

Diary of
JAMES WILKIE
World War I

Born
07th August, 1893.

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Son of
John Wilkie (Stone Mason)
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July 1916

Fromelles

17th – Up at 5.30 a.m., left with cable and phone (no breakfast), arrived BNs ok to see what they wanted and started work, two went to the 4th and myself and mate to 53rd, delayed waiting for Fritz to stop firing for about 15 minutes, then started off at a run for the saps leading to the trenches (*19) with roll of cable, just arrived in sap when they started firing again, lobbing all round us. We get a run of about 30 yards and hear the whistle of a shell coming, duck down and then start off again, do it in spasms (1 spasm – 30 yards), not laughing, arrived at destination safely, Fritz and his cobbers sending them in all the time, sap about 600 yards, parapets, sandbags, mud and shrapnel flying all over the place, then they sent in about 45 to the minute, shrapnel, high explosives, trench mortars and all sorts and sizes of bombs, send a funny feeling through you, bursting about 5 and 10 yards from us, and send the parapet in on top of a sniper and machine gun waiting at every hole in the parapet made by the shells to pick you off as you passed. 1st line of trenches blown to pieces, good lot of the infantry wounded, only one killed. My mate had a narrow shave, two fairly large pieces of shell struck his steel helmet, only for his helmet it would have been maleesh {Arabic for "never mind"}. One had lobbed a few yards from me but did not go off. 3 came over all together but did not explode. We finished our job about 1.00 p.m. Not sorry. 6 hours in the trenches. Also had two gas alarms while we were in the trenches, but didn't come off. Our mob sent over some gas this morning for our batteries sending it in as hard as they could. Our Infantry in the reserved trenches waiting and getting ready for this advance. Had to shift, the Germans made it too hot for them, blew the parapet to pieces, fatigue parties carrying ammunition and bombs all morning with trench mortars and Lewis Guns (*20) etc etc, getting ready for the stunt. 3 German soldiers came over to our trenches last night and gave themselves up and I believe two spies captured in our trenches this morning. One – said he was in the 8th Bde and the other in the Mortar Batters (Canadian), both had pay books and discs belonging to those units. Stunt did not come off, Germans were ready for us, had to wait at BN HQrs 'til after 2.00 p.m. and shells lobbing all along the road and around HQrs, arrived home about 3.00 p.m. besides shells. I had about 40 yards of opening where the sniper has a go at you as you go past at the igory {slang for "fast"} but he could not have seen me. Artillery, ammunition wagons going since daybreak (*20A), supplying the guns with ammunition full gallop. Expect to move to Bac St. Maur early. Stunt off. Start tomorrow, about 4 miles from here, further back from the firing line.

18th July – All ready to move off 8.00 a.m., left about 8.30 a.m. got about 100 yards down the road and received orders to return to the billet as moving orders cancelled. Had a sleep 'til about 5.00 p.m. and then received orders to proceed to firing line to lay cable, finished after midnight, stunt on.

19th July – (*22). Up at 6.00 a.m. and off to lay cable etc in the trenches, shells lobbing all around, finished about 12.20 p.m., just as our artillery started bombarding same row, we got back to our billet lively, had dinner and returned to trenches. 6 of us marched down, couldn't hear each other talking, bombardment at its highest, impossible to keep up communication between BNs and Bde, every time we fixed a break another shell would come and blow it to pieces somewhere else, parapet blown to pieces (*21A), terrible sight seeing the dead and wounded lying all around us and expected to go every minute ourselves. All ready for the charge 5.30 p.m. Charged over parapet 5.40 p.m. loaded with bombs and ammunition. Our Bde took 3 trenches 8th and 15th – was cut up badly before the charge, only two Sigs left – in the 31st (all my old cobbers), Barnes, Tozer (E. W.), Smith (C. J.) killed, the remainder wounded. 15th Bde didn't get a shin in, didn't get over the parapet, 8th Bde fell back early in the night, that left 14th Bde open both flanks and behind, they held till 4.30 a.m. before retreating. 8th on our left, and 15th on our right, captured about 600 prisoners, 17, 18 20 and 21 regiments and about 200 prison guards were fighting against us. Germans counter-attacked from 4.30 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. next day.

20th – Bombardment lasted about 23 hours, had no sleep all through, terrible sight seeing wounded coming out of the trenches, arms and legs off, smoking a cigarette, seemed quite happy, couldn't rake up a Brigade out of the survivors. Returned to our billet and not sorry, had a sleep, felt like a rest.