

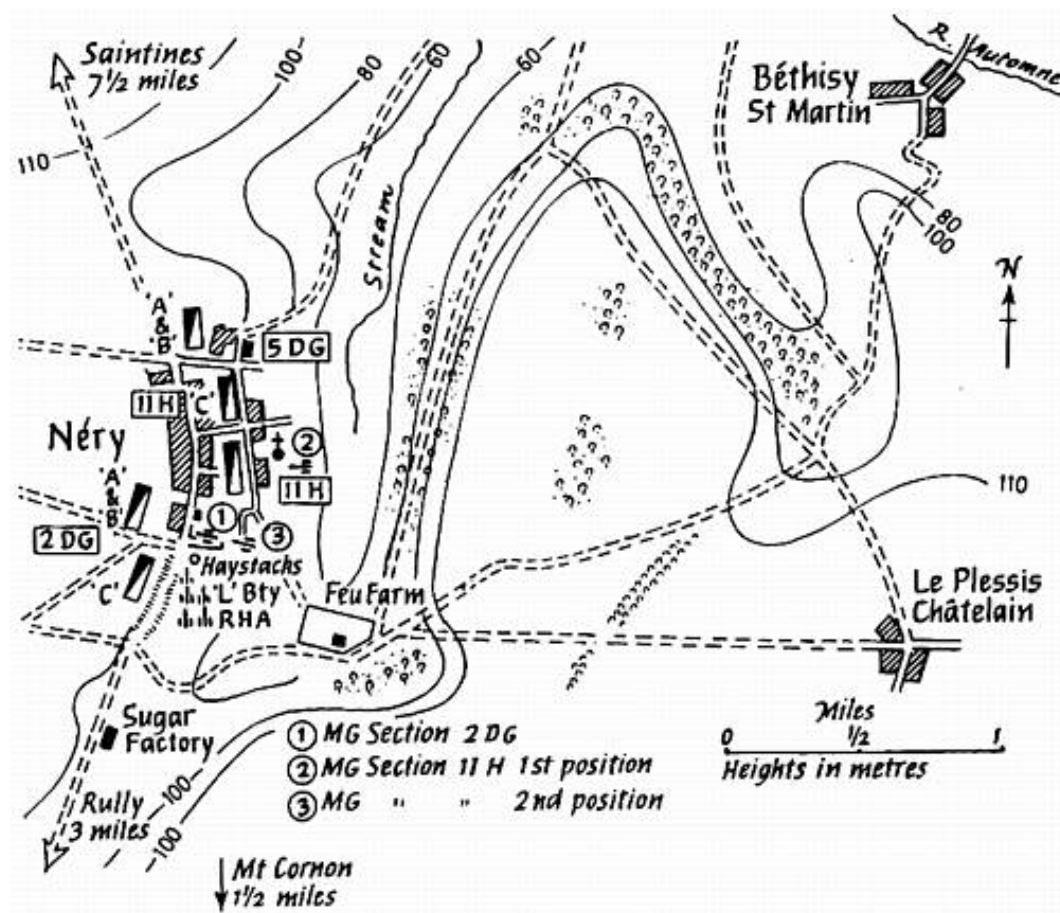
The Affair at Néry, 1 September 1914

Introduction

The following text derives from the Royal Artillery War Commemoration Book 1914-1918, and is quoted from the book *Tanks & Weapons of World War 1*, edited by Bernard Fitzsimons, BPC Publishing Ltd., London 1973, ISBN 0-7026-002-4.

The map and other illustrations have been provided by me.

The Affair at Néry



Map of Néry, showing the positions of the various units involved.

From Source 1.

'L' Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, following in the wake of its Cavalry Brigade (*1st Cavalry Brigade*) to Néry, reached it after the other units had begun to shake down into their quarters.

The allotment of the village was as follows: at the northern end were the 5th Dragoon Guards with their horses in the open; the 11th Hussars were billeted on the eastern face and up the east side of the village street, the men and horses being under cover - in houses, yards, barns, sheds, or lean-to's.

On the west side of the village street, and in the fields behind the village on this side, were the Queen's Bays (*2nd Dragoon Guards*), one squadron being in a field further to the south; all their horses were in the open.



With the Cavalry on Manoeuvres.
Coloured postcard, posted 22 January 1909.

'L' Battery on arrival was given a field to the south to bivouac in; and the sugar factory was allotted to it as its headquarters. In the north-west corner of the field were some haystacks.

While the battery was completing its arrangements for the night the Battery Commander proceeded to Cavalry Brigade Headquarters, situated in the main street, to ascertain what protective arrangements had been made to cover the bivouac of his battery.

He received orders that 'L' was merely required to block the two roads which led east and south from the sugar factory. He was also told that the force would continue the march at 0430 hours on September 1. Major Sclater-Booth returned to his battery, and the necessary posts were found by 'L' to cover the southern end of the billeting area. Gradually the work was finished and, wearied with the day's march under the hot August sun, men and horses settled down to rest. Silence brooded over the little village and the surrounding bivouacs that nestled around it on the western slope and at the bottom of the narrow valley, which was shut in to east and west by its guardian heights.

Horse Artillery Brigade, War Establishment, 1914

From: *Field Service Pocket Book (1914)*, published by The General Staff, War Office, London 1914.

	Personnel		Horses		2-horsed			4-horsed			6-horsed			Spare horses	Bicycle	
	Officers	Other Ranks	Riding	Draught	Guns (13-pdr.)	Cart, Water	Cart, Maltese	Wagon, limbered G.S. and wireless pack	Wagon, telephone	Wagon, cooks, or travelling kitchen	Wagon, G.S. for baggage	Gun carriage	Wagon, ammunition			Wagon, G.S., for ammunition
RHA Brigade, complete	19	662	277	502	12	3	1	6	1	1	5	12	36	20	70	12
Brigade HQ	5	39	29	14			1		1	1	1					3
Battery	5	200	102	126	6	1					1	6	12		22	3
Battery	5	200	102	126	6	1					1	6	12		22	3
Ammunition Column	4	223	44	236		1		6			2		12	20	26	3

'L' Battery is ready to march off

Day broke cool and very misty, and when the march should have been resumed it was quite impossible to see objects more than 150 to 200 yards away. Orders were, therefore, issued that units should stand fast until 0500 hours.



Ready to march off...

Contemporary postcard showing artillery on manoeuvres in England 1912.

The battery, which was standing halted in mass with the teams hooked in, took advantage of this delay to let down the poles and water the horses by sections at the sugar factory. Generally, it may be said, 'the only desire of our force in Néry at this moment was to get outside an excellent breakfast'. This very natural desire was to be roughly frustrated.

The mist was nearly as thick as ever when, just before 0500 hours Major Sclater-Booth, with his officers, walked down from the sugar factory to the north-west corner of the battery field, where the haystacks stood. Leaving the others here, the Battery Commander walked on up the main street of the little village to Brigade Headquarters in order to get the latest instructions as to the resumption of the march.

Going into the house he found the Brigadier and his Brigade Major. Hardly had he entered when a high-explosive shell burst over the village, and a roar of gun and rifle fire broke out from the heights overlooking the eastern side of Néry.



11th Hussars (Cherry Pickers) Reconnoitring.
From a postcard drawn by Harry Payne.

The officer's badges of rank
(two stars) indicates a Lieutenant.

At the same moment Lieutenant Tailby 1), who had been sent with a patrol to reconnoitre the high ground north of Néry, reached headquarters and reported that he had ridden into a body of German cavalry in the mist and had been chased back. It was now about 0505 hours and the 1st Cavalry Brigade had been taken completely by surprise.

Despite the disadvantage at which the British Cavalry and Horse Artillery were taken, and despite the heavy artillery, machine gun and rifle fire pouring into the open bivouacs around the village, steps were taken by all units to offer an effective resistance and hold on till assistance arrived from neighbouring troops.

As soon as firing broke out, the Brigade-Major went out to see that the necessary action was taken. Major Sclater-Booth also went out into the street with the Brigadier, and then left at once to return to his battery.

Suddenly a mob of maddened horses came galloping wildly down the main street. They were the horses of the Bays, stampeded by the enemy's fire. At the same moment a high-explosive shell burst among the surging mass of animals and rendered the road impassable. Crossing over to the western side of the street the Battery Commander ran behind the houses and so came to the field where 'C' Squadron of the Bays had bivouacked during the night.

From here the battery field was open to view, and Major Sclater-Booth saw that three guns had been unlimbered and brought into action to answer the fire of the German battery, the flashes of which could be

seen stabbing through the slightly thinning mist. Apparently the German guns were in action on the heights to the eastward a short half-mile away. The din was terrific. There was one incessant roar of gun and rifle fire, punctuated by the violent detonations of 'Universal' shells bursting over the battery.

As he ran forward to reach his battery a shell burst immediately in front of him, knocked him down, and put him out of action for the rest of the fight.

An inferno of shells

At the moment of surprise was effected, Captain Bradbury and the other officers of the battery were standing near the haystacks. Suddenly, with no previous warning, a shell burst over the battery, and immediately afterwards the bivouac came under very heavy rifle fire from the ridge. Captain Bradbury shouted out 'Come on! Who's for the guns?' and running out from behind the haystacks, made for them, followed by all the other officers. Meanwhile, in the exposed battery, horses and men were falling fast. Joined by those men who were engaged in steadying the horses in the inferno of bursting shells, the officers got three guns unlimbered and swung round to face the German battery. Captain Bradbury, Sergeant Nelson and others took one gun; Lieutenant Giffard took another; while Lieutenants Campbell and Mundy were at a third. The ammunition wagons were 20 yards away, and over that death-swept open space the ammunition had to be brought up. Hardly were the three guns in action when one of them, under Lieutenants Campbell and Mundy, was knocked out by a direct hit; the other two guns opened fire on the enemy.



Heroic stand of 'L' Battery, R.H.A. at Néry, September 1st, 1914.

The artist is unknown; the postcard was published by Gale & Polden, Aldershot, as card. No. 1549.

These two guns of 'L' carried on an unequal struggle. A few rounds only had been fired when Lieutenant Giffard, in charge of one of the guns, was severely wounded and all the detachment either killed or wounded. This left only one gun - under Captain Bradbury - still in action.

Lieutenants Campbell and Mundy, when their gun was knocked out, at once ran to the gun where Captain Bradbury and Sergeant Nelson were working, while Gunner Darbyshire and Driver Osborn crossed and re-crossed the shell-swept zone behind the gun to bring up the necessary ammunition from the wagons.

Almost immediately after the two subalterns joined Captain Bradbury's detachment Lieutenant Campbell was killed and the distribution of the duties at the gun became as follows: Lieutenant Mundy in position

close to the gun, acted as Section Commander, while Captain Bradbury carried out the duties as layer, and Sergeant Nelson those of range-setter. The gun appeared to bear a charmed life and remained untouched. Also it was clear that its fire was not without result, for the German guns were being badly mauled.

When the action began the German guns seem to have been in two groups - one battery in action on the heights, and now busily engaged with 'L' Battery, and two more batteries, unlimbered farther to the north almost opposite the centre of the village and firing on it.

Drawn by the fire kept up by 'L' the Germans now apparently decided to mass all their guns, and the two batteries in action abreast of the centre of the village moved round to join that engaged with 'L'.

The solitary gun of the latter was now opposed to heavy odds: the hostile guns were less than 800 yards away and in a commanding position. The action broke out with renewed fury and the massed German batteries made a determined effort to crush the single undaunted gun. Lieutenant Mundy was now seriously wounded, and the tale of casualties began to mount up, until at last at 0715 hours there remained only Captain Bradbury, still unhit, and Sergeant Nelson, who had been severely wounded. They kept up the best rate of fire they could, but naturally it became very desultory. A reinforcement now reached the little detachment, in the person of Battery-Sergeant-Major Dorrell, and on his arrival Captain Bradbury, knowing that the ammunition up with the gun was running low, went back to fetch up more from the wagons. As he left the gun he was hit by a shell and mortally wounded. There now remained only the Battery-Sergeant Major and the wounded Sergeant Nelson. With these two to serve it, the gun fired its last remaining rounds, and was silent. The end had come.

But it had not been fought in vain, for, as its last discharge boomed and echoed, reinforcements of all arms reached the field and the result it had fought so hard to attain was achieved.



Battery-Sergeant-Major George Thomas Dorrell, V.C., Royal Horse Artillery.

Contemporary postcard, passed for publication by the Press Bureau on the 10 February 1917.

'L' Battery's casualties amounted to 45 officers and men killed and wounded, out of a strength of 170. Among the killed were Captain Bradbury, who was awarded posthumously the Victoria Cross; it was also awarded to Sergeant Nelson and Battery-Sergeant Major Dorrell. The German cavalry division lost more heavily, was driven into the surrounding forests, did not emerge from hiding until late next day, and was still unfit to move on September 4.

On the reverse the following is printed:

For continuing to serve a Gun at Néry, after all the officers were killed or wounded, and in spite of a terrible fire from the enemy Guns at a range of 600 yards, until all the ammunition ran out.

Postscript



George Thomas Dorrell
(1880-1971)



David Nelson
(1876-1918)

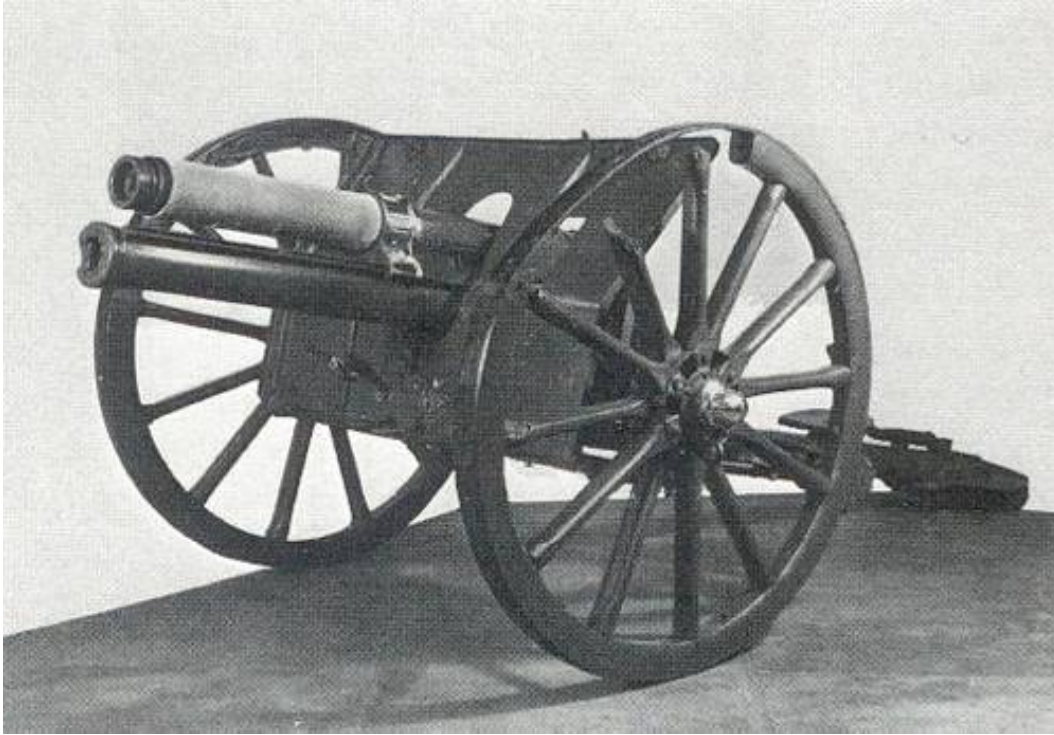
Three VC's to 'L' Battery, Royal Horse Artillery

Former *Battery Sergeant-Major Dorrell* and former *Battery-Sergeant-Major Nelson* were later portrayed in Gallaher's cigarette card series V.C. Heroes.

Captain Bradbury however, does not seem to be included in the series..

The illustrations derive from the V.C. Heroes homepage.

The three Victoria Crosses are displayed at the Imperial War Museum, in London, together with the No. 6 gun of 'L' Battery - The Néry Gun.



The Néry Gun - The 13-pdr field gun of 'L' Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, damaged at Néry on 1 September 1914.

From Source 6.

Mementos

After the battle the guns and some of the 'L' Battery's other equipment were salvaged.

No. 6 Gun, later known as *The Néry Gun*, was kept as a memento in its damaged condition.

It is presently (2005) displayed at Imperial War Museum, London together with the three Victoria Crosses from Néry.



Ammunition wagon from 'L' Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, damaged at Nėry on 1 September 1914.

Source: Own photograph, November 2001.

One of 'L' Battery's ammunition wagons is displayed in the *The Land Warfare Hall* at Imperial War Museum Duxford, where I photographed it in November 2001.

Sources

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2. *Nery, 1914 - The Adventure of the German 4th Cavalry Division on the 31st August and the 1st September* by Major A.F. Becke, Naval & Military Press, London 2004, ISBN 1-84574-030-0. The text was originally published in 1927 in *Journal of the Royal Artillery, Vol. LIV, No. 3*.
3. *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - Western Front, 1914-18* by Sir Martin Farndale, Royal Artillery Institution, London 1986, ISBN 1-870114-00-0.
4. *Field Service Pocket Book (1914)*, published by The General Staff, War Office, London 1914; reprinted by David & Charles Reprints, London 1971, ISBN 0-7153-5225-3.
5. *1914 - VCs of The First World War* by Gerald Gliddon, Budding Books, Stroud/Gloucestershire 2000, ISBN 1-84015-006-8.
6. *British Artillery Weapons & Ammunition 1914-1918* by Ian V. Hogg og L.F. Thurston, Ian Allan Ltd., Surrey 1972, SBN 7110-0381-5.

Further studies

As a supplement to the above article, I recommend *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914* by James E. Edmonds, Macmillan & Co., London 1933, which is available online.

Notes:

1) The patrol was founded by the 11th Hussars, and consisted of 2nd Lieutenant Tailby, Corporal Parker and five men. He was ordered to observe any hostile movement to the northwards, and he was warned that he might run into French piquets. The patrol did not meet any Frenchmen, but did observe a number of German dragoons (the advance guard of 17th Cavalry Brigade). The British patrol may have remained unnoticed, had not one of the *Cherry Pickers* jumped off his horse and opened fire at the Germans. The patrol took a hasty retreat, pursued by German dragoons, and galloped back towards NÉry to report its findings. Outside an estaminet, at the foot of a hill, 2nd Lieutenant Tailby saw a German cloak and a rifle, and a woman told him that three Germans had just bolted from the house. The cloak was secured to prove the presence of German cavalry, and asking the way on to the Bethisy-Néry road, 2nd Lieutenant Tailby and his patrol soon reached the village. On arrival at Néry, Corporal Parker was sent to warn the 5th Dragoon Guards, who unfortunately did not believe the information, and 2nd Lieutenant Tailby at once went to Colonel Pitman (Commanding Officer /11th Hussars) to report what had happened. Above information derives from Source 3 which gives the time of 2nd Lieutenant Tailby return as 0530.