlett seriously wounded.' (died 23/5)
141	(26/5) 'Brigade out of line to Bihucourt. (Capt.) Hobart went on leave. Teddy P. i/c.'	29/5	'Capt. King on leave ... Lt. Rose takes over command ... Co. returned to Bihucourt.'

Since the War Diary was not made available until 1965, some years after the publication of the novel, HW must have kept a detailed narrative of the events at the time.

Regarding the officers in the 208th MGC, the commanding officer, Capt. Cecil King, appears to be the counterpart of Capt. Jack Hobart. Like Hobart, Capt. King won the MC and was present at the battle of Loos in 1915,<sup>2</sup> although with the 13th Middlesex, not the Yeomanry. Capt. King was not killed in June 1916, as was Hobart, but continued to command the company until wounded at Cambrai in November. He survived the war.<sup>3</sup> The Second in Command, Lt. Clarence Rose, is presumably the basis for Teddy Pinnegar. Pinnegar mentions that he was at the battle of Flers in August 1916,<sup>4</sup> as was Lt. Rose, who was with the 115th MGC at that time.<sup>5</sup> Rose was posted to Grantham from France on 14 October,<sup>6</sup> which is about the time Phillip meets Teddy on the train to that place at the beginning of the book. Perhaps the meeting actually occurred as described. Lt. Rose served with the 208th until September 1917, when he was posted to 153rd MGC as Captain.<sup>7</sup> Of the other officers, Second Lieutenant Cyril Wright was, like the character Lt. Bright in the novel, from Cambridgeshire, and as did Bright, commanded Section 'D' in the company.<sup>8</sup> In the novel, Bright goes on leave at the same time as Phillip to sort out some matrimonial problems. The War Diary notes that Lt. Wright went on 'special leave' to the UK on 19th May, which suggests that it might have been for the same purpose. Like the character in the novel, Lt. Wright transferred back to the infantry in the autumn.<sup>9</sup> The 208th also contained a Second Lieutenant William Horsely. As with the character 'Darky' Fenwick, he was from Northumberland<sup>10</sup> and served as a non-commissioned officer in the Northumberland Fusiliers. As with Fenwick, Horsely had been a non-commissioned officer in charge of a machine gun section and had received a field commission.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the 208th contained a Second Lieutenant A.C. Montford who, like the character Lt. Montfort, was killed in the attack of 3rd May. Presumably, HW felt able to place this character under his own name, albeit with slightly different spelling, because he had been killed so many years earlier. The Montfort of the novel had been an actor,<sup>12</sup> and it is interesting to note that the actual Montford of the 208th is recorded in the War Diary as arranging an open-air concert for the company on 28th March.

The 208th was attached to the 187th Brigade of the 62nd Division,<sup>13</sup> which was known as the '2nd West Riding', as compared with the '2nd East Pennine' Division of the novel. The description of the attack of 3rd May on Bullecourt in the novel is a broadly accurate account of 187th Brigade's participation in the battle. As with the '2nd East Pennines', this was the 62nd Division's first time in battle. Lt. Horsely was not wounded and subsequently rescued, as happens to Darky Fenwick in the novel, the only officer casualty being the death of Montford. But there was a Sgt. Butler killed with the 208th as described in the novel.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of May, the fictitious 286th are moved north with their Division into the

2nd Army to participate in the battle of Messines on 3rd June. However, in actual fact, the 208th remained in their original sector, and participated in no further offensives until November. The novel describes the attack on Messines in front of the Spanbrocken mine. This was the sector attacked by the 9th Royal Irish Rifles of the 107th Brigade (36th Division), and the machine gun duties were carried out by the 107th MGC.<sup>15</sup> The account accurately describes the attack.

In the novel, Capt. Hobart is killed, but the actual commanding officer of the 107th MGC, Capt. Forbes, survived.<sup>16</sup>

The next chapter describes the 286th in a rest area, and here the novel reverts again to some of the experiences of the 208th at the same time (first half of June). Pinnegar as commanding officer urges a good turn-out for an inspection by the Divisional Machine Gun Officer, which takes place the next day. In the 208th, Lt. Rose as acting CO (Capt. King was still on leave) conducted a trial inspection of the company the day before an inspection by the Corps Machine Gun Officer on 7th June.<sup>17</sup> The War Diary indicates that the inspection went well, unlike the one in the novel. Following this, Phillip is sent on a Divisional Signalling Course but is sent back early after four days with a bad report. Similarly, HW is recorded in the War Diary as proceeding on a Corps Signalling Course on 20th May, returning on 26th May. The Diary does not indicate whether or not HW was sent back early, but notes on 26th May that 'Lt. Hamilton proceeds on same course.' since Hamilton did not return from the course until 27th June, we assume that HW must have returned early.

On 9th June, the Diary notes 'Lt. Williamson admitted to hospital.' HW did not return to the company. He was missing from the monthly roster of officers from end-June onwards, and on 4th July a new transport officer, Lt. J.D. Williams, arrived and served for the rest of the year.

In the novel, however, Phillip proceeds on a short leave at this time, returning to find that the Division has been transferred to the 5th Army to participate in the attack on Pilkem Ridge on 31st July. The 286th join in a Divisional machine gun barrage in advance of the attack, and then move up to support the attack of their own Brigade on St Julien. This sector was actually occupied by the 116th Brigade (of 39th Division) with support provided by the 116th Machine Gun Company. Like the Brigade in the novel, the 116th Brigade got into St Julien but was unable to maintain the position and fell back in front of the town.<sup>18</sup> The 116th MGC went forward with the infantry through the area described in the novel.<sup>19</sup>

Following the subsequent attacks on St Julien in August, Phillip goes on a course to Étapes, where he observes the 'mutiny'. Whether or not HW witnessed this is impossible to establish, but some of the events are confirmed in the history of the second battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers (published 1938).<sup>20</sup> In the novel, the mutiny begins as follows:

*... the men flung off their equipment and began to move in mass to the gates ... Three military policemen were standing outside the white-washed hut which was the MP post. One was the sergeant. He had been a heavyweight boxer. The leading men stopped short of the bridge, which was small and narrow. The sergeant drew his revolver. "I shoot the first man who tries to cross." Jeers and boos greeted him. A sergeant of the Gordon Highlanders shouted "Why aren't you at the front?" and walked forward. The boxer fired once into the air. "Go back, or I'll let you have it next time" he said. When the Gordon Highlander went on the Red-cap fired at the ground. The bullet ricocheted and hit the Gordon Highlander, who dropped. Immediately the men rushed the bridge ... .<sup>21</sup>*

Subsequently, fresh troops arrive to restore order: 'detachments of the Manchester and Royal Welch Fusiliers arrived by train ...'<sup>22</sup> The Royal Welch history confirms these events, under the date 20th September 1917:

*The 1st battalion and another have been at Étaples suppressing rioting ... A Redcap shot a Jock by mistake. It was then that trouble arose, and other real or supposed grievances were aired.*<sup>23</sup>

On Phillip's return, the various stages of the Third Battle of Ypres, leading up to the attack on Passchendaele in September – October, are related in outline only, without any detail of individual units or events.

HW then describes an interlude during which Phillip, temporarily absent from his company, assists Spectre West in entering the village of Passchendaele. On 10th October Phillip and Spectre are reconnoitring in the '2nd West Pennines' sector. They come across a party of Lancashire Fusiliers, and take them up to the village, the objective of the battle, which they are surprised to find is empty of Germans. West is wounded on the way back but sends Phillip on to report to Haig's headquarters with this information, in the hope of re-directing an impending attack by the Australians and New Zealanders (who are due to take over from the 2nd West Pennines) the next morning. By the time Phillip reports to Haig, the attack takes place anyway, with heavy casualties.

The area described in this episode was in the 66th (2nd East Lancs.) Division sector. The Official History notes that patrols of the 2/8th Lancashire Fusiliers did indeed enter Passchendaele (but on 9th October, not the 10th) and found it empty.<sup>24</sup> The attack by the Australians and the New Zealanders was exactly as described in the novel, with the quoted casualty figures confirmed in the Official History.<sup>25</sup> In the novel, the 9th Australian Brigade 'almost got to the village, where it found survivors of the 2nd West Pennines with a wounded staff officer'<sup>26</sup> (i.e. West). There is some basis for this, as noted in the Australian Official History. After establishing a line 600 yards from the village, the Australians 'found, hidden in a shellhole, two men of the 66th Division. One had a broken arm, the other trench-feet.'<sup>27</sup> Haig's quote to the correspondents is as recorded in the British Official History.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting in this episode how HW has inserted his characters into an historical situation, described in accurate detail. His characters attempt to alter events but fail, so that the historical sequence is allowed to unfold as it actually did.

Phillip returns to his company to find it transferred back to the 3rd Army to participate in the battle of Cambrai in November, which provides the climax to the novel. This returns the action to the experience of the 62nd Division, who had remained in this area since June. However, HW describes the activities not of his old company the 208th, but that of the 213rd MGC, which was attached to the 186th Brigade in the same Division. Shortly before the battle, the Brigade in the novel receives a new Brigadier, known as the Boy-General, 'said to be twenty-three years old, the youngest General in the British Army.' He had won the VC and the MC.<sup>29</sup> This was actually Brigadier-General R.B. Bradford, VC, MC, who became a Brigadier at the age of twenty-five, and took over command of 186th Brigade on 10th November.<sup>30</sup>

The operations of the 213rd are described in detail in the novel, but HW was not with the company,<sup>31</sup> nor, as noted earlier, with the 208th at this time. The attack begins at 6.20 am, but Phillip's company does not move forward until 9 am. This was the actual experience of 213rd MGC, which, with 186th Infantry Brigade, was in support during the initial assault. After this was successful, the 213rd and 186th duly moved forward at 9 am to take the next objective, Bourlon Wood.<sup>32</sup> The details of the Brigade's attack

in the novel, in which the Boy-General is ordered not to get ahead of his flanks, but goes ahead anyway, are all accurate. The Boy-General's quote that he 'saw no reason why this order should prevent him from the attack of his immediate objectives' is taken from the Official History.<sup>33</sup> An example of HW's imaginative use of material from the historical record is the following, from the Official History:<sup>34</sup>

*... one platoon (of the Duke of Wellington's) had fallen upon a column of 200 German infantry, marching, all unaware, towards Cambrai. In the dark an officer and two others were seized from the tail of the column, and a burst of rifle and Lewis-gun fire killed 50 Germans. The Duke of Wellington's had captured 150 prisoners ...*

This reappears in the novel as follows:

*Darkness had fallen when reinforcements were heard coming up. A platoon of the Duke of Wellington's was resting beside the road. The step was crisp and uniform; could these be Guards? But as the column came near, coal-scuttle helmets were seen against the stars ... (The) company passed; then a party of toughs fell upon the rear of the column and jumped on the backs of a feldwebel, a hauptmann and one other. Cries, shouts, screams, as Lewis guns rattled. Fifty Germans were killed and thrice that number taken prisoner.<sup>35</sup>*

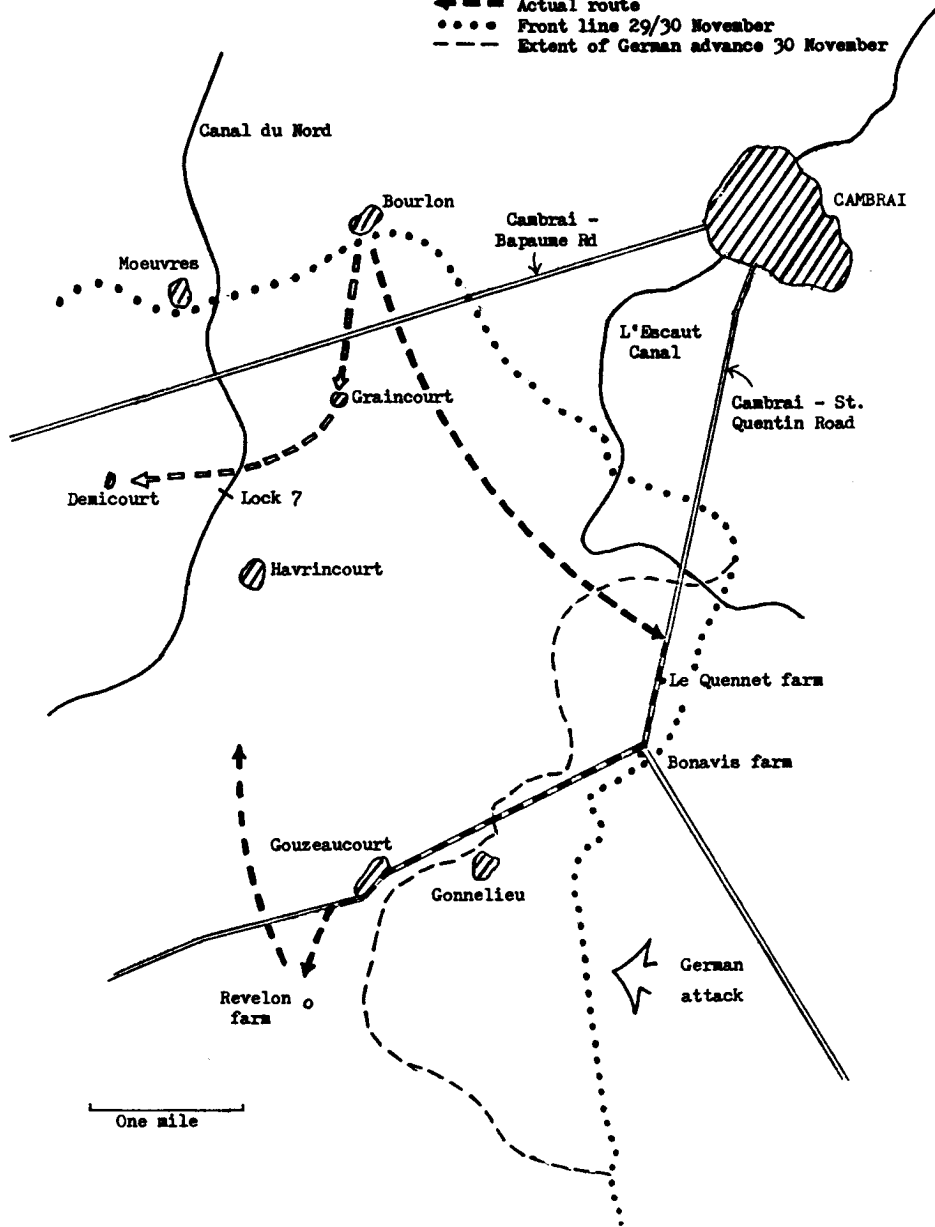
HW vividly recreates the event whilst maintaining historical accuracy, which is perhaps the objective of the whole sequence of novels. Subsequent stages in the battle, culminating in the capture of Bournonville village by the end of the month are all accurately portrayed. Finally, Phillip's company is relieved on the night of the 29th/30th November, and this episode provides another interesting example of HW fitting his characters into actual historical events.

The 286th are ordered from Bournonville to the Brigade rear assembly area in Demicourt, intending to go via Graincourt. In the confusion of the night, Phillip leads the company in the wrong direction and they come to Le Quennet on the Cambrai/St Quentin road, where they are warned that far from being in the rear they are actually close to the German front line (see map). The company finally arrives at Gonnelleu, at which point there is a large German counter-attack early in the morning. The company obtain ammunition from a supply train at Gouzeaucourt and join a mixed force ('Vincent's Force') organised by a Brigadier who had become separated from his Brigade. Assisted by the company's guns, Vincent's Force repels the German attack, holding a line in the area of Revelon farm, until relieved by the Guards' Division. The 286th, the following night, return to their brigade at Ribecourt (near Havrincourt) to find that they had been required to move to Lock 7 on the Canal du Nord the previous day to assist in repelling a German attack from Moeuvres. The Boy-General had been killed the night before, and the new commander is displeased with their non-appearance. Teddy Pinnegar is accordingly relieved of command and Phillip sent home sick, which ends the narrative in the novel.

There was indeed a German counter-attack on Gonnelleu on the night of 29th/30th and a line was held on Revelon Ridge by a mixed force organised by Brigadier-General B. Vincent, who had lost his brigade.<sup>36</sup> However, the 213rd MGC were not involved in this (nor were the 208th or any other of the 62nd Division Machine Gun Companies). They had been relieved and returned without incident directly to the rear assembly area at Bertencourt (just south-west of Demicourt).<sup>37</sup> This relief actually took place on the night of 28th/29th November. HW delays the relief in the novel by one day so that the 286th can be present when the actual German attack took place. However, the Official History notes that Vincent's Force was supported by 'three guns of the 235th Machine

THE RELIEF ON THE NIGHT OF 29/30 NOVEMBER

- ◄--- Intended routes
- ◄--- Actual routes
- ..... Front line 29/30 November
- Extent of German advance 30 November



Gun Company, only withdrawn from action ... when all their ammunition was expended.<sup>38</sup> The relief by the Guards Division, in which Phillip felt 'pride as he saw them advancing in diamond formation' is confirmed in the Official History which notes that 'the advance over the downland of the three battalions moving in perfect order was a heartening sight.'<sup>39</sup> Moreover, there was in fact a supply train at Gouzeaucourt, where the 286th obtained their ammunition. In the novel the supply train, partly raided by the Germans, is recaptured by the Guards and 'fed the Division for the next two nights and days.' The Official History notes that 'the enemy ... had had no time to remove the contents of the supply train ... The 1st Guards Brigade fed from the supply train for 48 hours.'<sup>40</sup>

While 286th were engaged in these activities, 'Brigade had been ordered at noon to move to Lock 7 of the Canal du Nord, to support another division ...' The 62nd Divisional History confirms this: '186th brigade was placed under orders of the 2nd Division and moved up as reserve late in the afternoon to east of the Canal du Nord.'<sup>41</sup> The 213rd MGC, not engaged in the fictional activities of the novel, accordingly actually moved to this place,<sup>42</sup> as the 286th were supposed to have done. Also, Brigadier-General Bradford, like the Boy-General, was killed by shell-fire on the 30th. In the novel, the 286th guns were 'not available for the counter-attack from Moeuvres.'<sup>43</sup> In actual fact, the 186th Brigade and 213rd MGC did not participate in any fighting, but were only called to be in reserve.<sup>44</sup> But it suits HW's narrative to have the company failing to be present when required, so that Teddy can be stellenbosched. As with the incident at Passchendaele, HW has carefully fitted his fictional narrative round an actual sequence of events in which his characters could have been present.

The characters in *Love and the Loveless* participate in virtually every major event on the Western Front in 1917: the spring advance in Arras, the Battle of Messines in June, Pilckem Ridge in July, the mutiny at Étaples in September, the Third Battle of Ypres culminating in the attack on Passchendaele in October, and finally the Battle of Cambrai in November. No one unit participated in all the events described and HW's narrative is based partly on his own experience, but largely, it appears, on research. HW made extensive use, for example, of the highly detailed Official History — 20 volumes covering the war in France and Belgium, the first volume of which appeared in 1921 and the final volume not until 1950. HW clearly uses his imagination in developing his characters and narrative, but they are always placed in a highly accurate historical setting, and are carefully orchestrated with real events. This suggests that HW's objective in writing the war novels was not to relate his own personal experience, but to recreate the Western Front in as much detail as possible. In this he has undoubtedly succeeded.

## NOTES

1. 208th Machine Gun Company 'War Diary' for 1917. Public Record Office.
2. 'War Diary' of 13th Duke of Cambridge (Middlesex Regiment) for September 1915 (Public Record Office) indicates that King was at Loos, but became sick just before the battle.  
Hobart says he was at Loos in *Love and the Loveless* (page 83). King won the MC in 1918 (see *London Gazette* 1918).
3. 208th Machine Gun Company 'War Diary' 27th November 1917. King was demobilised in 1919 (*London Gazette* 1919).
4. *Love ...* page 16. There was in fact an Edgar Pynegar at Colfe's Grammar School at the same time as HW, and who was killed during the war. Presumably this was the origin of the name of the character in the novel. (Duncan, *History of Colfe's Grammar School*, page 188).

5. 115th Machine Gun Company 'War Diary' for September 1916. Public Record Office.
6. 115th Machine Gun Company 'War Diary' noted on 14th October 1916 'Lt. Rose left for Grantham amidst general regret.'
7. 208th Machine Gun Company 'War Diary', 28th September 1917.
8. Cyril Frederick Wright born 1894 at Chesterton (Cambridgeshire). Register of Births, St Catherine's House. 208th 'War Diary' Roll of Officers, 31st March 1917.
9. *London Gazette* 27th October 1917.
10. William Frederick Horsely, born Newcastle 1895. Register of Births, St Catherine's House.
11. Horsely served in the 6th battalion Northumberland Fusiliers and was attached to the Machine Gun Corps (Army List, August 1916), serving with the 149th Machine Gun Company. The 149th War Diary noted on 15th April 1915 'Lance/Corporal Horsely gazetted 2nd Lieut. for duty with this company.' (Public Record Office).
12. *Love ...*, page 72.
13. E. Wyrall *The History of the 62nd (West Riding) Division 1914-1919*, page 38.
14. *Love ...*, page 139 and 208th War Diary for 3rd May 1917.
15. War Diaries of 9th Royal Irish Rifles and 107th Machine Gun Company, Public Record Office.
16. 107th Machine Gun Company War Diary.
17. *Love ...*, page 163, and 208th War Diary, 6th June 1917.
18. Edmonds *Military Operations in France & Belgium 1917*, Vol. 2, page 159 (the Official History of the War).
19. 116th Machine Gun Company War Diary. Public Record Office.
20. J.C. Dunn, *The War The Infantry Knew*, 1938.
21. *Love ...*, page 256.
22. *Love ...*, page 260.
23. Dunn, page 389.
24. Edmonds *Military Operations ...* said that 'officer patrols of 2/8th (with elements of 3/5th Lancs. Fusiliers) entered Passchendaele on the 9th and found it empty.' (page 332). Curiously, the Lancs. Fusiliers War Diary does not mention this.
25. Edmonds *Military Operations ...* page 342.
26. *Love ...* page 317.
27. C.E. Bean, *The AIF in France 1933*, Volume 4, page 917.
28. Edmonds *Military Operations ...* page 339.
29. *Love ...* pages 324 and 326.
30. Wyrall, *History of the 62nd Division* page 78.
31. 213rd War Diary, November 1917.
32. *Love ...* page 334. Wyrall *History of the 62nd Division* page 86. 213rd Machine Gun Company War Diary.
33. Edmonds *Military Operations in France & Belgium 1917*, Vol. 3, page 86.
34. Edmonds *Military Operations ...* page 89.
35. *Love ...*, pages 339-40.
36. Edmonds, page 185.
37. Wyrall, page 119, Machine Gun Company War Diaries.
38. Edmonds, page 186.
39. *Love ...*, page 353. Edmonds, page 190.
40. *Love ...*, page 354. Edmonds, page 190.
41. Wyrall, page 119.
42. 213rd 'War Diary', 30th November 1917.
43. *Love ...*, page 371.      44. Wyrall, page 119.