

FOUR

WAR EXPERIENCES I 1916 - 1917

On 4th April, 1916, I left school to join the army. The war had been going on for nearly two years; there had been heavy losses, but recruitment was still voluntary. Posters were everywhere calling on men to join up, including a huge one showing a picture of Lord Kitchener fiercely glaring and pointing his finger at the reader, with "Your King and Country need YOU" in large letters beneath. So off I went, at the age of eighteen, to join up. Wanting to be in one of the London Territorial Regiments, I went to the Artists' Rifles, but they had become an Officers' Training Corps, and one could join only after three months in the ranks of some other regiment. I tried the H.A.C., but one had to be at least five feet six inches tall, and I was only five feet five. The Queen Victoria Rifles had a good reputation, but they were full up. Another did not want anyone who was younger than eighteen years nine months, as training lasted only three months and no one could go to the front under nineteen. This meant that there were a lot of fully-trained youngsters with nothing to do.

After failing to join up five times, I found myself outside two doors; one was the London Scottish, the other the Queen's Westminster Rifles. I could not see myself in a kilt, but decided that, if the QWR would not have me, I would have to become a Scot. However, the QWR were pleased to take me, but as the Territorials were a kind of club in peace time, there was an entrance fee of twenty-five shillings to pay. So at last perseverance and determination enabled me to enlist in the army of a nation at war, which was crying out for recruits.

I, and about thirty others, were given uniforms and went off by train to Hazely Down Camp, near Winchester. Being very naive, I was surprised and rather disgusted, to find that there were no sheets for the beds, and that one was expected to sleep in one's shirt in bare blankets. Next day I was expected to shave; it was an army order. I had been issued with a cut-throat razor, with which I was not very successful as I had never before shaved in my life. However, I wrote home for sheets, pyjamas, safety razor and other bits of civilisation. These caused great amusement in the Hut, but soon others followed my example. Postage was so cheap and so quick, that I sent my sheets and pyjamas home to be washed.

As I had been in the School O.T.C., I did not go into the 'awkward squad', and very soon our smart squad of youngsters found ourselves fully-trained but too young for active service. So we were sent on various courses, for example, hand grenades, machine guns, and similar specialist activities. We became an elite group, unattached to any company, and thus exempt from unpleasant 'fatigues'. During September we were moved to Redhill.

On 29th September I had my nineteenth birthday at home and ten days later I was part of a squad setting off for France. They did not wait until they had a whole Battalion ready to go, but sent squads from twenty to fifty strong. There were about thirty or forty of us, waiting for a General to come and inspect us before we went, and as we were lined up for a pep-talk, mail was handed round. I had a letter from home to say that Tom, who had previously been reported 'missing', had now been reported killed. The lad on my right turned to me and said, "Is that a letter from your girl?" I told him what it was, and the message went right down the line to where the officers were standing. The General

was informed and he came and stood close to me to give his 'pep-talk'. He talked about revenge, and how we would have the chance to "get our own back". "The silly old fool", I thought. All I wanted was my brother back.

We marched to Redhill railway station with a band, and crossed from Southampton at night. The Channel was rough, and the smell below decks was foul, so a number of us slept on deck under a tarpaulin. After a week or two at the Base Camp near Le Havre we were sent 'up the Line' and transferred to the 6th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI), a battalion made up chiefly from London and Birmingham, as most Cornishmen went into the Navy.

Life in the Line was dull and dirty; lice bred on our clothing; rats scampered about everywhere. The lice used to lay their eggs along the seams of our shirts and trousers, so we would run a lighted match along them. You could hear the eggs 'popping' from the heat. There was no drainage, so there had to be duck-boards to walk on in the trenches. We would do about three weeks in the Line, followed by three weeks in reserve. In the Line we slept or lounged around in the dug-outs all day and spent the night in the fire trenches. At dawn and dusk we 'stood to', i.e. we were at our posts ready for any attack, as that was the Germans' favourite time. At no time during the day could one put one's head up for a peep, as snipers were constantly on the lookout for a target. We had with us all our kit, including overcoat, mackintosh sheet, blankets and 200 rounds of ammunition. Food came up hot from the kitchens once a day; the rest we ate cold, washed down with tea made in the Line. Latrines were in a side trench and were favourite places for the enemy to drop a mortar shell in the early morning! In reserve we occupied the French barracks in Arras, cold and over-crowded; we slept on the floor in rows round the walls. We spent our time on fatigues, like carrying rations up to the front line, repairing trenches, and parades. The town was nearly deserted of people, and most of the buildings were damaged by shell fire. The most interesting thing about Arras was the underground caves. One went down into this vast hollow area by odd stairways from a number of houses in the town. It was said that the populace went into them in the days of the Franco-Spanish wars. They were huge in every way. A whole Division could get into them. Electric light had been installed, and we had strict instructions not to wander away into the dark parts, as it was so difficult to find one's way back to the light. The roof was held up by thick chalk columns, and was in the form of a number of large domes.

On Christmas Day, being one of the newcomers, I was one of a party that had to go up to the Line and shovel water out of a communication trench; it was a stupid job as the water ran back as fast as we could shovel. When we got back we found that the troops had all had their Christmas dinner, leaving nothing for us. Luckily I had a little Christmas tin, which had been sent out from home, so some of us collected round it and each had a mouthful of Christmas Pudding. On the following day there was a parade and those who had been on the fatigue had muddy clothes. We got thoroughly berated for our appearance, but there was no means of drying them after our Christmas Day event. I suppose it was all to teach us 'new chums' that we were 'nobodies'. However, I was so furious that I wrote a letter to Dad, addressing the envelope to :
"Paymaster-in-Chief W.F. Woods, R.N."

In the letter I said what I thought of the whole situation - officers, men, conditions, stupidity, and a lot more. I had to appear before the Company Commander who pointed out that such a letter would depress the people at Home, and a lot more. I told him that I would like him to tear it up. I don't know whether this had anything to do with a decision the following week, when a Bombing Section was formed from the men from the QWR. We were once again an elite squad, and occupied the cellars of the wrecked houses of a deserted village near Arras. We did no fatigues, but would go out at night ahead of our front line (No-man's land). Our weapons were hand-grenades. If there was chatting in a German outpost, a couple of grenades would be lobbed over, while we crouched in shell holes. We were most unpopular amongst our own troops, because the Germans would always reply with artillery fire, while we had already moved on from where the shells were falling. We worked along the line and returned a few hundred yards to the right or left of our starting point; the object was to keep the enemy on their toes. Back in our cellars, rather than the trenches, we stoked up our fires, settled down to a quiet, dry sleep. We had collected arm-chairs from smashed houses, and our fuel was the chairs from the wrecked church. The DCLI did 'Box and Cox' with us, but we did not like them, as they were too lazy to get firewood from the church, but burned our arm-chairs instead. We tried to converse with them when taking or handing over, but we couldn't understand a word they said. They might just as well have been speaking Dutch.

On one occasion we were told to experiment with some armour. We found that we couldn't lob a grenade with it on, as it got in the way of one's arm when bowling. Then we put it up against a wall and fired at it. The bullets not only went through but curled up the metal on the inside, which, if a man were wearing it, would fix into his flesh. We heard no more about armour.

As the winter wore on, there was a lot of tunnelling under the German lines. The problem was to hide the excavated chalk. One starting point was in our village, and here we just filled the ruined houses with it. This tunnel started in a brewery and had a miniature railway down into the 'Mine', with electric light. The tunnels from the trenches were of a lower standard, and the chalk had to be covered with dye. However, before anything could come of it, the Germans retired from that sector.

One day there was a 'gas' scare, and a number of men took refuge in a dug-out where a charcoal brazier was burning. Here they were gassed by the fumes from the brazier. The men were taken out and just then the rum ration came round. The men had eaten nothing all day, and the rum was strong. When stretcher bearers took away the casualties, no one knew which were gassed and which drunk, so they were all carried away.

That winter was one of the coldest ever. During the very coldest part we were fortunately out of the Line altogether, resting. We occupied some farm buildings, but even so we had to take our boots and food into bed with us to prevent them freezing. Our 'bully beef' would be frozen hard, so we made a hole at each end of the tin, which was then thrown into the brazier.

The great idea in the army was that the men must be kept occupied, so we were all taken out to repair a railway line. We were given picks and had to dig - I have forgotten what, but by the end of the day we had each made a little hole six inches deep and a foot across in the frozen ground. The cold lasted a long time and became the only item in my letters home.

War Experiences I

In these parts where we rested the villages were still inhabited, so we could go to estaminets and buy hot coffee and fried eggs and sausages. There were also a lot of little boys about, advertising their sisters' wares : "Verry nice, verry cheap, verry clean." There were also queues of soldiers outside the local brothels. This I thought the most disgusting part of the war; I had no idea that people could be so low. Nothing like this had ever entered my head before, and I had thought that most people were moral. I put it all down to the effect of the war and the lack of a proper upbringing. Nor was I in the slightest degree tempted to follow their example.

On coming out of the Line in early spring it was a delicious surprise to see leaves on the trees, grass in the fields and wild flowers about. There were no trees or grass in No Man's Land, nor between our own trenches. A number of shattered tree stumps stood about, and the ground was all churned up by the exploding shells.

In March 1917 our elite Bombing platoon was disbanded and we all returned to our original companies, from which we gathered that we would be going into action in the near future. On Easter Monday, 9th April, the Canadians attacked and captured Vimy Ridge. The D.C.L.I. (14th Division)* were further south. There had been a general advance that morning in the warm sunshine, but a gap had been left, so our company had to go and occupy it in the late afternoon. As the weather was so warm we went over very lightly equipped - no overcoats or ground-sheets. There was no barbed wire where we went over. We just walked across in a wide spread-out line. One felt very exposed but not frightened, although under fire. Here and there a man fell. There was no supporting gun-fire, no noise or shouting. Only a quick walk for a few hundred yards with bullets flying around. At last we got to a deserted trench. Almost at once a horde of Germans came charging towards us. We all lay on the top as the trenches were round the wrong way, being German ones, and opened fire. A lot were seen to fall, and the attack never reached us.

So we settled down for the night. I was lying out on top at the extreme left of the line, on guard, when it began to snow; it snowed and snowed. I passed out; I suppose that I was forgotten lying up top in the snow. Next morning I came to in the bottom of the trench with the Company Commander pouring rum into me. It is a wonder I survived at all, as I must have been lying in the snow for about eight hours. However, I was none the worse for it and was quite alright in no time. During the morning there was a burst of Lewis-gun fire at the end of the line, where I had been all night. A man on guard saw a German wandering towards him. He got such a fright that he pressed the trigger of his Lewis Gun and fired all forty-seven rounds from its magazine into the unfortunate man.

During the day the snow melted, and the day turned out sunny. We sat in our trench without interference, just waiting for something to happen. The intended break-

* Including Jimmy Matthews, but we did not know each other at that time.

through by cavalry did not take place as thousands of horses had died, or had to be killed, as a result of the snow and frost. In the late afternoon the general advance by infantry was to be resumed. Thinking that our trench was held by Germans, the artillery bombarded us; the Germans, knowing it was held by British, also bombarded us. In spite of this we had very few casualties. Later the Northumberland Fusiliers came over with fixed bayonets to take our trench and were delighted to find that we were British. They must have gone on, as we got up from our trench and walked back to the British lines. The following day newspapers began arriving, which told us of the Battle of Arras. This was typical of everything that we did. For any information about what we were doing we had to rely on English newspapers sent out from home.

The next battle that we took part in was on 3rd May. The DCLI (Cornwalls) were in reserve and spent the day lying in a shallow trench just in front of a line of guns which fired incessantly. By evening we could scarcely hear, the noise being so deafening. An officer, walking above the trench just as a cannon fired, got such a shock that he jumped into the trench and sprained his ankle. This was our only casualty in this battle. What we were attacking and what was the result I had no idea; the papers reported only, "All quiet on the Western Front".

In July, the 14th Division was moved from the 5th Army under Allenby to the 2nd under Plumer. We marched all the way from the Arras area to the Ypres section of the line. Everywhere was muddy; the ground was so waterlogged that dug-outs could not be made. Shell craters touched others, so that one could only walk round the edges of the shell holes, all of which were full of water, barbed wire, oddments of equipment and war materials, and the everlasting remnants of men. If anyone slipped in, it took about five men to pull him out again covered in stinking slime. Duckboards had been put down so that troops could move at night; one could only move then as the Germans overlooked the whole area.

The main route to the Line was the 'Menin Road'. Shells were carried to the advanced artillery on pack-horses, but the worst job of all was carrying up rations. We stumbled about, but couldn't put down the sacks of bread as the loaves would have become sodden. We carried them in two small sacks tied together at the top, and the string cut into our shoulders.

In July the French army on the Rue des Dames mutinied, as General Nivelle had caused them to be cut to pieces in unsuccessful, massed, frontal attacks on strong German positions. To prevent a German attack on Nivelle's army, which refused to fight, an attack was planned for the British as far from the French as possible. This was Ypres, where it was well known that August was the worst month of the year for fighting as it rained all the time. However, the Germans had to be kept busy.

Our turn came on 22nd August. During the night of the 20th all but a few were withdrawn for safety as a very heavy barrage was to destroy the wire in front and the enemy trenches. I was among the few that remained. Our job was to repel any German attack. All through the day of the 21st and the following night a non-stop blanket of shells fell in front of our line. Our section, consisting of half a dozen men, sat in a little funnel-shaped hole in the ground, and that is all we did. We couldn't hear each other speak, but we could sleep or doze. During the night I stuck my head up and looked at the shelling. The ground was all lit up by the exploding shells. One could see quite easily the German lines. Everything in No Man's Land was flying in all directions. One couldn't be frightened. In fact I don't remember any occasion when anyone was

frightened; we were more like herded cattle, living for that moment only. I well remember, on one occasion on our march up to this area, I had to visit hurriedly some sheltered undergrowth at the side of the road. When I returned the battalion had moved on. I had no idea of our destination, so I climbed onto a limber, a two-wheeled army luggage cart drawn by two horses, which was going past. Eventually the limber was passing through a village, when I spotted some of our battalion, so I got off and rejoined my Company, without any surprise at the happy coincidence.

Towards morning the barrage moved forward and our battalion came into the front line; zero-hour was 7.00 am.; we all got into our places, and it wasn't raining. On the hour all the guns started up again with a terrific roar, and over the top we went. The first up my ladder came down immediately with a bullet through his hand. Then I went, wondering where I would be hit and whether it would hurt. I was carrying, besides my rifle and ammunition, a hand-grenade in each side pocket and a number of Lewis-gun drums of cartridges draped over my shoulder. I hadn't got very far when I found myself on all fours with my right sleeve torn. I dropped into a dry shell hole to take stock, together with another fellow. I pulled up my sleeve and saw a great chunk of flesh had been removed, and there were a number of little places in my hand bleeding slightly. The chap was grinning all over his face. "Two for Blighty", he shouted. We threw out all weapons and equipment and started back, as our orders were strictly that, if wounded, to get out of the way as soon as possible.

Going down the communication trench was far too slow, so we got on the top and walked back across country, a very unwise act as we were not under cover, but I suppose we were feeling freed from the whole business and a bit light-headed. My arm was numb, so I had tucked it into my tunic. After we had gone some distance, we came across our advanced field dressing station where our wounds received first aid. I had so many little wounds from the bursting shell, that my arm, from the elbow downwards, was one huge bandage.

Off we went again and reached the Menin Road. There was a continuous stream of pack-horses going in each direction. For a while we each held on to one and took large strides as the horses trotted, but it was all too energetic. Finally we got into what had been Ypres. Only the ruins of the Cloth Hall and the Cathedral stood. Arriving at a place for collecting wounded, we had labels tied on, were given a bowl of steaming cocoa and an injection against Tetanus. This last was worse than the wound; it was done in the chest and there seemed to be so much of it. After that we just sat around waiting.

There were a number of artillery batteries about here with a miniature railway to bring up shells, so as many as possible climbed into the empty trucks and set off for Poperinghe, all ranks mixed up and all feeling like a Sunday School outing, only disturbed by the din of the guns firing as we passed them.

We arrived in time for lunch, which was served at long tables in the open, a nice sunny day. No one had more than one serviceable arm, so there was great merriment while we all helped one another to cut our meat. A major and I, a private, helped one another on opposite sides of the same table. Nearby was a Church Army recreation hut,

so I went in after lunch to await the Hospital Train. A padre wrote a postcard home for me, saying that I had been slightly wounded, but was thoroughly fit and well.*

Just as it was getting dark we went off in the Hospital Train. I slept on the floor and didn't wake till morning at Etaples, south of Boulogne. In this war there were a number of Red Cross hospitals established and paid for by public subscription, organised by some Society women. Here was the Duchess of Westminster's hospital, staffed by young 'debs' and others, and this is where I was taken. After a hot shower, I got into clean pyjamas, a clean dressing gown and clean slippers and into a lovely clean bed. I hadn't slept in a bed for a year. Up to 1916, when recruitment was voluntary, lots of under-age boys had joined up, passing themselves off as eighteen or nineteen. After my bath I must have looked so young and rosy and smiling, that hospital staff kept asking me my age. Finally the hospital Commandant came along, looked at the card at the end of my bed, asked my age and length of service in France, and finally asked whether I would like to go to England. He clipped a red rosette on the board holding the card. After he had gone I got out and admired it. I saw my temperature chart as well. This looked like a range of mountain peaks. I had never had a very high temperature before and was duly impressed. Next came several days of nervous waiting owing to mines being reported loose in the Channel as a result of storms, and I was afraid that my wound might get well before the date of leaving for England, so I managed to be in the 'loo' or having a shower when the doctor came round. I need not have worried, as my temperature was not normal, and the main wound was a large ditch in the muscle of my right arm which would take some time to fill up. There was also a small piece of shrapnel in the palm of my hand with splinters in the wrist and fingers.**

At last the sea was calm and the date for sailing was fixed. The pretty night nurse, who chatted to me every night, asked me to write to her after I got to England. I promised to do so, but forgot to ask her name. It was not only in appearance that I was young and inexperienced. We crossed on a Belgian passenger steamer and I was on deck. There were Germans in the stern, looking frightened as they were certain the ship would be sunk. It may have been the first time many of them had seen the sea. Whatever it was, we were highly amused.

Although this was September of 1917, a band greeted our arrival, we were given tea and food and treated as well as the first returning heroes of the war. Welcoming parties must have seen thousands of returning wounded, and yet they made us feel appreciated. However, I was asked by some official where I lived so that I could be in a hospital near home, but when the train started I found that we were on our way to Dartmouth. Here we were dressed in the hospital blue uniform. I wore a sling for my arm, and, if I got into a crowded bus, I was not allowed to stand or pay for a ticket. In the ward we walking-wounded were supposed to help clean the ward, but having only one serviceable arm and perhaps on account of my youthful appearance, my job was to help the nurse to dust.

* This was the cause of some panic later at home, as the official notice arrived a fortnight or three weeks later; this said that I had been severely wounded and had been admitted into hospital. "The Army Council regrets, etc". It was thought at home that the card meant that I had had a scratch and had then gone back to the trenches, where I had then been wounded a second time and seriously. I think that the degree of panic was due to the fact that it was just a year after Tom's death.

** Most of them are still there.

War Experiences I

While I was in hospital in Dartmouth, Dick, who was now a very new midshipman, came to visit me. He had been a cadet at Keyham College, Dartmouth, so he took me to see the place. The new term had not yet opened so we could go anywhere we liked. We found a senior commander playing billiards with a warrant officer, so we all had tea together. This mixing of ranks off parade was a very new development in this war; pre-1914 there was a huge barrier between commissioned officers and other ranks. The break-down of this was due to the millions of civilians who had joined the forces.

My wound did not take very long to heal, and I then was sent to the DCLI 'reserve' battalion at Freshwater, in the Isle of Wight, to get ready to go back to France. I was in 'E' Company, which contained all the men who had been at the Front, so we were treated as veterans and something special. Needless to say we were all 'lead-swingers' and scroungers. For example, Freshwater lived up to its name and was certainly very fresh. As we moved on to winter it became extremely cold, and the amount of coal supplied for the stove in each hut was very small. The coal dumps were painted white so that pilfering could be noticed, but 'E' Company supplied the guards at night. When a member of one's hut was on guard, a number of men would go up with buckets, baths, blankets, to carry away a good supply of coal, and then white-wash the scar. In this way we had roaring fires all night. My particular lead-swinging was my arm. Light Infantry regiments carried their rifles 'at the trail', that is, in the right hand and parallel with the ground. As my wound was not very old, I was allowed to carry a broomstick instead of a rifle. I kept this up for a long time.

The battalion Physical Drill instructors were nearly all members of Cornwall's County Rugger fifteen. Fortunately, they lacked a scrum-half, so I joined the team and we went about playing some wonderful matches; that against the United Services at Portsmouth was one of the most enjoyable that I ever played in. It was a lovely day, the grass was firm but springy, and the United Services forwards included five burly stoker internationals. If I threw myself on the ball in front of their feet, two or three would bend down, pick me up in their arms and go on dribbling. The match was hard and vigorous, but great fun.

It was thought that the Rugger Committee should not consist only of officers, so an N.C.O. and I were put on it. Every week the Battalion went on a long 'route-march', for it must be remembered that armies still moved on foot then, so had to be kept in trim. I hated them, so on the appointed day each week I, as a rugger committee member, used to go off to prepare the rugger ground for the next match. As this consisted merely of removing anything that a stray cow had deposited, I comfortably avoided the dreary march. This was the great lesson one learnt in this war - not to oppose the unpleasant, but to side-step past it.

I was determined not to return to France as a private, so I wrote to Dad, who, without my knowing, at once wrote to the Commanding Officer telling him all about me. I had to appear before the C.O. accompanied by a sergeant and escort. The members of my hut were greatly intrigued and thought that I must have done something very serious, as the Company Commander dealt with ordinary misdemeanours, the Colonel taking only serious crime. Much to the surprise of the escort, the C.O. took me to a table, sat down beside me and helped me fill up a large form. One item asked in what branch of the army I wanted a commission, so I listed the lot - Infantry, Artillery, Cavalry, Flying Corps, right down to Cyclist, Ordinance, Pay, etc.

The Lion and the Bicycle

After that I was transferred to yet another elite group of people who had applied for a commission. We attended no parades or fatigues, but did a kind of course. I have forgotten what we did, but it was quite comfortable. One recollection of that short period was the arrival from time to time of survivors of the 6th DCLI. We were always so surprised to find someone still alive that we greeted each other as friends of long ago. There were so few left that the 6th DCLI had ceased to exist, and the survivors in France had joined another battalion.

Flying was such a new branch of the Services that I had thought that it was done by very specially clever people, so when I was informed that I was to go for an interview at the Air Ministry I was somewhat perturbed. However, the day came, and off I went to London. The Ministry was in the Hotel Cecil in the Strand and was always called Bolo House; why, I have no idea. There was first a medical test, which was very ordinary, followed by comic ones; for example, one had to stand on one leg with the other knee raised, one's eyes shut, tongue hanging out and arms stretched forward with hands limp. Finally came an interview with several senior officers, with lots of questions about my education, interests, games, etc. and finally three questions :

“Can you drive a car ?” “No.”

“Can you ride a motor-bike ?” “No.”

“Can you ride a horse ?” “No.”

.....awful feeling of failure on my part. “All right,” came the answer, “We'll take you.”

To think of all those dreary, dirty, beastly months in France and Belgium; if only I had known in the summer of 1916 ! - and to be able to sleep in a bed well away from the vermin-infested trenches. True it was dangerous when in the air. A Sopwith Camel held petrol for only two and a half hours, but in the trenches one was there for twenty-four hours each day. It was not the danger that I thought about, but the absence of lice, the cleanliness and the generally civilised living. And above all, a pilot in the air would be completely independent - no orders, no pushing around, his own boss. The idea was heavenly.

Mum and Dad were rather nervous about it, when I told them, but they did not try to deter me. War was an awful strain on them, with four sons in the Forces. The troops in East Africa, where Bill was, were dying from malaria and dysentery; Tom was already killed; Dick was on a Battle Cruiser. So at least it was something to have me in England. Really I was in the safest position, as long as I was very careful.

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