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THE HOOD BATTALION

Royal Naval Division: Antwerp, Gallipoli, France 1914-1918

LEONARD SELLERS

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Royal Naval Division:
Antwerp, Gallipoli, France 1914-1918
by
LEONARD SELLERS

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England.

Rupert Brooke
Sub-Lieutenant, Royal Volunteer Reserve
of the Royal Naval Division's Hood Battalion

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This book is dedicated to my great-uncle, Albert John Walls, and Joseph Murray of the Hood.

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Acknowledgements

I have had nothing but help and encouragement in researching and writing this account of the Hood Battalion. It started as a labour of love, and grew rapidly into an obsession as I became engrossed in my subject.

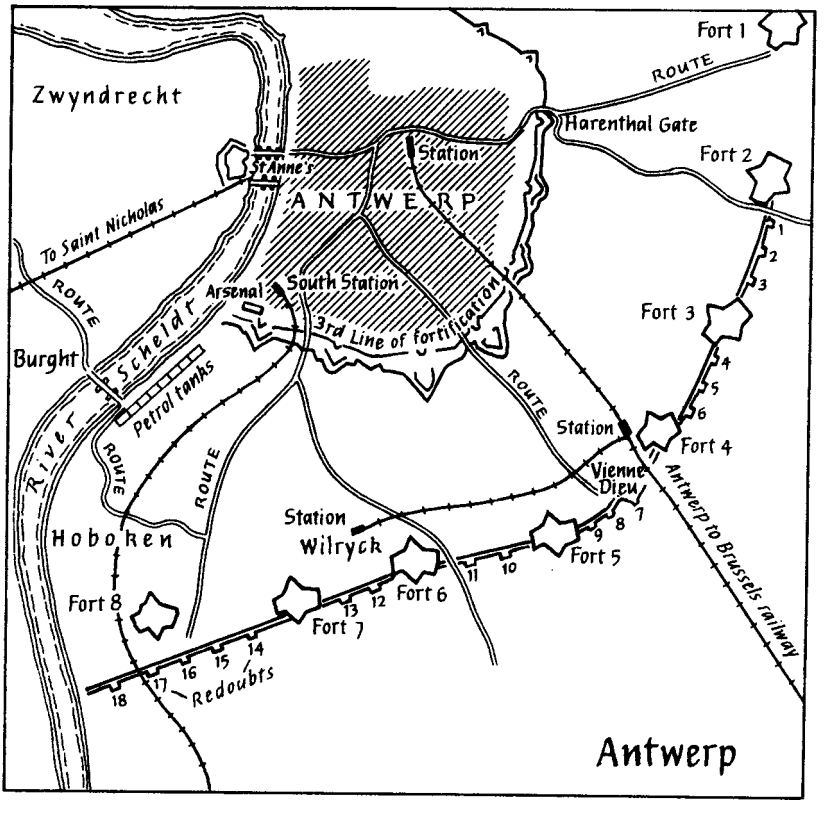
The sheer volume of support makes it impossible to write an outline of the help each person gave me, so I have simply listed their names on page 325. I can only add that I very much appreciate all the assistance I received, in whatever shape or form. Each person in the list knows their individual role, be it providing research facilities, papers, photographs, advice, permissions, critical reviews, or any other help.

I must particularly thank my wife, Elaine, and our two sons, Mark and Neil. All three suffered my research and the occasions on which I confined myself to the study with no word of complaint. Without their support I could not have completed the book.

It has not always been possible to trace the copyright holders of all the material I have quoted, and I would be pleased to hear from any such persons to whom this applies.

Leonard Sellers
Honeysuckle House

Maps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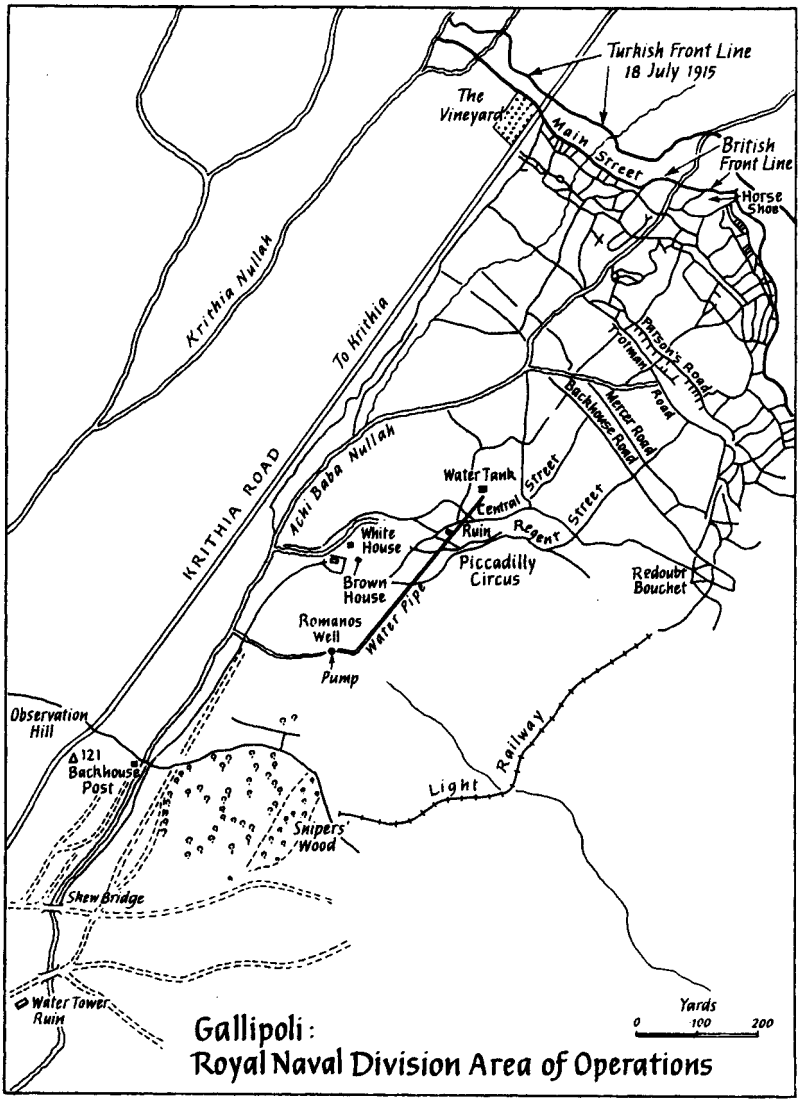
Turkish Front Line
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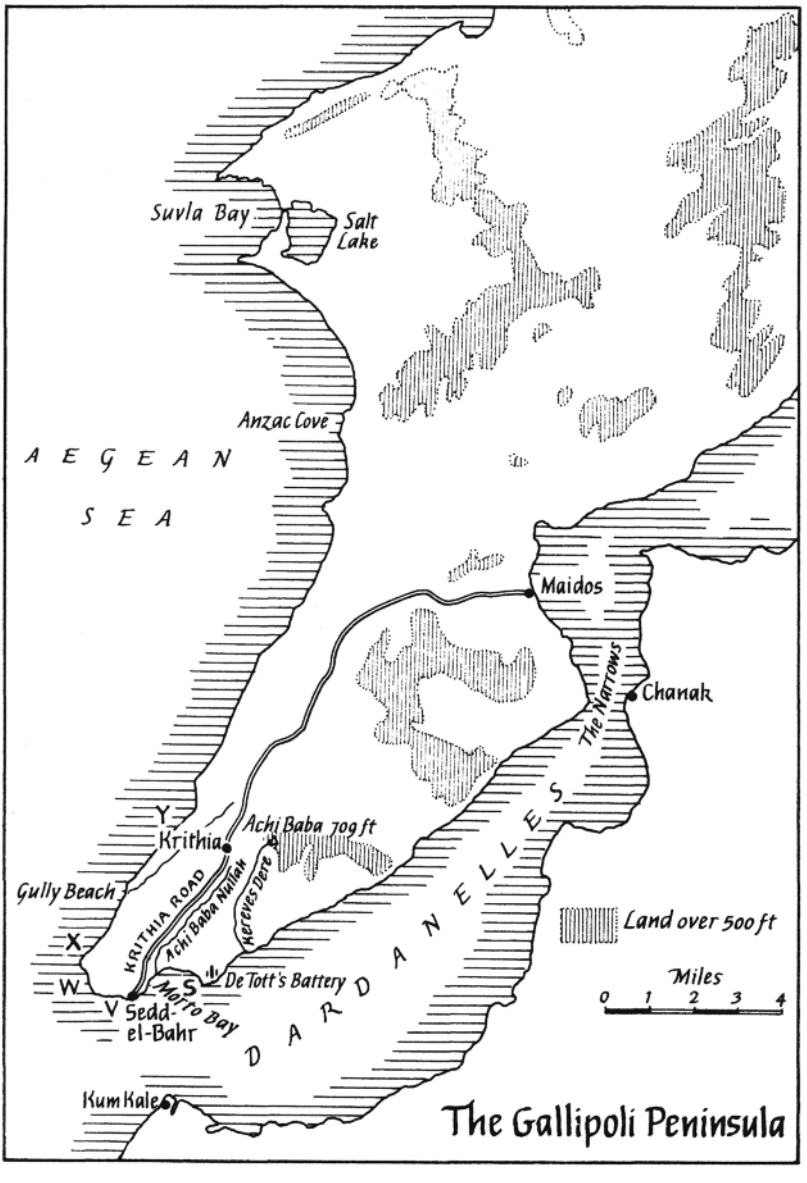
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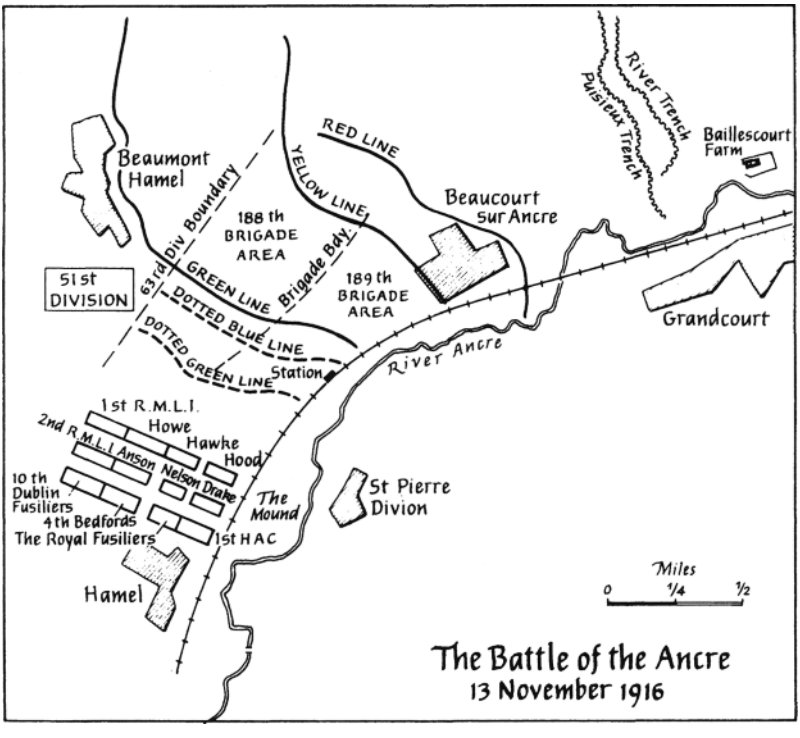
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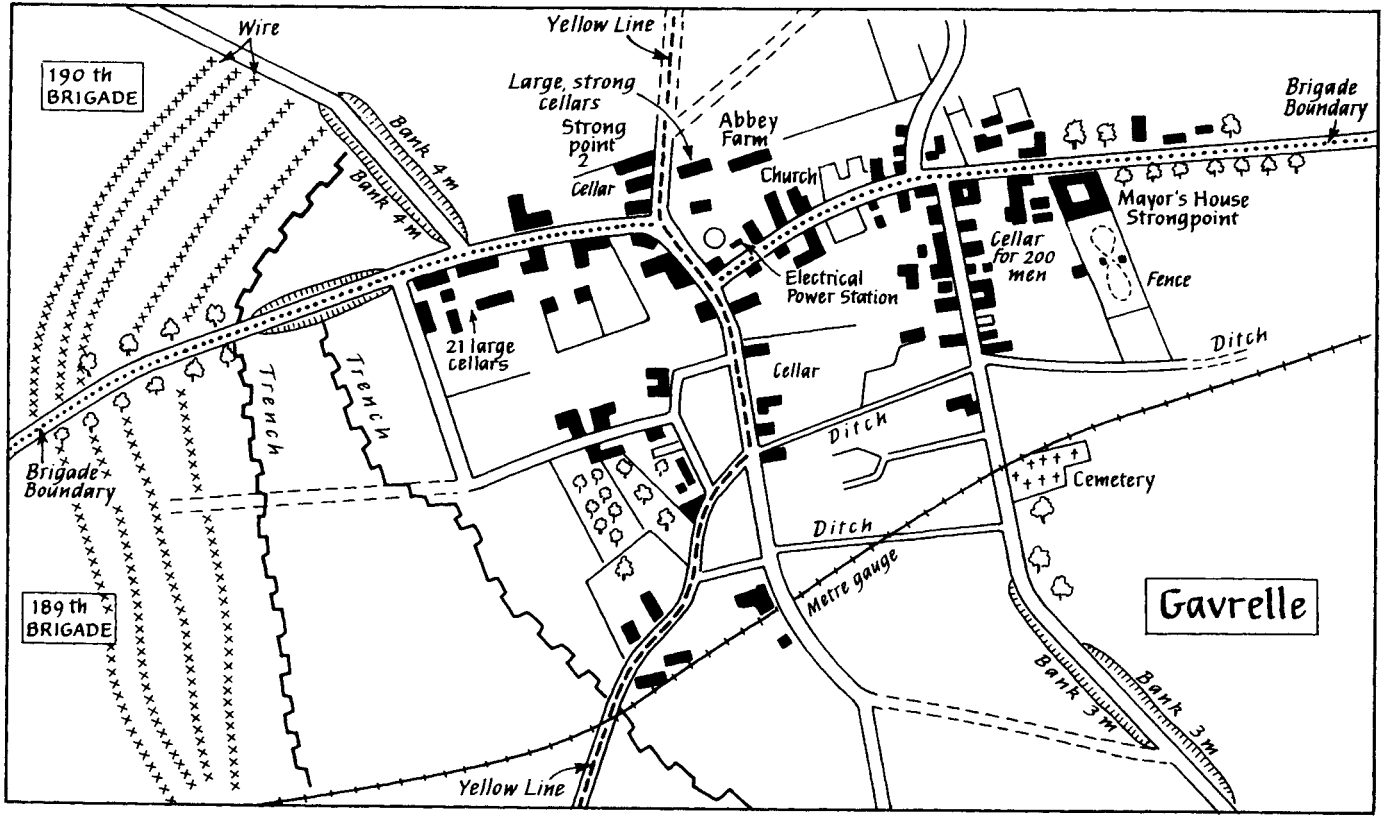
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Strong point 2
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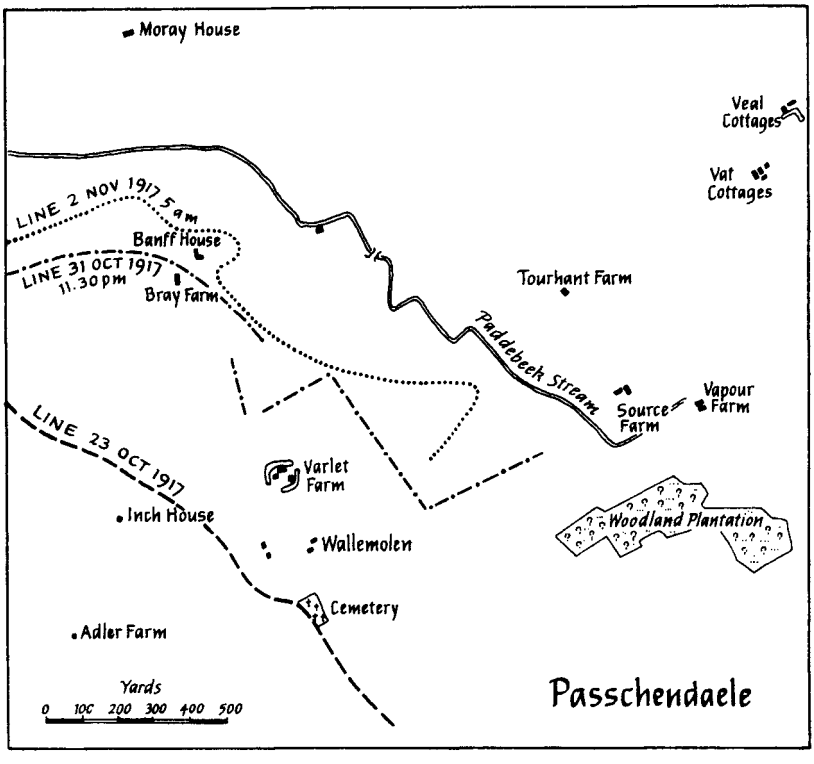
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Introduction

It all started with a small gold locket on a simple base metal chain. This slightly dented piece of jewellery was given to my wife, Elaine, as a hand-me-down from my great-grandmother Caroline Walls. After her son's death Caroline had the locket engraved:

In Loving Memory of
Dear Bert
Killed in action at the
Dardanelles July 18th 1915

Inside was a photograph of my great-uncle, Albert John Walls, with one of my great-grandmother Caroline opposite. I wondered how he had met his fate in that distant land during the First World War, and my resulting researches led me on to what eventually became this history of the Hood Battalion of the Royal Naval Division throughout that war.

I found a story of colour and adventure, of frustrating failure and lost opportunities, terrible hardships, suffering and death, but balanced by determination and heroism, and later success in battle, orchestrated by great names of the age, including Churchill, Kitchener and Asquith.

My great-uncle Albert Walls was the eldest son of John Daniel Walls and Caroline Walls, née Duerr, of Commercial Road, Peckham London. He was born on 25 June, 1878, and should perhaps be considered fortunate to survive childhood: five of his brothers and sisters died before reaching the age of five.[1] Albert was initially a printer, in the general line of his father's work, but on 28 October, 1903, he joined the Royal Navy. He then saw service at Chatham naval base, on the armoured cruisers *Acheron*, *Leviathan* and *Bacchante*, and on the battleships *Illustrious* and *Agamemnon*, the last of which was, coincidentally, to play a leading role at Gallipoli.

Albert was discharged on 6 November, 1908, and transferred to the Royal Fleet Reserve on the following day with the rank of stoker first class and a character reference which described him as 'Very Good Throughout'. Thereafter he spent a week each year training on board navy vessels, until he was finally mobilized for war service on 2 August, 1914. He reported to HMS *Pembroke* at Chatham, and was transferred to HMS *Victory* at Crystal Palace for duty with the Royal Naval Division's Hood Battalion on 17 September.[2]

Formed at the beginning of the First World War, the division was made up of officers and men of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, stokers of the Royal Fleet Reserve and seamen of the Royal Naval Reserve. The unit was Churchill's brainchild, earning from the Prime Minister, Asquith, the sobriquet of 'Winston's Little Army'.[3]

It was a division with a difference, not as other units, but soldier-sailors, which resulted in interesting combinations of officers and men. The men were mainly former naval reservists and new army recruits, a good proportion of whom came from the six recruiting areas of Bristol, Sussex, Clyde, Liverpool, Tyneside and London. Many Hood officers would in other circumstances have been future leaders of the nation, like Arthur 'Oc' Asquith, the Prime Minister's son, or William Denis Browne, one of England's best young musicians and critics, who was educated at Rugby and Cambridge and later studied under Busoni in Berlin.[4]

Another talented officer was Frederick Septimus 'Cleg' Kelly, an Australian composer and pianist educated at Eton and Balliol, who later studied music in Frankfurt and subsequently decided to settle in London. He combined music with outstanding athletic attainments: he stroked the Oxford eight and rowed in the Olympic Games; one of the greatest scullers of his age, he was three times the winner of the Diamond Sculls.[5] Bernard Freyberg already had a distinguished record in the armed forces of his native New Zealand; Patrick Shaw-Stewart had been a brilliant scholar at Eton and Balliol; Charles Lister, also of Balliol, was a diplomat and son of Lord Ribblesdale. Even Americans came to fight with the division, including the charming and good-looking young Johnny Bigelow Dodge.

But perhaps the best known of all was Sub-Lieutenant Rupert Brooke, the poet and symbol of the age, and, as it turned out, of the Gallipoli campaign. Destined to die of blood poisoning just before the first landings, his going seemed to be an omen of the outcome: so near and yet so far. His excitement and enthusiasm for the cause led only to his death, at the age of 27.

As the story unfolds we see the war gradually change from what were called the 'Tipperary days', when hopes were high, hearts were young, expectations soared, romantic ideals held sway, and blood

flowed through youthful veins in the certain knowledge of early and righteous victory. Then came the reality of loss, numbness, mud, and just living from day to day. We see a generation swept away, and we see the Hood Battalion progress from Antwerp to the shores of the Gallipoli peninsula in the Dardanelles.

Steeped in history and romance, the setting for the sagas of Troy and Helen, the Dardanelles were known in ancient times as the Hellespont, leading to the Sea of Marmara and the prize of Constantinople. This is where Europe rubs shoulders with Asia, and centuries of bloody history and enmity had taught the Caucasian side to beware of the cruel demons across the water in Turkey. When the Turks allied themselves with Germany, Gallipoli offered a chance to change the course of the war, reduce its length, and in so doing save countless lives.

Many nations were present at Gallipoli: the British, the French with their Senegalese colonists, Australians, New Zealanders, Indians and Gurkhas all lined up on the Allied side, Turks and Germans on the other. The Allies very nearly succeeded, but delay, ineptitude, bad planning and the strangulation of supplies of men and munitions took their toll. Our story reveals a small fragment of this notorious campaign.

And then on to France and the Western Front, where the division poured its blood liberally into the fields of Ancre, Gavrelle and Passchendaele; but there was still a niggardly doubt in the minds of the army, who felt ill at ease with this manifestation of compromise and expedience. They may have been one of the best divisions available, but army men still had the feeling that these sons of Drake, Nelson and Hood would be better off on the ocean waves.

After the end of the First World War the experiment of having a naval division was not tried again. The experience and memory of the compromise required was too painful for all involved; so the ghosts of the Hood Battalion were left to roam the plain at Helles, looking forever to the unattainable heights of Achi Baba, or to wander among the blood-coloured poppies strewing the fields of France.

In writing this history I have tried to convey to the reader a sense of 'being there' by using first-hand accounts. It is not my story, but theirs. They experienced the fear and exhilaration of battle, the smell of death, the sound of oars in rowlocks, the expectation of voyage, and the glue of mud at the journey's end. None of us can go back; we can only look back and wonder at the suffering of those who went through this cataclysm and the changes they brought about.

Part One

THE EARLY DAYS

CHAPTER ONE

Formation and Training

Before the beginning of the First World War, plans for a naval land force were drawn up on the recommendation of the Committee for Imperial Defence: if war broke out a force of Royal Marines would be formed under the control of the Admiralty, to be known as the Advanced Base Force. When war was declared this project was put into operation, and a brigade of marines was established. However, there were large numbers of naval reservists available over and above those required for manning the fleet, so on 16 August, 1914, the Admiralty decided to add two further brigades to the existing marines.[1]

At that time the British army could only muster six divisions of infantry troops and two cavalry divisions. To meet this shortfall, troops were withdrawn from overseas postings and the Dominions to help where they could. New volunteer units were also formed and trained, such as the local 'Pals' battalions. But a division of naval reservists surplus to the fleet would undoubtedly be a great help; indeed, Lord Kitchener, in a speech to the House of Lords on Thursday 17 September, 1914, showed his keenness for the enterprise:

> Nor must I omit to refer to the assistance which we shall receive from the division of the gallant Royal Marines and Bluejackets now being organized by my Right Honourable Friend the First Lord of the Admiralty. Their presence in the field will be very welcome, for their fighting qualities are well known.[2]

The administration of the Naval Division was handled by an Admiralty standing committee presided over by Winston Churchill, the First Lord. They worked quickly to provide a base to house the first intake of men, to feed them, and to select their officers. In addition to the marine brigade, already partly formed, two naval brigades consisting of four battalions each of 880 men were to be organized in 16 double companies

of 220 men. This number was later changed, and each battalion was designed to be made up as follows:

Petty Officers (Royal Navy)	28
Petty Officers (Royal Fleet Reserve)	48
Petty Officers, Leading Seamen and Seamen (Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve)	424
Stokers (Royal Fleet Reserve)	250
Seamen under 30 years old (Royal Naval Reserve)	187
Total	937

A camping ground was found near Deal in Kent, and the War Office was asked to supply 700 tents to supplement the 170 marine tents already to hand. RNVR men were instructed to bring their own rifles, while arrangements were made to issue 4,000 rifles for the RNR and RFR. These were of the old Lee Enfield type, but orders were placed for the newer short type to be delivered at the earliest possible moment. Vickers received an order for 40 Maxim machine guns, to be ready in 10 days; four would be issued to each battalion, with four kept in reserve. Each company was to have a machine-gun section, and each of the three brigades was to form a field ambulance column. Orders were also placed for 4,000 military uniforms for the marines and 8,000 naval kits for the reservists, all to be in khaki.

At this early stage a decision was made which, as Douglas Jerrold states in his history of the Royal Naval Division, was a stroke of genius and had an incalculable influence in keeping alive some elements of naval tradition. The rudimentary first battalions were to be known by the names of famous admirals and naval bases:

1st Royal Naval Brigade – Commodore Wilfred Henderson, RN
- 1st Battalion – Drake
- 2nd Battalion – Hawke
- 3rd Battalion – Benbow
- 4th Battalion – Collingwood

2nd Royal Naval Brigade – Commodore Oliver Backhouse, RN
- 5th Battalion – Nelson
- 6th Battalion – Howe
- 7th Battalion – Hood
- 8th Battalion – Anson

3rd Royal Naval Brigade (Marines) – Brigadier-General Giles Trotman
9th Battalion – Portsmouth
10th Battalion – Plymouth
11th Battalion – Chatham
12th Battalion – Deal

Providing bands for the new brigades was a priority, although the quality was not important and it was thought likely that sufficient could be assembled from among pupils under instruction at the Naval School of Music.[3] In the event the 2nd Royal Naval Brigade acquired three bands: the headquarters Clyde Band of 24 men, the Anson Band of 28 men, and the Hood Battalion band, known as the Dundee Band, of 22 players.[4]

And so, with orders flying in all directions, the division was born in late August, 1914, and men and officers began to arrive. Many of the naval reservists were not happy with the prospect of becoming soldier-sailors and not going to sea, as John Bentham, an ordinary seaman later of the Hood, explains:

> The commodore spoke to the men and informed us that all our hopes of going to sea were dead, as it had been found by the powers that be that the reserves of regular ratings were sufficient for the needs of the fleet and it had been decided to form a naval brigade such as was found in the Boer War. We were to go to Deal and company commanders were to attend a conference to work out details. This was a real blow and everyone was very depressed. We even held a solemn mock funeral in which our officers took part and a copy of the *Admiralty Seamanship Manual* was lowered into the Thames.
>
> Gun drill was abandoned; everyone concentrated on rifle drill and we were served out with the old leather equipment as was used in the Boer War. Needless to say, it was in a shocking state, having been stored in the cellars of the barracks since the beginning of the century. It was hard as iron, mildewed and took hours of cleaning even to make it presentable. However, it is said that water will wear stone, and constant oiling, polishing, etc., did work wonders, but still we could not use the bandoliers to keep any ammunition . . .
>
> The officers at Walmer had a great many problems whilst giving drill instructions. None of the officers had the slightest idea of army drill and it was quite a common sight to see company commanders reading out commands from the drill manual. It was the usual practice to march off on to the downs by companies and drill separately; but once clear of the camp and well out of sight, the usual order was fall out and carry on smoking, simply because the officers had not the faintest idea of what to do. The marine

instructors used to despair of ever knocking us into shape and often said 'God help us if ever we are sent to the front', and that they would not be seen dead with us.[5]

The Hood Battalion was to be commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel John Arnold Cuthbert Quilter, a six-foot-tall former Guards officer, who had the unenviable task of turning this diverse collection of men into an efficient infantry battalion. His second-in-command for a period was Major the Viscount Bury of the Scots Guards; many of the commanding officers had served in the Guards.

Colonel Quilter was born in 1875 and educated at Eton and Trinity Hall, Cambridge. His military career began in the Leicestershire Militia, and he gained his commission in 1897 as a second lieutenant with the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards. He served with distinction throughout the South African campaign, sustaining a slight wound and being mentioned in despatches. At Biddulphsberg on 29 May, 1900, Quilter and a number of men showed great courage in entering an area of burning veldt grass of several years' growth and rescuing wounded comrades while under Boer fire. In 1914 he was appointed lieutenant-colonel commanding the St Helen's Battalion, Princess of Wales (South Lancashire) Regiment,[6] and later transferred to command the Hood. His background showed his undoubted qualities, and he soon gained a reputation for fine platoon and company training. He proved a good officer and was well liked.

Among the new officers was Bernard Cyril Freyberg, who was to become a Royal Naval Division legend. A New Zealander who had swum for his country at international level, Freyberg trained as a dentist. In 1911 he joined the 6 Haurali Regiment, a newly-formed territorial unit, and was gazetted as a second lieutenant; he later signed up as a special constable during a period of local strife involving strikers. Being a man of action, however, in March, 1914, he left New Zealand on board a Royal Mail steamer, ending up serving in the Mexican Civil War; then, hearing news of the outbreak of the First World War, he made his way to England.

Landing in London on Monday, 25 August, 1914, with the intention of finding a position in the armed forces, Freyberg was strolling across Horse Guards Parade one day when he encountered the First Lord of the Admiralty. Determinedly, Freyberg approached Churchill (in those far-off days without the benefit of bodyguards), and questioned him as to the advantages of applying for service with the RND. Churchill was initially reluctant to listen, but eventually encouraged the move. Acting on this advice, Freyberg contacted the New Zealand liaison officer to apply for a commission; he was in the right place at the right time, as many suitable candidates were only in their late teens

or early twenties, whereas Freyberg was 25 and had held a territorial commission. He was made a temporary lieutenant (RNVR) in the Hood Battalion; shortly afterwards he was promoted and took over the command of A Company.[7]

On 2 September the Marine Brigade moved to Friedown camp, while the 2nd Brigade went to Lord Northbourne's park at Betteshanger in Kent. The Rev Henry Clapham Foster, a temporary chaplain with 2nd Brigade, described the park enthusiastically:

> Betteshanger and the surrounding country was admirably adapted for training purposes, and during the latter days of August, and throughout the month of September, numerous sham fights and night attacks were arranged. The men acquitted themselves exceedingly well both in the field and at the rifle ranges (with a large brick wall as their backdrop), which were now in full working order . . .
>
> Time passed quickly in camp, and the social side was by no means neglected. Two enormous YMCA marquees proved to be a godsend to the men, for here they could read, write letters, or hold an impromptu concert if they felt so inclined . . . The Rector of Betteshanger, the late Canon Bliss, and his two nieces did all that lay in their power to help both officers and men during their sojourn in their midst. The Rectory bathroom was at the disposal of all officers who were tempted to indulge in the luxury of a hot bath, and in their own grounds the Misses Lindsay worked most zealously night and day at a cosy canteen for the men, under the auspices of the Missions to Seamen.
>
> Lord Northbourne and his friends in the vicinity of the camp always took a kindly interest in the men's welfare, and he was frequently a spectator at the numerous boxing and football contests which were held in the camp. I remember very well a speech that he made at the conclusion of a vigorous boxing match between two rival battalions. He concluded by saying that the men had proved themselves excellent fighters with the gloves, and he had no doubt that when by and by they were called on to take part in a sterner fight they would acquit themselves equally as well . . .
>
> Many men availed themselves of the opportunity by coming at 5.30am to the picturesque and beautiful little church at Betteshanger . . . Parade service was a wonderful sight in those glorious grounds; the place selected was a gradually-sloping piece of ground close to the vicarage, and here, Sunday by Sunday, officers and men made their corporate act of prayer and praise. Lord Northbourne and his friends were present, as a rule, and some villagers would group themselves together just outside the railings close by.[8]

Unfortunately the needs of the fleet soon intervened, and many of the better-trained men were withdrawn. They were replaced by new RNVR recruits drawn from six areas: London, Bristol, Merseyside, Sussex, Tyneside and the Clyde. Winston Churchill was meanwhile making strenuous efforts to provide the division with its own artillery, including writing a letter to Kitchener at the War Office on 13 September, 1914:

> In these circumstances, is it not worth your while considering a bolder plan, viz. take the complete artillery of one of the least advanced territorial divisions; send it to India and bring home the regular artillery of a division? You could then count on the whole division being complete for service on 1 January. It is an awful pity to leave these splendid battalions keeping order among natives, when trained artillery is our bitterest need.
>
> I think myself that every regular battery in India, except mountain, ought to come home and be replaced by territorials.

On 19 September Kitchener replied that he had no artillery officers or batteries to spare, in view of the needs of the new army in training, and Churchill finally admitted defeat on 20 September:

> I think I had better give up the attempt to form the artillery of the Royal Naval Division. The task is too difficult and my resources too small.

However, Churchill still battled with Lord Kitchener on other fronts on behalf of his fledgling infantry, and Kitchener was forced to concede defeat on some points:

> As I have stated in the enclosed copy of the Admiralty letter, I think that it would be better for you to continue the present arrangements and obtain stores from the trade. It would not, in my opinion, be expedient if Admiralty orders took precedence over orders for the armies now being raised, although no-one can more thoroughly appreciate than myself the value of the Royal Naval Division.
>
> With regard to your proposal that a general officer should inspect the division, I shall be delighted to send a general officer down some time in December; I doubt whether an inspecting officer could at present moment form an opinion as to the fitness that the division is likely to reach for active service after 1 January.[9]

CHAPTER TWO

Antwerp

In September, 1914, the strategic Belgian fortress at Antwerp became at risk: Germany was advancing and bringing up its heavy howitzers for the attack. The Channel ports were threatened, and it was vitally important that these doors to Europe should remain open and secure.

Asquith, the Prime Minister, was very concerned; the Belgian government had concluded that they must leave Antwerp and withdraw in the direction of Ghent, but the British army was stretched by its shortage of infantry and unable to help. There was, however, the Royal Naval Division. Untrained, untested and undervalued they may be, but Winston's Little Army could come to the rescue.

On 3 October a meeting was convened between Lord Kitchener, Winston Churchill, Sir Edward Grey, Prince Louis of Battenburg (the First Sea Lord) and Sir William Tyrrell. They decided that Belgium should be urged to reconsider withdrawal, and the RND sent to stiffen their resolve and defend Antwerp.[1] The division would have no artillery support, so the campaign had little chance of success, but any delay in the German advance could protect the Channel ports and it was a case of using what one had. The recently-formed and infant force was to be blooded almost before it was born.

The RND 3rd (Marine) Brigade was already in France, guarding Dunkirk on Churchill's orders. General Aston, the overall commander of the Royal Naval Division, had left England on 19 September with a mixed force of 2,600 marines, the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars, Commander Samson's aeroplanes, a number of armoured cars and 20 Royal Engineers. Their mission was to concentrate the enemy by giving the impression of being a considerably greater force, while using the armoured cars to cut railway lines.[2]

With the crisis in Antwerp, the Marine Brigade was moved to Belgium, with General Archibald Paris replacing Aston in command when Aston became ill. They arrived on 3 October and next morning

took up position, in company with the 7th Belgium Regiment, on the left or western half of a semi-circular entrenched position facing the town of Lierre, with its wings resting on the right bank of the River Nethe above and below the town. The outer forts on this front had already fallen and trench bombardment was in progress, which increased in violence that night.

Early in the morning of 5 October the enemy crossed the river, which was not under fire from the trenches, and by midday the 7th Belgium Regiment was forced to retire. This exposed General Paris's right flank, but Colonel Tierchon of the 2nd Chasseurs made a gallant counter-attack, assisted by British aeroplanes, and restored the position by late afternoon. During the night of 5/6 October the Belgians tried to drive the Germans back across the river, but the attempt failed and resulted in the evacuation of practically all the Belgian trenches.

The few troops remaining tried to counter-attack, but were unable to make any impression as the bombardment was too violent. The exhausted Belgians holding the line consisted now of only 125 men of the 3rd Battalion Fortress Infantry, trying desperately to retain positions in trenches normally manned by 500 troops. Only 260 remained of the original 1,400 2nd Chasseurs, and just 280 Carabiniers. Three Belgian battalions had received no food or rest for 48 hours and it was evident that not much reliance could be placed on these troops. As the bombardment increased, the position of the British Marine Brigade was becoming untenable.[3]

A second line of defence had been hastily prepared, in the form of the RND 1st and 2nd Brigades, plus the army's 7th Division. The Rev Foster described the preparations:

> The news that we were to leave immediately for France spread very quickly round the camp, and among the men there was a scene of boundless enthusiasm; loud cheers were raised as they hastily dressed and got their kits together. There was no time to lose. Breakfast was at 7am and at eight we were told the transport would be ready to convey our baggage to Dover.
>
> The 2nd Royal Naval Brigade started on the march to the pier at about 9 a.m., amid scenes of great enthusiasm, two brass bands and a fife and drum band accompanying them . . . . The men selected some curious words for their own special 'marching songs', and these are, as a rule, set to familiar melodies. It would have astonished, not to say shocked, the Salvation Army had they heard the following words sung to a hymn tune when passing a public house:
>
> There's a man selling beer over there;
> There's a man selling beer over there:

Over there, over there, over there, over there!
There's a man selling beer over there.

Another favourite ditty with men on the march is a song with a somewhat unsavoury refrain:

Wash me in the water
Where you wash your dirty daughter,
And I shall be whiter than the whitewash on the wall.

Singing such ditties as these, we marched from Betteshanger to Dover. We were accorded a magnificent reception in the streets by crowds of people who cheered lustily and waved flags and handkerchiefs as we made our way to the pier . . . . At about 5pm our men commenced the somewhat dreary task of getting the baggage on board. We took with us, besides field kit, our base kit, and first-line-of-transport kit. At about 9.30 we were ready to sail, so well had the men worked . . . .

In a short time we were under way and slowly sailing out of Dover harbour. It was a strange, not to say uncanny, sensation to be leaving one's native land on active service for the first time . . . . Our escort, consisting of two destroyers, kept close to us during the whole of the night. The voyage, however, proved to be uneventful, and at about 4am on Monday, 5 October we anchored off Dunkirk.

For eight weary hours we lay off Dunkirk, awaiting orders, in a choppy sea. At last a French destroyer came alongside and a somewhat portly French naval officer shouted through a megaphone that we were to proceed into harbour and moor at the quay. It was just about noon when we entered.

Those were stirring days – the Tipperary days we might call them – and the war was but two months old. The cheers from troops and civilians on shore, re-echoed by a thousand throats on our transport, stirred the emotions, and will live in the memories of those who heard them to the end of life. But the most moving incident of all was when our brass band came up on deck and played the *Marseillaise*; nothing delighted the French more than this little compliment, and they cheered again and again as the ship moored at the quay.[4]

At Dover the 2nd Brigade had been given five days' rations and two million rounds of ammunition, all transported down from London. In Dunkirk Commodore Backhouse, the commanding officer, requisitioned more stores from a Royal Navy depot, collected maps and equipment from various departments, and met the British consul. He also visited General Sir Henry Rawlinson, who was to command the completed Antwerp relief force once the 7th Division arrived;

Rawlinson warned Backhouse it was on the cards that their trains would not get through to Antwerp.

The brigade began to leave at 10pm on 5 October, on what proved to be a slow but safe journey. At daylight on Tuesday, 6 October the trains were given a warm welcome as they passed through villages surrounding Antwerp, and the main station in the city was reached at 7.30am. On arrival they were marched by road to the suburb of Kiel and instructed to find billets. The marching men were greeted by great cheering; Belgian girls pinned little silk flags on their tunics and large jugs of light beer were brought out, from which the men filled anything that would hold liquid.[5]

However, shrapnel could be clearly seen bursting near the city and two captive balloons in the sky were helping to direct the German fire. Thousands of Belgians were engaged in constructing entrenchments, and a great number of fields had been flooded to check the advance. As the brigade continued on through the second line of defences they passed large bodies of retiring Belgian troops going in the opposite direction, utterly exhausted and very dispirited. Numerous ambulance wagons were bringing wounded out from the trenches in front of Lierre.[6]

The *Daily Mail* correspondent, J.M.N. Jeffries, described the scene:

> As the hours advanced there were signs of breaking and disorder amid the troops. At some bifurcation or cross-point close to the front on the Lierre road (Kontich perhaps, or was it Lint?) there was great confusion, jamming of vehicles to and from the front, rearing of horses and shouts, ambulances involved with ammunition wagons, cars all honking and screaming at each other, with the prospect of enemy shells landing at any moment in the midst of the disorder; and no-one to direct, no-one to disentangle the jumble, which grew worse every minute.
>
> No-one, that is to say, till a man jumped from a car and, hoisting himself to vantage upon some unseen pedestal or other, began to cry out at the mob in Anglo-French, and to point with vigorous, imperative gestures to this or that centre of the maelstrom. He was a remarkable and in that place an inexplicable figure, clad in a flowing dark blue cloak, clasped at the neck with silver lion-heads or something of that sort, after the fashion of the cloaks worn by prelates in Rome, and this cloak fell in great folds from this stretched oratorical arm. But there was purpose in his gestures, and power in his voice, and under his direction cars and carts were unlocked from each other, and the traffic gradually sorted into streams.

> The car in which I was fell into its own channel and went past with the others, but as I looked back he was still at his post, poised like a statue, watching till the order he had created was installed with durable momentum. It was Mr Winston Churchill.
>
> I did not fail to mention this characteristic and valuable little piece of work, for valuable it was, in my telegram that evening. But it was forbidden to be printed by the censors in London.[7]

Churchill was in the area inspecting the troops' current intermediate position, situated halfway between the original line and the second ring of forts round Antwerp. He found its flanks were in the air, and even if it could have been held the tired condition of the Belgian troops made this proposition most unlikely. A council of war was held, with the Belgian King presiding over his general staff. There were two courses of action: either to retire to the second line of forts or bring the 7th Division to Antwerp to recapture Lierre and the line of the River Nethe. This idea was dropped when it was made clear that the division could not remain permanently locked up in Antwerp after the line had been re-established, so the first option was favoured.[8]

The First Lord of the Admiralty had clearly become comfortable in his role of saviour of Antwerp. The Prime Minister wanted him back at the Admiralty as soon as possible, but on 5 October Churchill produced a shock of staggering proportions. He telegraphed Asquith and offered his resignation as First Lord in order to take command of both the relieving and garrison forces in the defence of Antwerp. As Churchill's friend Violet Asquith wrote, 'What amazed and shocked me was the sense of proportion (or lack of it) revealed by Winston's choice.'[9]

Churchill had got the taste for combat, and wanted more. If his request had been granted, men of the rank of major-general would have been commanded by a former lieutenant of Hussars, which would have ruffled too many feathers. But events decided the issue: there was no time left for Churchill to play the soldier.

Meanwhile, Commodore Backhouse and the 2nd Brigade had arrived at Wilrijk railway station to find the 1st Brigade already there, unloading stores. The men were given food, then advanced by road to move into prepared trenches: the Marine Brigade would be in the centre, with the 1st Brigade to their right between Boschhoek and Hove, and the 2nd Brigade to their left between Vrende and Boschhoek. The positions were about two miles from the German front line at Lierre. But on arrival the commanding officers were told about the change of orders resulting from the council of war: they were to go back and occupy trenches in line with the second ring of forts around Antwerp. As

they moved, these orders were changed again, and the 2nd Brigade was eventually sent to billets at Vienne Dieu, where they were fed and turned in for the night.[10]

The chaplain, Henry Foster, writes:

> A march of five miles brought us to the village of Vienne Dieu, a quaint spot on the confines of the city . . . . Here we halted and were to rest a short time before going up to the firing line . . . .
>
> We were told that we were to be quartered for the night in an old château, standing in its own grounds and surrounded by trees. There was abundant evidence that the occupants had been wealthy people and that they had fled away in haste. There was a quantity of valuable furniture, and we found everything just as its late owner had left it.
>
> We ascertained that one of the servants belonging to the house was still at her home in the village, and after a good deal of persuasion we succeeded in getting her to come and cook supper for us . . . . Those of us who are still alive will not readily forget the scene in that old room of the château. There we sat round the table, a light being supplied by a candle stuck securely in the neck of an empty bottle, eating like the gourmands who haunt Simpson's in the Strand and other famous eating-houses. Plates and forks were scarce, but pocket-knives came in exceedingly handy. The windows had been plastered up with brown paper so as not to let out a single streak of light.
>
> There sat such well-known personages as Lieutenant-Colonel George Cornwallis West, Arthur Asquith, Denis Browne and Rupert Brooke, eating pieces of veal with their fingers and drinking coffee out of tumblers and milk jugs.[11]

Sleep was almost impossible, as the guns were firing on both sides, and at about 2.30am the next day (Wednesday, 7 October) orders arrived for the naval brigades to occupy the trenches between the forts in the second line of defence. The men were soon assembled and marched to their new positions.[12]

1st Brigade
Hawke Battalion between forts 2 and 3
Collingwood Battalion between forts 3 and 4
Drake Battalion between forts 4 and 5
Benbow Battalion in reserve

2nd Brigade
Howe Battalion between Lierre road and fort 5
Hood Battalion between forts 5 and 6

Anson Battalion between forts 6 and 7
Nelson Battalion in reserve at Château Elsdock, where the brigade HQ was established.[13]

The infantry defences here were covered by strong barbed wire entanglements, but the trenches had no head cover or loopholes and, being raised far above ground level, gave very little protection against artillery fire. The men began digging shell-proof trenches in the rear with entrenching tools borrowed from the Belgians. Backhouse acquired other supplies for his men from the train still at Wilrijk railway station, and a nearby depot in a linoleum factory, then busied himself visiting all the trenches under his command and studying the plans he had been given for retreat. The men were plentifully fed and quite contented in the warm, dry weather.[14]

The 1st Brigade appeared to be not quite so well organized, nor in such high spirits. Their battalions had reached position at about 5am, and immediately set about trying to improve their situation with the few available entrenching tools. But the men were tired and the lack of water made itself felt; coupled with general ignorance of how to use a pick and shovel, this resulted in little practical improvement. Four buses loaded with supplies were received by the brigade, but, instead of a self-contained bus-load for each battalion, all stores of one type were loaded in one bus, so everything had to be sorted and reloaded before they could be issued to the troops.[15]

The situation was now getting critical, as that morning the Germans crossed the River Scheldt in force at Schoonaeroe above Termonde. This move directly threatened the railway from Antwerp to Ghent, and an urgent, hurried retreat from Antwerp was increasingly likely – which would lead to the probable congestion and possible destruction of the fragile pontoon bridges across the river in the city, and consequent extensive losses of troops. Field-Marshal Sir John French, the British commander-in-chief of Allied forces in Europe, sent Lieutenant-Colonel Bridges from his staff in an aeroplane to give him daily reports on the situation; and plans were put in hand to provide steamers and barges to transport 7,000 men across the river in one go.[16]

At 3pm orders arrived to extend the 2nd Brigade's right flank to the trenches between fort 7 and the number 16 redoubt, so Nelson Battalion moved into this position. One company of Howe was relieved near to fort number 4 by Drake Battalion, and went into reserve.

At 7pm the 2nd Brigade put up a furious fusillade. Backhouse and Major Maxwell (the brigade major) went forward to discover the problem, but found it was just a false alarm. There had been continuous heavy fire all day from the forts and guns to the rear of the RND, some of which fell short and endangered the men (one

Belgian redoubt was knocked out by fire from an adjoining fort), but German fire at this stage was mainly directed at the advanced villages. Very little was aimed at the forts and trenches, although there was casual shelling into the city itself.[17]

Bernard Freyberg had spent the day reconnoitring a possible withdrawal route for his company of the Hood. Whilst engaged on this he touched a section of electrified barbed wire: the current glued his right hand to the wire, and it was some time before the switch could be located and the current turned off. His palm and fingers were lacerated, the scars remaining for the rest of his life, but it was only the first of many injuries he would sustain before the war was over.[18]

During the night of 7/8 October German shells continued to fall on Antwerp with greater and greater intensity from 2am onwards. The water supply in the city had been cut, and soon some 100 houses were burning. Fortunately there was no wind, or the damage could have been far worse and the pontoon bridges destroyed. Backhouse was visiting General Paris at divisional HQ at 2am when a large shell burst only 10 yards from them, but their luck held and no-one was injured. Many shells burst around the commodore's car as he was returning to his position, while divisional HQ was moved back into Antwerp itself. 2nd Brigade HQ transferred to Wilrijk railway station, where shell-proof trenches were constructed in a nearby garden.[19]

As day broke on 8 October the shelling continued. Chaplain Foster writes:

> It was on this day that we first noticed any marked increase in the enemy's shellfire. His heavy batteries were very busy, Antwerp being the chief target, and by midday the town was literally deluged by a torrent of big shells, which burst with ear-splitting reports, terrifying both man and beast. The Rev Robert Primrose (the Presbyterian chaplain with the Hood Battalion) told me that he had taken a walk during the early hours of the day in the centre of the city, and had seen three or four houses blown down, with terrific force, as the wind blows down a house made with playing cards. The loss of life was considerable. Men, women, children, horses, dogs and cats were lying dead in the main streets.
>
> Some parts of the line held by the Naval Division suffered heavier bombardment than others, but so far, luckily for us, most of the shells were, as the men put it, 'Non-stop for Antwerp'. It is, perhaps, somewhat difficult for those who were not there to imagine the utter hopelessness and despair of the men who had been sent with the intention of defending Antwerp. Unknown to us, the fate of Antwerp was decided before we arrived.[20]

Before dawn on 8 October Paris received news from General Dossin, commanding the 2nd Belgian Division, that forts 1, 2 and 4 had fallen to the Germans. At 9am a conference was held to discuss the situation. It was agreed that, if the forts had indeed fallen, the entire line was untenable unless they could be retaken quickly; failing this, the whole line must be abandoned at nightfall and the defence withdrawn to the inner enceinte immediately round the city. For this purpose, however, the fortress troops in Antwerp were sufficient, so it was decided that the British naval forces and General Dossin's division should cross the Scheldt after dark and join the main Belgian field army to the west of the river.

The three forts had not in fact fallen to the Germans as reported, but later that afternoon their garrisons abandoned them and could not be induced to return, so the contingency plans were only a few hours premature. The condition of the Belgian troops was such that there was little hope of holding the line, but the Belgian CO, General de Guise, was determined to maintain the defence, step by step, to the very last. He chivalrously insisted that the British troops should be the first to cross the bridges, his final words being, *'Alors, c'est fini, mes hommes sont usés.'*

Lord Kitchener was informed of the situation, and shortly afterwards orders were received that the British should withdraw across the river, that General Rawlinson had been instructed to assist in every way possible, and that trains had been arranged to be at the town of St Nicolas, to the west of Antwerp. General Paris had himself already decided that his Royal Naval Division would retire across the Scheldt after dark to Haesdonck, six miles west of Antwerp. The Belgian army was endeavouring to keep open communications with the city, but its men were too exhausted to dispute a serious enemy attack from the direction of Schoonaeroe, and were retiring behind the Ghent-Selzaete canal to try to re-form. A plan was put in motion to send two brigades of the 7th Division and two brigades of artillery by rail to Ghent to cover the flank of the RND retirement.

Bad news now came in that a German force of about a division, reinforced by 6,000 troops from Brussels, was attacking Lokeren and the railway between St Nicolas and Ghent. The only course open was to send the trains along the northern line from Selzaete to St Gillies Waes, a small town north of St Nicolas. Arrangements were made to protect the route, and one officer personally took seven trains down this line. Messengers were sent to General Paris to inform him of the change; as a safeguard, Commander Samson, RN, was sent in armoured cars with a duplicate set of instructions.

At 5.25pm General Paris held a conference with his senior officers and staff, and sent an order to the Royal Naval Division instructing

them to retire on receipt of the order. The retreat began at about 7.30pm under very difficult conditions, with terrific confusion and congestion on the roads. Guards had been posted at the bridges, however, to keep the way clear for the RND.[21]

Commodore Backhouse described the retreat:

> We had a conference of commandants at 4pm, but had no orders to give them for retirement. At 5.30pm Colonel Ollivant (on the RND divisional staff) arrived with orders for retirement at 10pm, followed a few minutes later by Captain Sketchley (also an RND divisional staff officer) with orders for immediate retirement. I sent Curzon, who was at Wilrijk with me, to collect his battalion and sent Maxwell to the Hood and Anson battalions, to evacuate and proceed to the pontoon bridge. I had a regrettable meeting with Belgian officers in charge of the reserves and who had brought in guns, in telling them of our departure.
>
> The leading companies of Howe and Hood reached Wilrijk at 7pm, followed by the remainder of these battalions at 8.30pm, when we moved off to the pontoon bridge, the Anson and Nelson Battalions having gone separately. We had no difficulty in making our own way and had no shellfire. The road led close to the burning oil vats, but we did not have any difficulty in passing. We were received by General Paris on the bridge, who directed the 2nd Brigade to Zwyndrecht. Some shells burst in the burning oil vats soon after we had cleared the bridge, but the bridge was not shelled as we crossed. The arrangements of guides between Burcht and Zwyndrecht were very good. We had left behind two lorries with our stores besides the whole of our kit back at Wilrijk station.[22]

The Reverend Foster, who was with the Anson Battalion and came up just after the Hood and Howe, wrote about his experience:

> Our men loathed the idea of a retreat, but the majority realized that every minute the position was becoming more critical and that immediate retreat was our only hope of escaping capture.
>
> Almost all the Belgians had gone, except those in the forts, and in our covering fort only one Belgian gunner remained. One of our naval gun crews gallantly offered to remain and work the guns to cover our retreat, which they did up to the very last minute . . . .
>
> In order to cross the Scheldt, we were forced to pass by the blazing petroleum tanks at Hoboken. The road was narrow, but it was the only road left. The fumes were overpowering and the intense heat proved too much for some of the men. The flames at

times blew right across the road, and large German shells were falling in amongst the tanks at the rate of four a minute. Sometimes a shell would burst with a terrific report in the boiling oil, and flames shot up to the height of two hundred feet.

As we approached the blazing tanks it was like entering the infernal regions. The burning oil had flooded a field on one side of the road and dead horses and cattle were frizzling in it. 'Now, boys,' shouted the officer, 'keep your heads and run through it!' And we did – but I don't know how we did it. Once we had got past the oil tanks we were in comparative safety for a hundred yards because the road was sheltered, but then for some thousand yards it was exposed again to the enemy's fire.

We were ordered to run at the double over this bit of road, and most of us were fortunate enough to reach the pontoon bridge over the river. A spy was caught by one of our battalions in the act of trying to blow up this bridge, but his designs were frustrated just in time, and a bayonet ended his career.

Sentries were posted at intervals while we went across, and shouted, 'Change your step!' every few yards. At last we were safely on the other side and breathed again. The relief felt by all ranks on getting across the river can hardly be imagined, and although even there we were by no means out of danger, yet we knew that a most important step had been taken.[23]

At 10pm the 2nd Brigade reached Zwyndrecht, then went on a further seven miles or so towards St Nicolas. After a long march they reached St Gillies Waes railway station at 7am the following morning, having covered some 20 miles from fort 5. Five special trains were waiting for them for the journey to Selzaete, close to the Dutch frontier, a route which would avoid German troops.

Describing the retreat, General Paris wrote:

> The hopeless block on every road and through every village, caused by the movement of the Belgian army and the entire population with their cattle and goods, rendered intercommunication impossible. I myself was never able to reach the head of the column; in fact at least two trains had left St Gillies Waes before I arrived there.

These two trains had in fact left only partly filled, but it was easy for Paris to assume that they had both been full. He followed on by car once he was happy that the retreat was successful. However, confusion in communication and orders were to mean the loss of the majority of the 1st Brigade.

Commodore Henderson states that at 6.50pm Colonel Ollivant arrived from divisional HQ to inform him that instructions had already been issued for a general retirement, the intention being that the 1st Brigade should follow the 2nd. Henderson says this was shown to be impossible, and the two men agreed that the 2nd Brigade should not start their retirement until 10 p.m., thus covering the 1st Brigade's southern flank. Henderson issued orders for retirement at 8pm; Lieutenant Ingleby, on the 1st Brigade staff, took these orders to Drake Battalion but found that, unknown to brigade HQ, they had already left. It appears that divisional retreat orders were conveyed only to Drake, who withdrew without the knowledge of their commander. Henderson had also been wrongly informed that he should move via the Port de Malines, whereas Major Richardson at divisional HQ had planned for the 1st Brigade to proceed to St Anne's Bridge by the Harenthal Gate. Last but not least, Henderson was not told that the order required definite action.

As it happened, Henderson took the correct route, led by three officers who had carried out a reconnaissance earlier, but owing to the great fatigue of all battalions (including the 10th Battalion of Royal Marines Light Infantry, who had been in support of the 1st Brigade), the enemy shellfire, and the difficulties en route, they got considerably scattered. The majority of the marines and three remaining battalions reached Zwyndrecht by 4.30 a.m. the next day, and Henderson went off in his car in search of divisional HQ and supplies for his men, which he had been verbally informed would be there. But he could find no trace of either. By 8am the only food located was about four ounces of meat per man. Henderson did, however, get a report from the Belgian HQ that the enemy was likely to open fire on Zwyndrecht.

At 8.30am Belgian HQ came up with the information that billets and supplies were available at St Gillies Waes, and that the remainder of the RND were there; so, despite his men being without food or water, Henderson gave orders that battalions should move on to St Gillies Waes by 4pm. He went on himself to make contact with divisional HQ to arrange billets and supplies, but, arriving at 11am, it was the same story as in Zwyndrecht. He could find no trace of divisional HQ, nor any billets or supplies. All he found was one broken-down bus at the railway station, partly filled with biscuits. Further enquiries at the station elicited the information that about 5,000 British troops had left by train for Ostend earlier in the day! It seemed that divisional HQ had mistaken the arrival of Colonel Seely, commanding Drake Battalion, for the arrival of the whole brigade.

Meanwhile, the 10th Battalion RMLI, under Colonel Luard, arrived at St Nicolas by a different route and were told by the Belgian authorities that they would have a better chance of a train if they went to