

My Great-Grandfather's War

Part 2: La Ville-aux-Bois-lès-Pontavert

This is the second in a six-part series on my German great-grandfather's war service with 3. Batterie / **Kgl. Sächs. 4. Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr.48** (FAR 48). After a brief summary, I will be telling the story mainly through the pictures and their captions.

As described in the first part, Arno joined the regiment in the field with **23. Infanterie-Division** of **XII. Armeekorps** on the Aisne north of Reims in mid-October 1914. They would remain in this sector for almost two years before FAR 48 was transported to the southern part of the Somme battlefield, where elements of the corps had been fighting the French since July 1916. Regrettably, none of Arno's surviving photos from the Western Front are dated later than this period on the Aisne, and all but two are believed to be from the first half of 1915 - so in the projected fourth part, the regiment's history from 1916 until the end of the war will be succinctly summarised.

While working on this series, I have become increasingly conscious of how much of Arno's story is missing. My belief is that his letters to his future wife, his *Militärpass* and *Soldbuch* and his medals were with other valuables stolen from my great-grandmother's flat after her death. What happened to the rest of his photos (for which space visibly exists in the relevant album) is a complete mystery. However we do know from his post-war CV that he remained with FAR 48 until demobilisation and was never so much as wounded (at least, not seriously enough to merit a mention in the published *Verlustlisten*). My research in the regimental personnel files in the Saxon Archives in Dresden has found brief mentions of him by name as late as Christmas 1916, always as a *Gefreiter* and (when identified by sub-unit) a member of the 3. Batterie.



Among Arno's surviving photos, the largest identifiable group was taken in a single fortified village on the divisional front. **La Ville-aux-Bois-lès-Pontavert** (literally 'the town in the Pontavert woods') lies a couple of miles north of the Aisne, slightly to the west of the main Laon-Reims road. As the name suggests, it was and is surrounded on three sides by woodland - most notably the Bois des Buttes to the south-west, which conceals a low rise with several peaks. Though seemingly slightly larger today than in 1914, the population in recent years has only been around 100-150.

Following the Battle of the Marne in September 1914 and the subsequent German withdrawal, this quiet spot became a focal point of a French attempt to push into a gap in the German defensive front. The Saxon XII. Armeekorps was among the forces deployed to counter this move, and on 15th September **Schützen-(Füsilier-)Regiment „Prinz Georg“ (Königlich Sächsisches) Nr.108** (henceforth SR 108) launched its first attack on La Ville-aux-Bois, supported by IR 178 and IR 182. The village was finally secured two days later, and repeated attempts were then made to take the Bois des Buttes before the battle subsided into routine trench warfare. The higher ground in the wood, jokingly referred to by the Saxons as the '*Berg von La-Ville-aux-Bois*' (La-Ville-aux-Bois Mountain) or '*Viller Berg*' would remain a constant bugbear for the village garrison until its capture by SR 108 and GR 101 on 10th March 1916 in a diversionary operation for Verdun.

Until the end of March 1915 the village was held alternately by elements of SR 108 and IR 182 (together forming 46. Infanterie-Brigade within 23. Infanterie-Division). At that point the division was reduced from four to three infantry regiments with the departure of IR 182, and its front redivided into three regimental sectors which would remain largely consistent for the rest of their time on the Aisne. Thus '*La Ville*' became the established home of the Schützen-Regiment. Although the French had the advantage in observation from the '*Viller Berg*' and their front line lay dangerously close at the edge of the woods (so that trench mortar bombardments and aggressive forward patrolling were regular features of life in this sector), the village would be regarded with some fondness in later years when SR 108 was serving on much more dangerous fronts.

So - you may well ask, what was my great-grandfather doing in '*La Ville*'? As we have seen, his battery was deployed near the Juvincourt-Corbeny road, in direct support of SR 108. The forward observation officers of FAR 48 would certainly have had good reason to visit the village, as would the runners and telephonists who supported them. However the answer almost certainly lies in last week's photo of Arno with the crew of a Belgian 5.7cm Maxim Nordenfolt fortress gun - two of those men, including the gun commander, reappear in his photos from La-Ville-aux-Bois. The Belgian fortress guns were supplied to the division at the end of March 1915 as a close-defence weapon for the infantry lines, intended to counter French use of similar small-calibre 'trench artillery'. We know from photographic evidence that one of these 5.7cm pieces belonging to FAR 12 was emplaced in the trenches

of GR 101 at Le Cholera, and also that a 5.3cm Krupp-Gruson 'Fahrpanzer' (essentially a small armoured turret on wheels) with a Prussian *Fussartillerie* crew was employed in La-Ville-aux-Bois itself.

As for FAR 48, Jürgen has pointed out the following passage in their published history (p.79), referring to the changes brought on by the ongoing reduction of batteries from six to four guns apiece:

"Owing to all of the prior deductions, at the end of the month [April 1915] the batteries had only four guns each left. Now both of the field guns of the **3. Batterie** [which had been] forward deployed at La Ville were also withdrawn, in their place **a captured Belgian gun arrived.**"

Fig 1: Testing of 5.7cm Maxim Nordenfelt fortress guns, apparently by artillerymen of XII. Armeekorps early in 1915. The text on the reverse does not identify the writer's unit, but notes his location and date as Amifontaine (4km north of Juvincourt), May 1915.



In part 3 we will take a look at Arno's photos from Schloss Belval in Godelancourt-lès-Berrieux, site of a field hospital and the *Erholungsheim* (rest and recuperation home) of the 23. Infanterie-Division.

Fig 2: Arno in La-Ville-aux-Bois around May 1915; the reverse reads "*taken in La-Ville-aux-Bois according to letter of 3rd June 1915*". Most regrettably, no wartime letters from Arno (and only two cards with significant text on the back) are known to have survived. Note how tight and ill-fitting his *Waffenrock* appears - mainly because both of his front skirt pockets (and his right trouser pocket) are full. This also reveals how high-waisted these uniform jackets were, putting the belt equipment at a convenient height while making the wearer look taller!

Despite my best efforts I have not yet been able to identify the exact location depicted here. Any suggestions would be most welcome.



Fig 3a & 3b: French pre-war postcard of the chateau of La-Ville-aux-Bois seen from the eastern side. Another French postcard (below) identifies the owner as 'le comte de Sache' or possibly 'de Sachs' - the latter would ironically suggest descent from one of the numerous illegitimate offspring of Friedrich August I, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland!

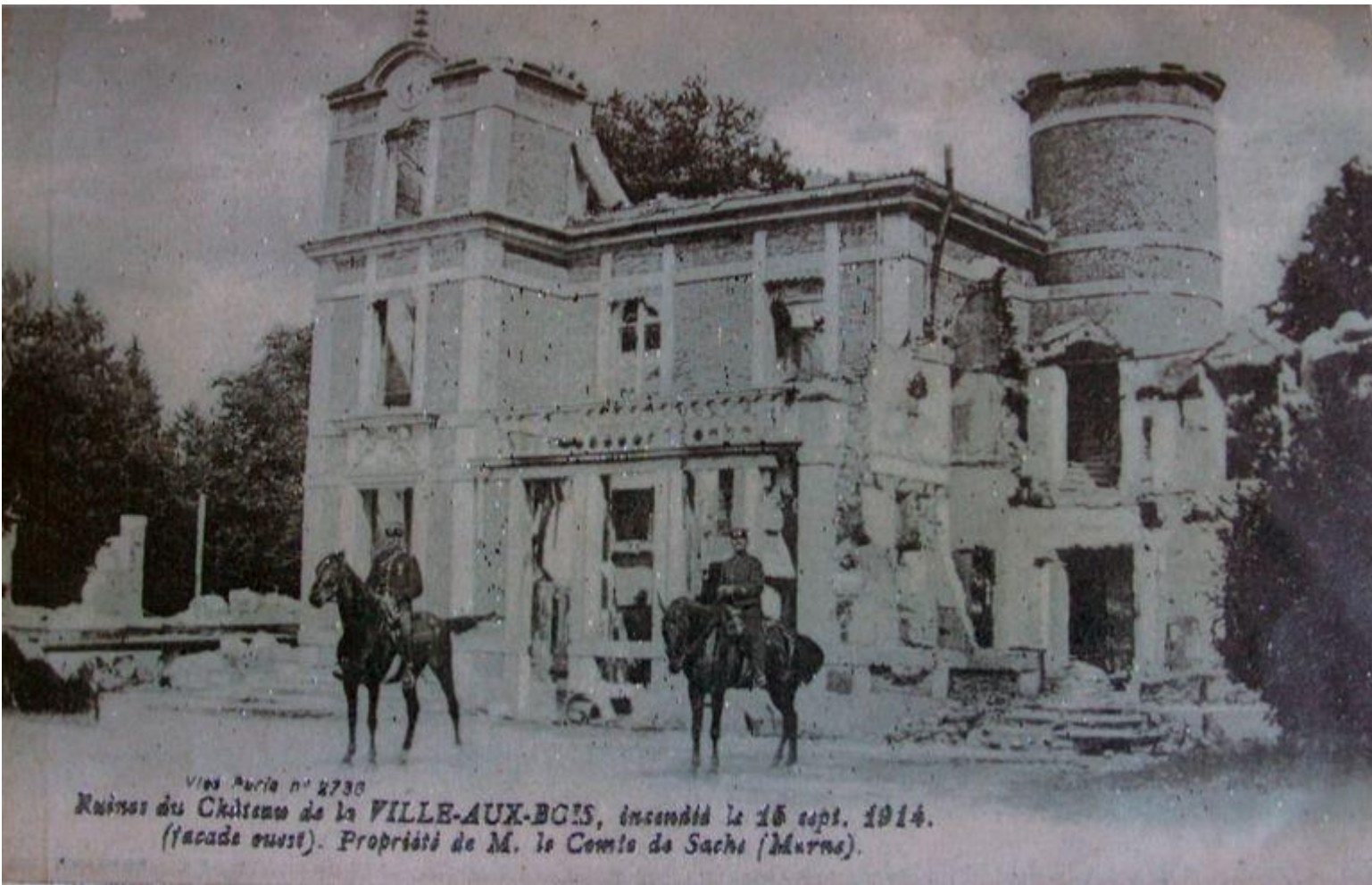


Fig 4: Photo from the album of Hans Berthelen (SR 108), showing the ruins of the chateau ('*Schloss*') seen from the eastern side around February 1915. The numerous bullet holes bear witness to the fierce house-to-house fighting for the village. The regimental history of SR 108 notes that during the first assault on 15th September 1914 the chateau was a focus of the French defense, and only cleared after a 'bloody struggle'. Similarly at the end of July 1915 it would be selected by the Saxons for fortification as a *Stützpunkt* (strongpoint), together with the *Wasserburg* at the other end of the village.

On closer examination graffiti can be seen on the gateposts. Most notably, a hunting horn with '108' in the middle can be seen on the left gatepost between the officer with the walking stick and his seated colleague (a medical officer).

Credit: Jürgen Schmieschek collection.



Fig 5: Undated photo of Arno in front of the eastern side of the chateau, revealing a communication trench now dug through the middle of the street. The left-hand gatepost has now collapsed and the trees are in bloom, helping to screen this area against observation from the 'Viller Berg'.

This is the only known photo of Arno wearing a peaked *Schirmmütze*. Though any soldier could buy one, wear in the field was usually restricted by regulation to NCOs and officers. Since Arno was a *Kriegsfreiwilliger-Gefreiter* earmarked for potential promotion, this may have been an aspirational purchase. For all we know however, he may merely have borrowed it from his *Unteroffizier* for this picture!

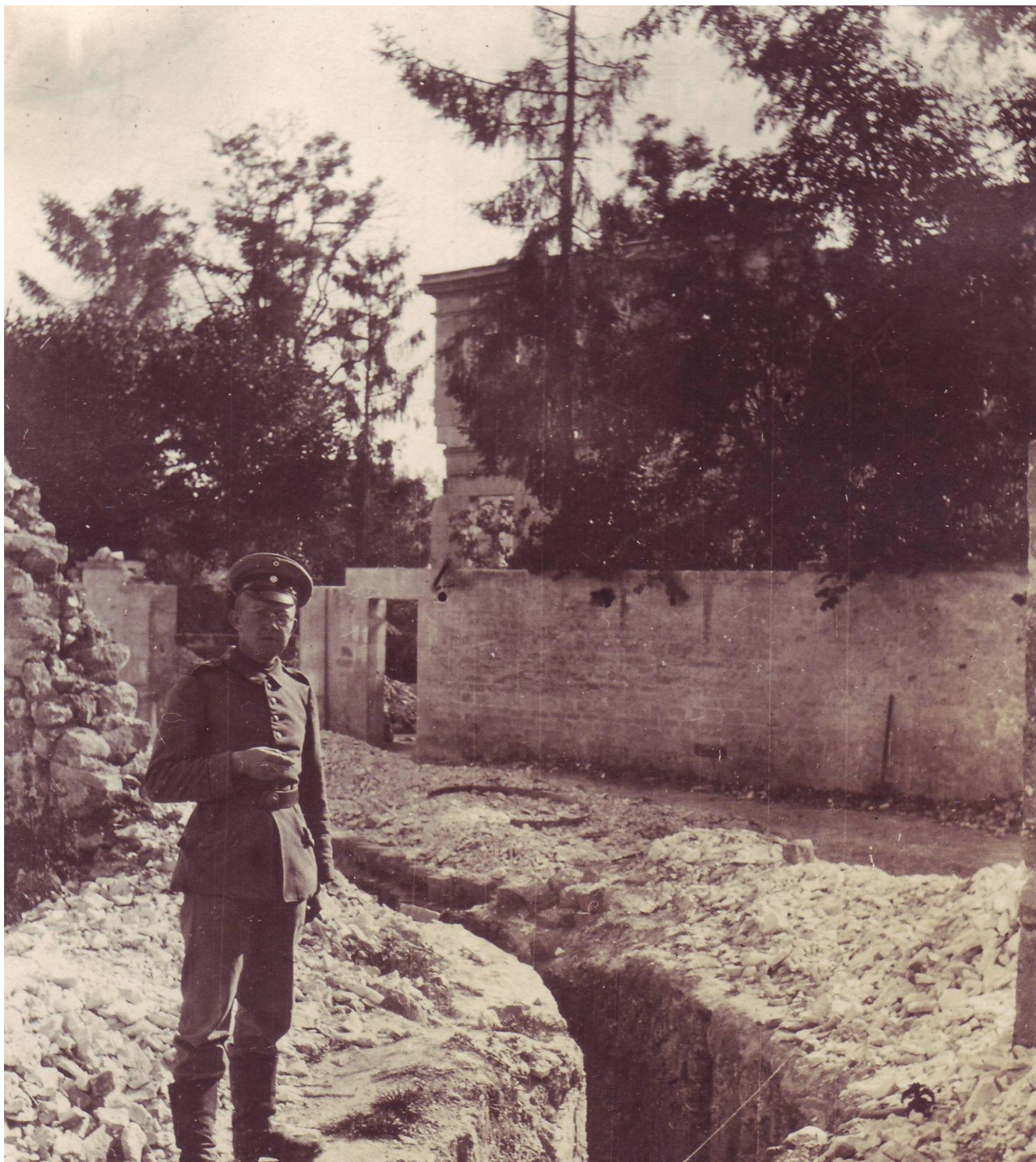


Fig 6: Another photo from Berthelen's album, showing the rubble of the chateau around March 1916. It can be safely assumed that it was levelled when the village was subjected to intensive *Trommelfeuer* on 25th September 1915.

Credit: Jürgen Schmieschek collection.



Fig 7: Another unidentified location in the village photographed by Arno. The large stone blocks (and the large sculpted chunk in the right foreground) are suggestive of the chateau, but I have not been able to match this with any other pictures.



Fig 8: Arno's undated photo of the village church, showing an *Unteroffizier* and *Kanonier* of his regiment in the ruined interior. Both men are recognisable from the picture of Arno with the Belgian 5.7cm gun (see part 1 of this series). Perhaps Arno himself is the photographer?



Fig 9: Hans Berthelen's photo of the village church seen from the cemetery wall (so with the photographer's back to the front-line trench system beyond) around February 1915. Due to their height and prominence, churches were both an obvious location for observation posts and a magnet for enemy artillery fire. Credit: Jürgen Schmieschek collection.



Fig 10: Commercial postcard of the church from 1915, revealing more of the devastated graveyard. This card was authorised for publication by the Saxon Interior Ministry, printed by C.C. Meinhold & sons of Dresden and sent through the *Feldpost* by a member of GR 101 in September 1915. Censorship of place names on commercial cards was only slowly and sporadically applied; on some in my collection, names have been half-heartedly scribbled over in pencil.



Kirche in La Ville aux Bois

Fig 11: The sad wreckage of the church around March 1916, as seen in Berthelen's album. The wooden framework of the roof is still recognisable on the left.

Credit: Jürgen Schmieschek collection.



Fig 12: Commercial postcard from the prolific firm of Heinrich Knobloch (Blasewitz) graphically depicting the state of the village both before and after the 'Trommelfeuer' of 25th September 1915. Due to the opening of the Franco-British autumn offensive in Artois and Champagne, most of the Western Front saw a dramatic increase in hostilities and (in many cases) diversionary operations. While La-Ville-aux-Bois was hammered flat by heavy artillery, only a small number of the enemy were seen to leave their lines and no actual attack ensued.



Nr. 121: Bauerngut in La Ville aux Bois
vor und nach dem Trommelfeuer Ende Sept. 1915



Fig 13: View of the village and the wooded ‘*Viller Berg*’ beyond, seen from the Laon-Reims road (the present-day D1044). One French map from April 1917 shows a wire obstacle line covering the road on this side, as seen in this picture. The photo is part of a small group in my collection, all with the same handwriting and most printed with the name of a commercial photographer, Wilhelm Freudenberger of Niedersedlitz (near Dresden) - “*currently in the field [with] 2./108*”.



Present-day view of the village and the Bois des Buttes, seen from about the same location on the Laon-Reims road.



Fig 14: Another of Freudenberger's photos, showing an observation post on (presumably) the western edge of the village. At the periscope is Leutnant Ernst Clausen of 2. Komp. / SR 108. Ltn. Clausen would later be awarded the *Ritterkreuz des Militär-St.-Heinrichs-Ordens* for his leadership of the regiment's 3. MG-Kompagnie against the French offensive in the Champagne (near Moronvillers) in April 1917. Although wounded three times (the second and more severe being in the action for which he was decorated) he would survive the war.



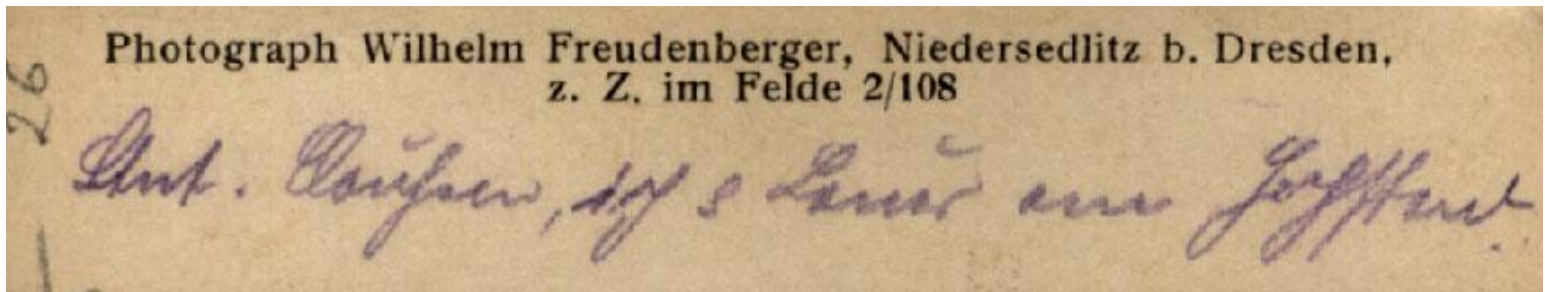


Fig 15: Another of Arno's photos from La-Ville-aux-Bois. My theory is that this is a view from the northern wall of the *Schlosspark*, looking northwestwards across the trenches on the division's right flank towards the heights of the *Winterberg* (Plateau de Californie) at Craonne.

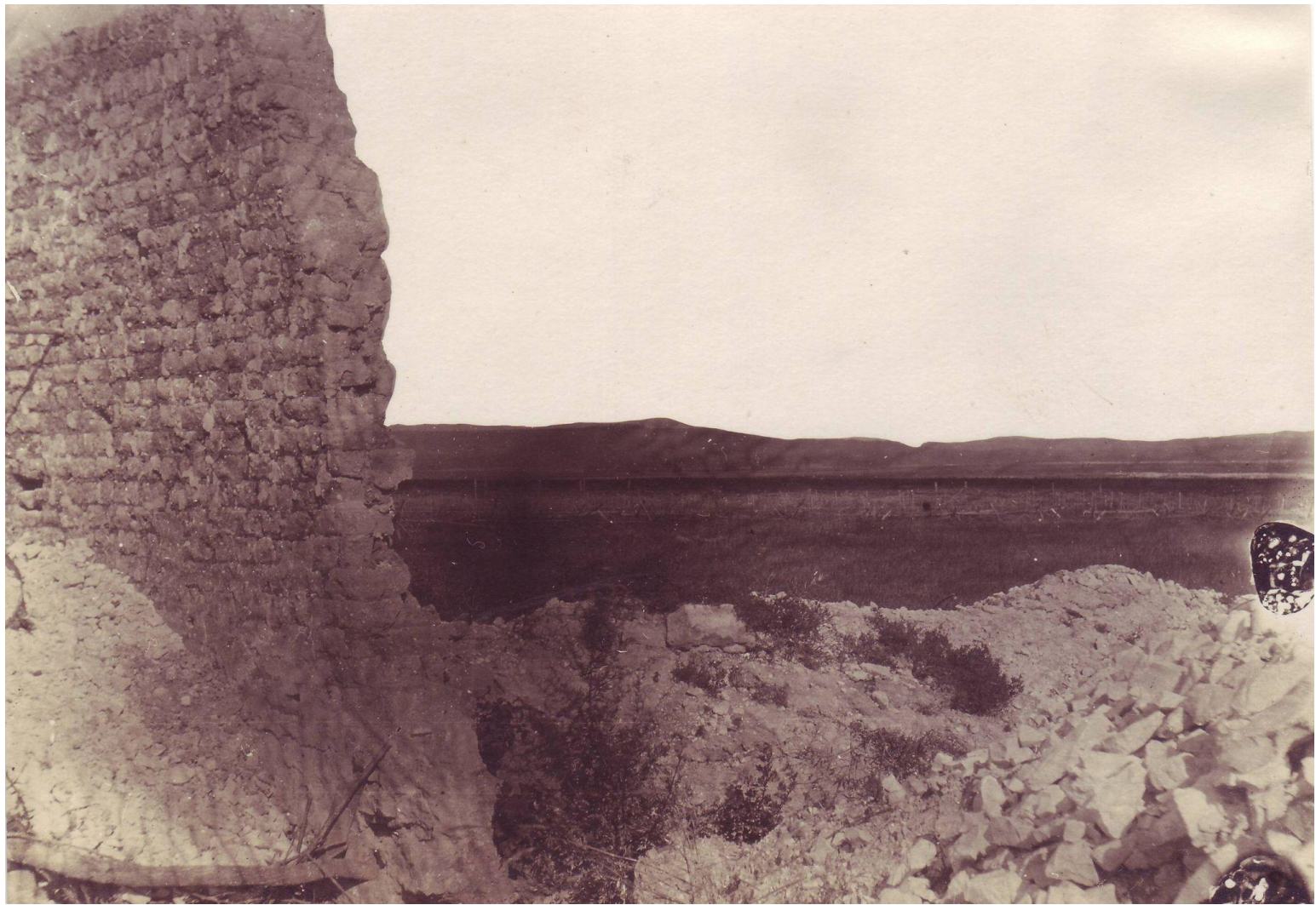


Fig 16: Commercial postcard from the firm of O. Peters (Jahnsdorf) depicting a French soldier's grave (no doubt from September 1914) in the middle of the street. The frequently used term '*Heldengrab*' (hero's grave) was also generously applied to the enemy's dead.

The German shepherd is probably a trained *Sanitätshund* (medical dog), as that breed of dog is known to have been used by 23. Infanterie-Division in this role as early as February 1915. *Sanitätshunde* were trained to assist the medical orderlies by locating the wounded on the battlefield.



Französisches Heldengrab mitten auf der Doristraße in La Ville aux Bois

Fig 17: I believe this photo is a souvenir of a visit by Arno and his *Unteroffizier* (the same one seen at the church and with the 5.7cm gun) to a 25cm *schwere Minenwerfer* firing pit near the western edge of the village. The three men with Prussian cockades are believed to be specialist *Pioniere* from AOK 7 (HQ, 7th Army), part of the actual crew of the weapon. It is quite possible that the visit is a working one, as the artillery and *Minenwerfer*s often needed to cooperate. Besides cooperating in combined bombardments, each could cover the deficiencies of the other - the *Minenwerfer* could destroy targets too close to the German trenches to be safely targeted by the artillery, while the artillery could engage targets beyond the effective range of the *Minenwerfer* (such as enemy artillery attempting to destroy it).



My theory is that this is the weapon mentioned on p.110-111 of the regimental history of SR 108 as being present in the village at the end of March 1915. This was used (quite successfully) to support a raid from the village against a suspected French mining gallery, falsely believed to run "from the north-east corner of 'La Viller Wald' [the adjacent wood] on the Craonne road toward La Ville about 40m opposite".

Fig 18: Another photo (dated 23rd August 1915 on the reverse) of the same mortar position, one of a group of pictures belonging to Max Wunsche of SR 108. This time the firing pit is seen from behind and above rather than from the right, revealing ruined walls both in front of and to the left. On the reverse Wunsche describes it as THE *Minenwerfer* in La Ville-aux-Bois, seemingly confirming that it was the only one there.

The basket on the left is for one of the weapon's monstrous 97kg shells (a comparatively modest 50kg version was also available); every single one of these would have to be carried forward by hand from the nearest field railway terminus. The Prussian crewman (left) can now be seen to have an oval badge on his left sleeve identifying his specific unit, a common practice in 1915 for *Minenwerfer* formations (which at the time would still have worn the same shoulderstraps as the Pionier-Bataillon or -Regiment from which their personnel were drawn). The man on the right is Max Wunsche's immediate superior, Unteroffizier Altenburg of SR 108.



Fig 19: A fascinating photo from Hans Berthelen's album, showing trench construction in progress in the village in 1915. The wall in the background appears to have been reinforced with sandbags, and what looks like a rudimentary rain shelter added.

The ruined village was freely exploited as a source of construction materials, which would otherwise need to have been carried forward by hand. Due to French observation from the '*Viller Berg*', this could only be done by night and at considerable risk. However demolition of any building or wall which could conceivably interfere with the enemy's line of sight was strenuously avoided.

Initially the garrison of the village was accommodated partly in the cellars and partly in the houses themselves. After heavy shelling at the beginning of February 1915, it was recognised that even the cellars could not be relied upon to withstand prolonged bombardment. Fortunately the chalky ground was highly favourable for excavation, and deep shellproof dugouts were systematically constructed throughout the village over the subsequent months.

Credit: Jürgen Schmieschek collection.



ETAT-MAJOR DE L'ARMÉE SERVICE HISTORIQUE
LES ARMÉES FRANÇAISES DANS LA GRANDE GUERRE
TOME IV. VERDUN ET LA SOMME. 1^{er} volume.

CARTE N°30.
Le bois des Buttes. (mars - avril 1916)

Imprimé au Service Géographique de l'Armée.

Echelle : 1/50 000

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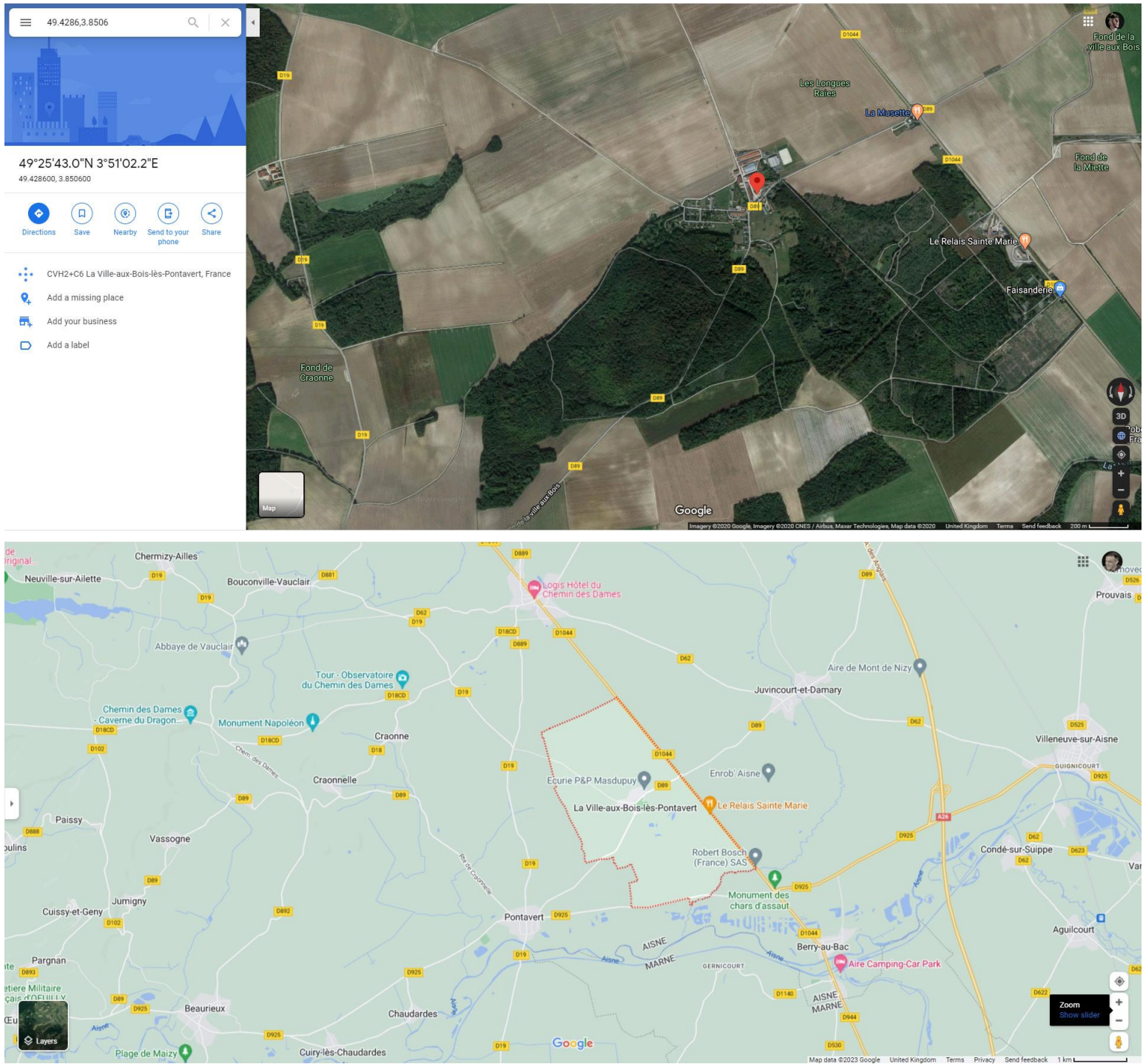
LÉGENDE

Echelle : 1/50000

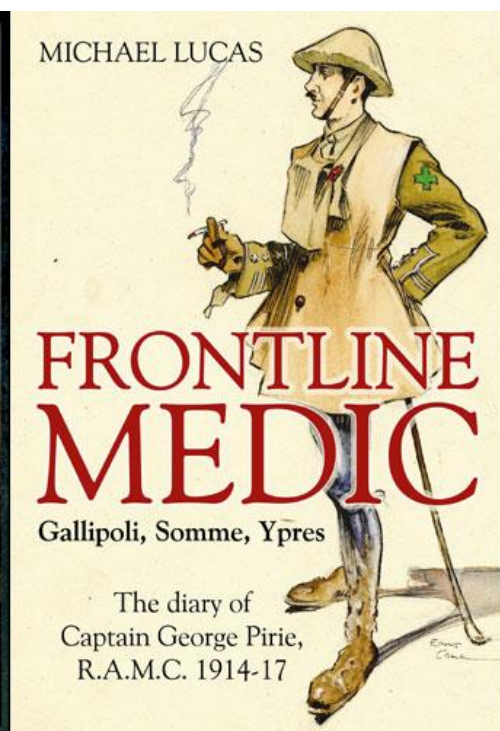
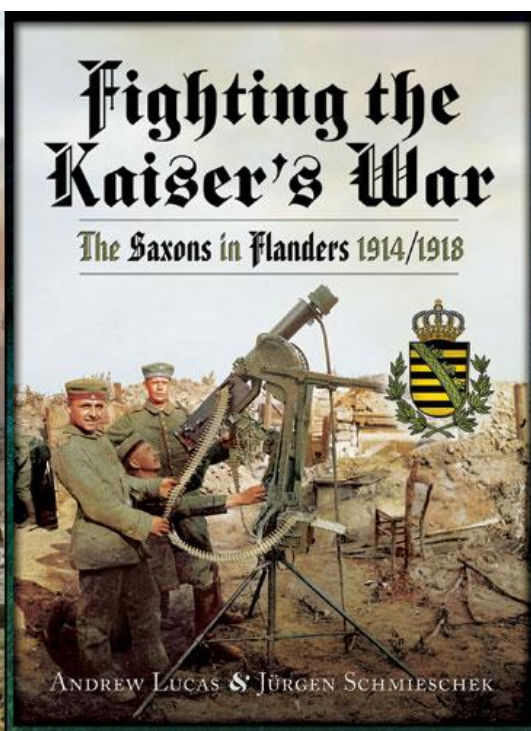
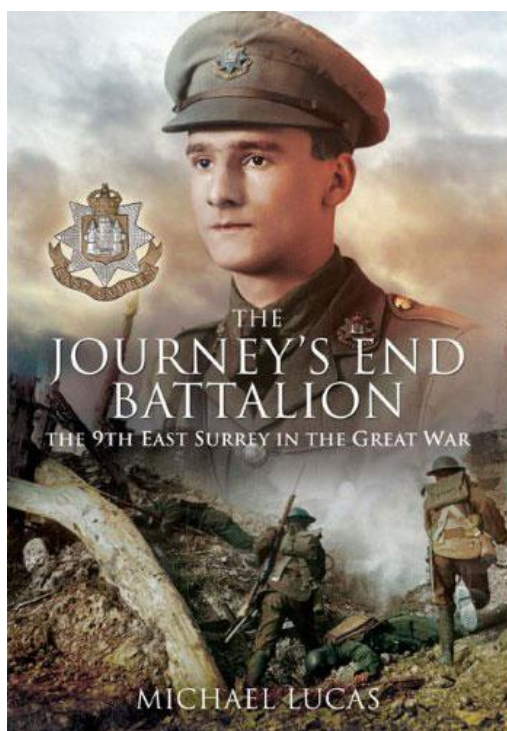
LÉGENDE

Fig 22: Google Earth satellite image of La-Ville-aux-Bois as it appears today. While the village was completely levelled by the end of 1915 and now lacks any recognisable buildings, the street layout is essentially the same and the new church seems to have been built in the footprint of the original one.

Numerous structures built by the Saxons in 1916 (and used in 1917-18 by other German units, the French and even - briefly - the British) still exist in the Bois des Buttes, including tunnels and concrete bunkers.



If this has fired your interest, don't forget to visit our website www.royalsaxonarmy.co.uk to check out more articles and buy our books! 😊 My friend Jürgen Schmieschek and I (Andrew Lucas) have produced two volumes in English and one in German on the Royal Saxon Army in Flanders, while my father (Michael Lucas) has produced three on WW1 British subjects.



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