# NORMAN HOWDILL

# 1898 - 1988

# MEMOIR:

# EARLY FAMILY LIFE

# ROYAL ARTILLERY WW1

Memoir thought to have been written up c. 1978
Donated to Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds by Norman's widow, Edith Margery Howdill in 1988
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# NORMAN HOWDILL

Born 9th February 1898

Father [Charles Barker Howdill] an architect ARIBA 1892:

- National Gold Medal – Design for Post Office
- National Bronze Medal – Measured Drawing
- National Silver Medal – Measured Drawings purchased by nation for S.K. (South Kensington) Museum

Father was trained by his father (Thomas), who was a craftsman, in the Tadcaster district. A carpenter, joiner and a staunch Trade Unionist who held high office but was 'sacked' when he told the members of the branch that their demands from their employers were excessive and unwarranted. He left Tadcaster and moved to Leeds and set up as an architect and surveyor. He, my grandfather, was a well-known Primitive Methodist local preacher. Along with my father he designed many churches (chapels) in the country.

Forbears date back to 17th century:
1652 Guardiano, Ledsham Church (West Riding)
1678 Churchwarden, Ledsham Church

Mother came from Swaledale – fully occupied in bringing up and weathering a large family – four girls and three boys – one girl died of scarlet fever when she was about eight years old. She was the second child, the first a boy. I was the third, so that I became second on my sister's death, so that it was finally B.B.G.B.G.G. My eldest brother died two years ago (at) 81. He volunteered in 1915 as a driver in the Royal Army Service Corps. He was an experienced motor mechanic and a call went out for such men who were paid 5/- per day (!!) as against others 1/- per day.

My grandfather used to have a tricycle. On the handlebars he always had a whip to use on dogs and boys if they came anywhere near him!! Later, he bought a car. I don't remember the make but it was an open car and the seats seemed very high up as compared with more modern cars. I only once rode in the car and it was almost a disaster. Going down a wide street near the centre of Leeds, my grandfather seemed unable to slow down at the crossroads and only just managed to swing round the rear of a horse & cart; the owner was frightfully annoyed and gave vent to his feelings!!

My father was an accomplished organist and pianist. He was organist for 55 years at the Primitive Methodist church in Burley Road, Leeds (1880 to 1935). He was also a keen photographer, traveller and lecturer (see brochures enclosed). His work as an architect and his lecturing took him to all parts of the country and inevitably had a very definite effect on our family life. My mother had a great deal to do in looking after us. Although we had a maid living in at one time, my father's architectural practice declined noticeably just before the Great War and during it. Mother would bake our own bread and make wonderful tea cakes, do our washing etc etc. The girls helped and one of my jobs was to wash the tiled floor of our entrance hall (and was I annoyed if any of the family walked on it before it had dried thoroughly!!).

My mother was the leading contralto in the Chapel Choir. My eldest brother became an organist and pianist and the rest of the family sang – except me!! I blew the organ for father!! There was a constant coming and going at home. My father was very keen on some of the competitions in the weekly magazines such as John Bull, e.g. bullets, rhymes, words with varying meanings. He used to keep us busy during the winter when he was at home, looking through dictionaries for groups of words to help him with his competitions, and we thought it great fun. Mother thought it was almost a waste of time as he rarely won a prize, but she was delighted when he won a Christmas hamper.

I remember very little of my school life in what would now be called a primary school. My earliest recollection was having a nasty fall when running to school along the cinder path (we lived then on the outskirts of Leeds, almost in the country, near Headingley cricket grounds). My parents were very perturbed as my forehead was badly scarred and I still have a scar now.

We moved into Leeds nearer my father's office and I attended the local elementary school, in fact all the boys in our family attended the boys' school and the girls attended the girls' school. The Heads were well-known in the Leeds area and both schools had excellent records. They were in a middle-class area and the pupils were a mixture from homes of shopkeepers, artisans and professional people. There were no problems of discipline in either school and corporal punishment was very rare, although the teacher who had the senior classes had a cane which had a hoop at the end (like a walking stick) and he kept it under the back of his jacket!! He used it on our backs and kept it out of sight when the Head was about. Although we tended to dislike him, he was a very good teacher. In later life I often visited the school and saw the Head and that senior teacher. Singing was a most important part of the curriculum and the Head played a big part in the school choir. There was no school uniform but we were always 'inspected' to make sure we were tidy and had clean boots!! There was no real difficulty as our parents almost without exception paid great attention to our appearance. Most of us had knickerbocker trousers with long stockings and jackets with belts. And,

of course, the Eton type collar. Incidentally, the Headmaster was always ready to 'try out' educational experiments. For instance, there was a plot of open ground opposite the school so he obtained permission to cultivate it and he was able to arrange lessons, dealing with gardening. We also had organised swimming lessons. We were marched down to the nearest swimming baths, a quarter of an hour away, NB no transport!! When one considers that this was before the First World War – 1914 – it can be realised that education was education over sixty years ago.

When I was $11^{+}$ I, along with other boys, was entered for the Junior City Scholarships. I was successful and gained a place at the Leeds Central High School for Boys (a grammar school). Those scholarships were very highly thought of and there was much competition. (I have found details in my file and enclosed them.) None of my brothers or sisters were awarded scholarships. My eldest brother [Thomas] went to the Leeds Boys Modern School (grammar); my younger brother [Leslie] stayed on at the Elementary School and was recommended by the Head to take up some practical work e.g. horticulture. He (my brother) opted for office work and went into a solicitor's office. He was very soon disillusioned and my father apprenticed him to one of the best builders' firms in Leeds and he became a first-class carpenter and joiner and finally became Head of Department at Southall Technical College. My eldest sister [Marion] stayed on at the Elementary School and then entered the Post Office in Leeds. My remaining two sisters [Madge and Dorothy] went to the Leeds Girls' Modern school (grammar). NB I do not claim that I was better than any of my brothers or sisters because I won a scholarship!!

Pocket money – I don't remember ever having any!! If we wanted anything, within reason of course, we were allowed it. A half penny (½d) in those days went quite a long way!! Of course, there was comparatively little transport except on major roads where there were trams. We seemed to walk everywhere except when we were going some distance away and then we went by tram.

When I went to the grammar school, which was a very big one and drew pupils from a wide area, I found everything was well organised. This is with hindsight and thinking over what I didn't realise at that time, and comparing it with some of the schools I know a good deal about, e.g. all textbooks had to be bought by parents; also instruments, and we were required to have them when we reported at the beginning of the autumn term. We had our form rooms where we had all lessons except the sciences (chemistry and physics), joinery and metalwork, art and physical education. The school had been built at the end of the 19$^{th}$ century and beginning of the 20$^{th}$, when there was a drive for the development of science. The laboratories were spacious and well equipped. There were lecture theatres well planned to be adjacent to the appropriate laboratories. Also, the art studios were very good. (My father was Assistant Architect for the Leeds School Board at the time.)

There was very little moving about as the teachers of the subjects came to the form rooms – much the best way!! We had desk lockers and I can't remember ever losing a book, in fact I still have a number of my old books.

I do not think any of the staff had a cane, only the Headmaster, a Scotch academic, M.A. DSc (remarkable in those days). Although he did not rule with a rod of iron, he used the cane effectively when necessary. He kept his eye on everything and I had to appear before him for bad writing. He knew my father very well and when he sent for me, he held out one of my exercise books and reminded me that my father was a beautiful writer. I got 'four of the best' – two on each hand. He did not have to send for me again on that score. When we were in the fifth form, the Head went through the work reports on each boy to see how they were progressing to sit for matriculation (Northern universities – Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds & Sheffield). He was very keen on history and Latin, English language and literature; English history and mathematics were obligatory, Latin was optional as was French Unprepared and geography, which I took. We had to sit for six subjects and pass them all to gain matriculation.

A failure in one subject meant sitting them all again. I passed in 1915. All boys who, in the opinion of the Head were weak in Latin and History, had to attend school on Saturday mornings, one hour for each. I was weak in both so I had to attend for two hours – we had no option. He took the lessons. There were quite a number of Jewish boys in the school and they pleaded it was their Sabbath, but he insisted they must come – if they wished to have the advantages of English education, they must obey the rules (or his rule). They all attended!!

Regular homework was set. We had to do it and it was always marked (so different from nowadays in so many cases). It was accepted as the thing and I don't think we resented it in any way – it was no use grumbling about it. Parents invariably welcomed it. The Head seemed to have little interest in games but we had successful association football and cricket teams. I played in both teams. The Head always appeared in the photographs of the teams, complete with cap and gown. The school had adequate playing fields – a quarter of an hour tram ride from the school.

Looking back, I feel the school provided a well-balanced disciplined education. I was always happy there and made many friends, and visited the school when I returned after service in the army. I also attended the Old Students' annual dinner.

During the period I was at the grammar school - 1910 – 1916 – I did various jobs; not because the family needed the money, nor to get some pocket money for myself. It so happened that people my father knew approached him for help. Two old ladies had a stationery shop near my father's office and he bought papers and stationery etc there. They were finding it very difficult to get boys to deliver their morning papers, could he help them? My father thought my younger brother might do some and I might help, so we delivered papers for a time and duly received some pocket money. I forget how much. I shall never forget how delighted the old ladies were and also they always gave us a large mug of hot tea and two slices of bread and butter before we set off with the papers. A personal friend of father's was a master printer and father had shares in the company. They printed church magazines, in addition to other publications. There were numbers of local firms who advertised in these magazines and I was asked one year to go round and get them to renew their advertisements. It gave me an insight to business.

Another job I was asked to do was to go to an office in the centre of the city where newspaper journalists wrote out reports, which then had to be taken to the night train for London, about 11pm. They wanted a boy, and father suggested I might help – he had used the office and knew the journalists. He used to write articles for the local paper, Yorkshire Post etc and also articles on photography. I took my homework to the office and when the reports were ready, I rushed down to the train and handed them over to the guard!! That was the only way the reporters could get their news items into the London editions. The last job I had was in a different category altogether. Another of father's friends was an agent for a number of cloth manufacturers, English, Scotch, Irish French, German and Austrian. He was on the committee of the Leeds Institute of Science, Art and Literature; my father was an Hon. Sec. There was a full-time paid secretary and appropriate staff – it was one of the biggest in the country and had extensive premises. During one of my school summer holidays, I must have dozed off to sleep in our 'front' room and my father came into the room. He woke me and asked if I had nothing to do – no holiday homework etc etc. He told me to go to the agent's office and ask him if he could find me something to do. I had never met the gentleman before and I went in fear and trembling!! He was very short and I almost looked down on him as he eyed me up and down. He told me he could give me something to do, handed me a duster and asked me to dust round the office and the store room where there were bales of cloth. He evidently took a liking to me and he got me to help with the postage of patterns etc., going with him to show patterns to customers and finally keeping his books and accounts. The only other help he had was a boy who used to deliver goods on a handcart to local firms. He had a wonderfully good business, all his expenses were paid including the rest of the premises and he had a very good commission on his sales. I learnt a good deal about the cloth trade and the business side of it and I continued to help him when I came out of the army.

He did a lot of voluntary work in connection with recruiting and also with the Home Guard. I joined the local contingent and we used to have manoeuvres at weekends. Also there was a group of men who used to act as labourers in the foundries in Leeds. I joined one. Our job was helping to move heavy machinery. This was done at weekends and we were given some payment. I forget how much.

It should be remembered that at this time, no decision could be made about my future. There were no Civil Service exams etc., and I could not decide what preparations I should make. However, I was asked to take over the job of laboratory assistant in the chemistry labs. I had to fit in the times with the Senior Chemistry Master and my Form Master and I had to stay on after school hours. In those days, there were no full-time fully-qualified lab assistants.

King Edward VII came to Leeds on an official visit and the Leeds Institute was on the route. A big stand was erected for members and family friends. Police were there; the Assist. Chief Constable lived next door. My father, who was Hon. Sec., had to be 'security officer'. I do not know the official title in those days. His main job was to check everybody and to check cameras for explosives of any kind, and for weapons. I was allowed to be with him and of course was thrilled. My mother was very worried!! There were no incidents and I had a wonderful view. I also went round with my father in connection with his practice as an architect, helping with surveys, inspection of cracks in buildings in ming areas due to subsidence, collecting rents from properties owned by my grandfather, usually domestic dwellings, some in Bradford and Harrogate.

Although I mentioned earlier that I don't remember having regular pocket money, I did save a good deal of money from the jobs I undertook for my father's friends. From this I was able to buy a second-hand bicycle very cheaply, and pay for a cycling holiday in the summer with school friends, staying at a cottage at a little village a few miles from Scarborough and Flixton on the east coast. We cycled all over the Yorkshire Wolds and the coast. I forget exactly how much it cost but I think it was round about 10/- per week, all-in!! My mother, who looked after the family very well, gave me some money to pay for the fare by train in case the weather became very bad. I remember very vividly we were returning late at night from Scarborough when war was declared in Aug '14, meeting field artillery on the road and we were delayed. We had to be very careful about black-out at night and there were wardens going round 'spotting' chinks of light. We heard the zeppelins going over most of the night. When news was received that Kitchener had gone down with the destroyer he was on there was gloom everywhere. I was in school at the time and the staff had evidently heard

the news and it quickly spread round. One could feel a change in the atmosphere and it was almost as though we had lost the war.

Before the war I had become a member of a club for boys. It had been started by the daughter of a well-known doctor who was a specialist (now called consultant), whose rooms were in the centre of the city near the town hall in Park Square where most of the specialists had rooms; the Harley Street of Leeds. I have forgotten who introduced me; it could have been friends or more likely my father who knew the specialist, a Dr. Stacey. The daughter, Miss Stacey, had managed to persuade a number of businessmen in Leeds to take an interest in the formation of the club. We had a club room, which we kept clean ourselves and had various activities. Although it was in no sense attached to any religious denomination, there was a prayer meeting at regular intervals. The club was called 'The Spartans' and a scout troupe was formed when Baden Powell started the movement. I fancy we were among the first of the troupe in Leeds. We had some wonderful adult leaders and we became very well known. The businessmen provided a good deal of equipment, trek carts, tents etc and we had some marvellous camps. The club then became part of the YMCA as a junior YMCA and we were able to use the premises of the senior YCMA – gym, rooms etc. Miss Stacey married a Mr. Hudson Pope who helped at the club for a time and when they moved away it was 'handed over' to the YMCA. Mr. Hudson Pope was the founder of the CSSM [Children's Seaside Mission] which still functions.

We had comparatively few entertainments and we did not seem to have much time. The outstanding one was when Catlin's Pierrots appeared at Christmas time at the Leeds Institute. There were odd times when we might go to the cinema – silent films - lowest price 3d. The Leeds Institute had a full programme of lectures, recitals etc in their hall - the Albert Hall - all of them national artists, lecturers etc. Harry Lander was one of them. On occasions the Institute hired the Coliseum (opposite the Institute building) for a special lecture with slides (or film), e.g. Scott's expedition. I managed to see most of these.

You may think that my father figures too much in my life during the period before my war service, but you will no doubt appreciate he had a tremendous influence on my life and also the whole family. My mother played a major part behind the scenes, as it were, keeping the family together when father was away on business etc.

War Service – Training

I was 18 years of age on 9th Feb 1916 and I had to report regarding Service on 1st May 1916. I was then given a searching medical examination and classed A1. Some decisions had to be taken before this. Most if not all my friends were already in the forces and I felt I should join up. My father wanted me to go to the University (Leeds) where I had been granted a King's Scholarship, and join the OTC [Officers' Training Corps] and get a commission. I preferred to join the ranks and I felt I would not want a commission before I had seen active service, rightly or wrongly. Also, I discussed with my headmaster the question of being 'called up' for service. He suggested he could get my deferment as I was a student but I told him I wished to join the forces and he quite understood. The lab assistant in the physics lab was in a similar position to me, due for 'call-up'. He asked the Head if he could get him deferment as a conscientious objector. The Head refused. I do not know on what grounds. The boy did not report when notified. He went from his home and hid, and lived on a moor outside Leeds, Adel Moor. I don't know how he existed and avoided arrest but he was 'free' after the war, and died some years later from the effects of exposure on the moor.

When I attested, I assumed I should join the forces immediately. I had my hair cut although it was never long, mother saw to that, and had arranged everything. To my surprise I was told I was too young and I could not be enlisted for another six months!! Believe me, I was bitterly disappointed. I do not want anyone to look upon me as a hero. I felt I ought to play my part as my friends and many others were doing. My father did not mind my going 'into the ranks'. My eldest brother had volunteered in 1915 – he was a first-class motor mechanic and when there was an appeal for them, he responded and was soon out in service driving a lorry.

I was mobilized on the 9th Oct 1916. I had always expressed a wish to join the Artillery as I felt I would prefer some technical branch of the services. I had little experience of driving a car as I had had only a few lessons in our old Ford. It so happened that the friend of father's who was an agent for cloths, already mentioned, did voluntary work for recruiting and helped at the central office in Leeds. He was a bachelor and well over the age for military service. I had also helped him and he indicated to the officer in charge my wish for join the Field Artillery. It was duly arranged and with a few others, all older than myself, we were sent to Ripon where there was a training camp for Infantry & Artillery. I made friends with two men older than myself, who lived and worked in Leeds. One was the manager of a local brewery and the other the manager of a greengrocer and fruiterer's business in Leeds market and they had a branch in Ripon, so my father used to go into the branch in Leeds and they were very kind, letting my parents have fruit etc at wholesale prices for many years. We were separated but we met up again after the war.

Regarding pay, I had quite a surprise when we reported for mobilisation at the centre in Leeds. We were asked a number of questions - the main one being our occupation, wages etc and had we any dependants etc. As I was a 'schoolboy' I said I had no dependants and would not require to allocate part of my pay to parents. When I was asked whether I had done any jobs I told them and they said I had been able to save my parents some expense and if I allocated some of my pay the government added something to it. The clerk almost insisted I should follow their advice as I was entitled to arrange for an allowance to my parents, which I did with a certain amount of reluctance. I could see the point of it as married men with wives and families would suffer if some provision were not made. My parents were surprised but agreed I had done the right thing. I forget how much my pay was. I always thought it was 1/- per day. I am sure there must be some official records somewhere stating rates of pay and allowances etc.

Side note – I was a gunner as I hoped I would be. I was too tall for a driver.

The Ripon Camp consisted of huts, parade grounds, the usual cook houses etc and it was very well laid out. We were very quickly kitted out and I was very pleased to find how particular they were that the riding breeches and tunic fitted well. Some of us thought that our breeches were not smart enough and we found that there was an army tailor in our part of the camp who did alterations for a reasonable sum. We collected our palliasses [straw mattresses], blankets and pillows and went to the hut to which we were directed. We had the usual bare boards and trestles. Having been a boy scout, I was used to roughing it and I wasn't a bit bothered and soon settled down. The training commenced with drill and also lectures. The sergeant who took our squad was very strict and could be very sarcastic. He was however a very good instructor. Unfortunately I became if not a target, 'singled out' very quickly. The first lecture was a technical one to do with instruments, and angles were introduced. The sergeant officer asked questions and one of the first was how many degrees are there in a right angle?'. To my horror very few knew anything about angles. My two friends knew as I did there were between 25 & 30 in the squad and the sergeant asked those who gave the correct answer what they did in real life. I said "a student" and the sergeant picked me up immediately – "a schoolboy", and I had to admit from there on if no one could answer his question it was "ask the schoolboy"!! It was rather embarrassing at times but I don't think the sergeant did it to show up the others. My first real shock was at the end of the first week when we had kit inspection. We were warned about it and had to have everything laid out on our beds. I had a complete kit. When the NCO in charge of our hut called us to attention as the Orderly Officer and Orderly Sgt entered we stood to our beds and dare not move. I looked down and lo and behold a brush was missing and worse that it was noticed by the Orderly Officer as he came round. No questions were asked. I said nothing. I was given two weeks C.B. [confined to barracks] and report for fatigues every evening!! Someone, and I didn't attempt to find out who, had 'pinched' the brush

when I wasn't looking. I was annoyed with myself. Fatigues consisted of heaving coal from coal wagons on to a coal dump, cleaning out canteens, washing up at the officers' mess (the cooks usually gave us ice cream) and other similar jobs. Although I felt very hurt and almost wronged, I made no bones about it. It taught me a lesson!!

Training progressed steadily: mechanism of the guns (18 pounders), shells, gun drill, ranging etc. I managed to get some day passes, usually Saturdays and was able to go to Leeds to see my parents. It was an easy train journey. Then we got a shock. There had been many casualties among the infantry and replacements were required. A number of us were to be transferred to the infantry and I was one of them when we went to look at the list. I immediately contacted my parents to let them know. Of course, none of us liked the idea of leaving the Artillery. Some, in fact many, of those on the list were married with families and I must record that those of us who were young and single expressed our regrets, but nothing could be done – it was war. Those on the list had to hand in our artillery We were then paraded before a Staff Officer, I think a General. He addressed us and expressed some sympathy for the transfer but it was necessary. He then inspected us all and we had further surprises. He stopped in front of one young man and asked his age. We could not hear what he said but the General ordered the Sgt Major to take him off the list: he was under the age laid down – 19½ years. It appeared that our age limit had been set for service overseas and as the draft had done some training they were expected to be sent to France as soon as possible. The General then asked if any others were under 19½ and a number stepped forward. The General continued his inspection but did not ask any others!! He could report, if asked, that all the draft were 19½ or over!! Duty done. I was only 19 and quite a few more were under 19½ and we did not step forward and therefore remained on the draft. We felt we could not step forward and be taken off the draft when so many more with responsibilities had to go. Those on the draft had to do various fatigues. I was given the job of scrubbing the floor of a hut. As I was on my knees our Sgt Instructor was passing through the hut and saw me. He stepped in and said "what are you doing?" I replied "scrubbing the floor Sgt". He stared at me and asked me if I was on the draft and when I told him I was, he enquired my age and I told him. He was furious and said "we are not going to lose you, you are coming off". He took me along to the officer in charge and I was back in the Artillery. This incident took me completely by surprise but I can't honestly say I was sorry. (We learnt later that the draft had gone out as reinforcements and most of them had been killed or taken prisoner in engagement. The news shook us and we realised some of the horrors of war.) I was then re-kitted but I didn't get my posh breeches back. I felt the gods were on my side.

I had to report to my NCO and was immediately put on guard for the next 24 hours – this was on a Saturday. We had been depleted when the draft were getting ready to move off so they had to detail a member of us for guard duty. On the following day, Sunday, I was on guard duty outside the

guardsroom when I saw my father and my eldest sister coming towards the camp. Although I did not mention it, I am sure they came to see me because I had let them know I was to be transferred to the Infantry and my parents feared the worst; knowing my father, I am also sure that he would have faced any eventuality with courage but he was prepared for anything to help the country. The NCO in charge of the guard arranged for me to have a day's pass out of camp and we went into Ripon to the service in the cathedral.

One of the most pleasant memories of Ripon was the church parades on Sunday mornings. We had a choice of services, C of E, RC or non-conformist. Although I was a Primitive Methodist, I always paraded with the C of E for the services at Ripon Cathedral. All the various regiments, infantry and artillery and Scotch regiments had their bands and they all took part in the parade. I knew the C of E service as we used to parade at C of E church with the boy scouts when camping. The morning reveilles sounding round the camp were really quite enjoyable to hear even though we had to get up at 6am. They never actually coincided so that they lasted at least 5 minutes. Similarly, in the evening when last post was sounded for each unit.

Our training at Ripon having been completed, some of us were sent to another training centre at Diss in Norfolk. Most of the men were much older than us 'young uns'. Some had served in France and had been wounded and were classed as unfit for further active service. Others were medically unfit for service. Those of us who were not old enough to go abroad were not at all happy to be with a lot of 'old cracks'. I realise that sounds very unkind and unfair but we were anxious to complete our training (we had not had any firing practice), 'come of age' and go out to France and get on 'with the war'. A group of us were given a stripe and became bombardiers. I suppose that calmed us down a bit. Then one of the officers, a very young one, separated us from the rest and told us we ought to be commissioned. He gave us training in ranging, giving orders and also, when it was wet, giving short lectures to the men; he gave us 5 minutes' warning of the subject to talk about. We enjoyed this, at least I did.

Although the camp was huts, some were in billets and I was lucky as I was billeted with another bombardier of my age and we had a lovely place with a very kind middle-aged lady. She did her very best to make us comfortable and when my colleague was taken ill with very severe flu and the Medical Officer wanted to send him to hospital, she begged the MO to allow him to stay in the billet and she would look after him. The MO agreed. She made up a bed for me on a divan. In addition she wrote to the parents and offered to put up his mother if she wanted to see her son, and she accepted. My friend was very ill and I think the MO was worried that it might lead to pneumonia. However, he recovered fairly quickly and was back on parade.

Whilst at Diss, I was unfortunately court-martialled. I was NCO in charge of the guard and we had a prisoner. He was a deserter and had been detected and arrested. He escaped by the old dodge of going to the latrines during the night escorted by two of the guard and making off into the blackness. As I was in charge, I was held responsible and had to be court-martialled. I was naturally worried and wondered what would happen. I had to state what took place and it then transpired that the man had deserted a number of times. The court decided that no further steps should be taken to find the man and I was reprimanded. I think the man had some domestic problems. I do not know whether my court-martial was recorded on my papers but I did not hear any more about it. I was thankful to get off so lightly.

My next move was to Norwich where I was sent for an NCO's course. As a gunner I had not learnt to ride a horse. In the Field Artillery the training for drivers was quite different from that for gunners. NCOs had to ride and therefore the course included a good deal of riding. This was quite new to me. I don't think I had ever had a donkey ride on the sands!! However, I managed pretty well but had a rather nerve-wracking experience when a horse ran away with me. We used to go on to the heath outside Norwich, Mousehold Heath, for training in gun drill, preparing to go into action and galloping forward with the six horse gun teams to take up positions. Our horses in the stables were saddled by drivers for us (NCOs) to lead out on to the parade ground. Unfortunately, I was the last to get to the stables and there was no horse for me. They had to saddle the Sgt's horse as the only one available. They were very dubious about it as it had a hard mouth and could be difficult, but there was no alternative. When we got on to the heath the officer in charge rode on ahead and when he raised his cap high above his head, we had to gallop forwards. My horse knew the drill better than I did. It saw the cap before I did and immediately set off hell for leather and I couldn't hold it. Away we went past the position and my gun team. All the drivers being experienced, galloped forward and took up the allotted position with the rest of the battery. I managed to control the horse and didn't come off and returned very crestfallen. The Sgt Major who was in charge ordered me to dismount and hand over my horst to a Corporal and I took his and went to the rear of the battery. I didn't get any credit for staying on the horse during its mad gallop and riding it back!! After that I made certain I had a horse with a softer mouth. I thoroughly enjoyed the course, especially as we had some free time in the evenings and were invited to various clubs in the city - YMCA etc - and were taken to the theatre to see various musical comedies.

After the course I and some others who were 'under age' were sent to join a battery in Suffolk, Benacre Park. We were under canvas and a unit of the coast defence system. It was understood that this particular length of coastline was very vulnerable as the seabed sloped away very quickly and vessels could approach the shore with little risk of grounding. Although I was a junior NCO, I was given a job on the battery staff; this was a group who were responsible for the technical side,

ranging etc. Also I was no. 1 in the group, the Major's right-hand man. This meant I was not in a gun team but was an NCO. I had various duties e.g. ticket duty. A good deal of our manoeuvres were done at night so that we could practice taking up certain positions along the coast as quickly as possible. I had my first experience of firing practice with this battery. Ranges for guns were almost solely on Salisbury Plain. Our range was the North Sea. We had to transport the guns by rail to Aldeburgh and we fired from the beach out to sea and during the night. I presume the inhabitants would be given warning and steps would be taken regarding vessels at sea, usually naval. We were supposed to plug our ears but I cannot recollect being armed with plugs or using cotton wool. 18 pounders were noted for the noise they made, a vicious, loud terrific crack. Most of the battery were not liable for overseas service but there were often appeals for men who were available to volunteer to form a draft for France. When these appeals were made, all of us 'under age' immediately stepped forward to the annoyance of the Sgt Major, who angrily ordered us back into the ranks as we knew we wouldn't be allowed to go. The nearest town was Southwold and we were able to get a bus there and if we missed the last one, we walked back to camp. Close to us were some infantry and they had a large marquee in which they had concerts every Sunday evening. Although we were not supposed to go, a few of us NCOs managed to gate-crash sometimes when we were free.

I was unfortunate enough to be in trouble again. I was NCO in charge of the picket on duty all night. The horses were in the open air fastened by ropes to long lines and the pickets were responsible for the camp. The last man on duty 4am – 6am had to waken the bugler to sound reveille promptly at 6am. On this occasion the trumpeter did not sound reveille until after 6am. Our Major noticed the time and promptly ordered the Sgt Major to place the NCO in charge of the picket under arrest. I did not know about it as I was in the picket tent lying down, which I was entitled to do. The SM found me in the tent and told me I was under arrest as reveille was late. He asked me about it. I said I couldn't order the last picket to waken the trumpeter since the orderly Sgt had not given me the instruction to do so the previous evening, which was perfectly true. (Whenever a guard on picket takes over, the NCO in charge must be given full instructions from the orderly Sgt on duty.) The SM was taken aback but I apologised immediately and told him I would not use that in evidence, I would take full responsibility. Later in the day I was brought before the Major and the charge was read – he asked if I had anything to say. I apologised and I said I had omitted to remind the last picket to waken the trumpeter, and took full responsibility. I was admonished. I though afterwards I might have risked being in charge with impertinence. Discipline was quite strict. Our CO, the Major, was a regular officer who served in India and had been badly gassed in France. He was not a martinet, nor was the SM, another regular, but everything had to be done 'just so'. I wasn't rude to the SM and looked literally just like a schoolboy; also, no-one else was around to hear and I think he let it go.

When some of us 'under age' became 'almost of age' we were sent into Shropshire in readiness to join drafts for France. There was more drilling and we were supposed to have firing practice with rifles but the course was cut short and we did not get to the ranges. I fancy there was an urgent call for reinforcements. We were given leave to visit our homes and then put on drafts. Incidentally I 'lost' my stripe. All bombardiers were reduced to the ranks when they went on active service for the first time. This was probably wise as those already having had some experience 'in the line' wouldn't like someone 'raw' as an NCO.

War Service – Overseas

In November 1917 I embarked at Southampton on a troopship for Le Havre. It was packed with men, Infantry, Artillery (Heavy & Field), Engineers, Army Service Corps etc etc - every regiment of the British Army. It was dark when we set off and there was a gale blowing. We were escorted by destroyers which we could see now and again. All lights were obscured and I was collared by some NCO and ordered to go on to the top deck on cigarette patrol. Submarines were about and no-one was allowed to smoke except in the saloons. It was the worst job I had ever had. The ship was rolling and heaving and I was stuck on the top deck watching the waves almost engulf the boat. And there was no one else on the top deck. And was I ill!! But no one relieved me and I kept staggering round as best I could. When we got to Le Havre and the boat was tied up it went up and down with the swell, which was almost as bad as being in the midst of the channel. One gets to the stage of almost not caring what happens. When in the harbour and my cigarette duty done, I went below to one of the saloons and quickly came out. It was full of troops smoking and playing cards (gambling) and the air was thick, it choked me and I was glad to go on deck for some fresh air. However, I did manage to avoid being ordered to join a fatigue squad to clean up the ship before disembarking. We then were marched along, most of us rolling about as if we were still aboard, to the camp and sorted out ready to join our particular units.

I was posted to the 466th Battery, 65th Brigade Royal Artillery. This meant a journey by train and lorry from Le Havre across the north east corner of France to a place southwest of Poperinghe, TocH [Talbot House] in the Ypres salient, some 100 miles. We were in the usual cattle trucks, the floors being covered with a good layer of straw to make us comfortable!! There were no toilets on the train and we had to relieve ourselves by the railway track when the train stopped, which it frequently did.

Our battery was quartered in some barns which had tiers of bunks. There was no village and no civilians; open country. The brigade had been in action in the battle of Ypres and were resting just after Passchendale. I found that we were not attached to any division or corps and were a 'flying

column' sent to any front where additional artillery was needed. This meant that our Sgt had to find rations, ammunition, stoves etc from units in which sector we happened to be. Some were generous e.g. South Africans and New Zealanders. The Canadians were pretty good, but Australians were not liked. Unfortunately, the Aussies were paid much more than the British and they spent money lavishly and prices went up. It did not affect us very much as we were rarely in villages and towns which were inhabited, but we came across British troops who had followed the Aussies into a town or village and they were very bitter at the increase in prices. We were told that there was a minor mutiny in the area; it may not have been true. While we were resting, I had my first and last bath in France. There was a bathing parade. We were sent in groups bare-back on horses to a village some miles away. I felt very sorry for some of the gunners who had never ridden a horse. I was lucky having had an NCO course. It is true that we did not trot, it was merely walk, but that can be uncomfortable. The baths were in a shed which had a series of sprinklers, or showers, and we were able to have a very good rub down for the water being quite hot. For the rest of the time in France we had to manage the best we could and there was little chance of having a good washdown with hot or warm water.

My first experience of being under fire was rather laughable!! Poperinghe was briefly held by the Germans in October 1914 and was recaptured on the 15th October and soon became the venue for the military. There were training camps, depots and hospitals. The station was one of the most important behind the lines. Restaurants and eateries did a roaring trade. There was a continuous stream of traffic of all kinds. This was despite frequent bombardments. I was sent with a fatigue party on a wagon to a depot on the outskirts of Poperinghe to collect some stores. We were near a clump of timber where the workers were all Chinese. Suddenly there was a whine followed by a shriek and all the Chinese labourers disappeared!! We couldn't make it out until we realised they had taken cover in every possible place into which they could squeeze. After an appreciable length of time there was the sound of an explosion in the distance and out came the Chinese. It was one of the shells from the long range guns passing over. We were highly amused. We learned later how true it was that 'you don't hear the shell which hits you', it arrives without warning!!

It was at this place where the battery was 'resting' that I became acquainted with MUD. It has been written about in the many books on the 1914-18 war and there are numerous photographs available, but it has to be experienced to realise fully what it meant to the troops. Although in the winter there was plenty of mud on all fronts, the Ypres sector had more than its fair share. The trenches were frightful and we in the field batteries with horses to look after suffered a good deal. We had troughs some distance from our quarters where we watered the horses. Inevitably the ground for quite an area round the troughs was quickly ploughed up by the horses and became a sea of mud. All the batteries in the brigade used the troughs. Sometimes we were able to ride the

horses but more often we had to lead two horses. The mud was usually at least over our ankles, often well over and in addition, the horses splashed mud much higher. We had no means of drying our clothes etc and we were glad when there was a breeze and some sunshine. The horses were always in the open at the wagon lines and when we were in action the gunners were fortunate enough not to have anything to do with the horses. When out of action we had to help the drivers.

In late November our brigade was ordered to move south of the Cambrai sector some 50 to 60 miles. We had halts on the way as every care was taken not to extend the horses. At one of these we had a very large tent, almost a marquee, for shelter and the fodder for the horses was stored in it. At midnight my Corporal wakened me up (out of a deep sleep which I was enjoying) and told me I had to ride along with an officer to an advanced observation post near the front line and return with the officer's horse. I pleaded that I was not a driver but a gunner and that surely a driver should be detailed. He pointed out that my tunic showed that I had been an NCO before being sent out and therefore I could ride. (Removal of a stripe always showed up.) So I had to go out at 3am along with the officer. I wondered if this was going to be my baptism of fire, it was nasty and wet. There was very little activity and shelling was very intermittent. There was only one incident on the way when we came across some dead horses, which our horses refused to pass and we had to dismount. I led them round the carcasses. This was, as it were, my first introduction to the horrors of war. We reached our destination which was a hut and the officer very kindly got me a mug of hot coffee and I set off to return leading the officer's horse. I was anxious to get back before it was light, otherwise I might have been a suitable target. Fortunately things were quiet and I was safely back about 9am. I was a little sore with riding but that was not the end. The battery had been ordered to move off. The men had finished breakfast and they had forgotten my ration. I had to scrounge some food, mount the horse and ride off with the battery. It was now pouring with rain and I was far from happy and did not relish the rest of the day in the saddle. The journey from west of Poperinghe to the Cambrai sector was well behind the front line through the inhabited French countryside and we managed to have a few drinks in various establishments on the way, which were very welcome. We felt we were back to civilisation again!! If only for a short time. The French were very friendly.

We arrived in the Cambrian salient [battlefield which projects into enemy territory] towards the end of the great tank battle, the biggest in history. Cavalry were also in action. Our brigade did not go into action but came under fire from artillery through the foolishness of some American soldiers. A few hundred yards away from us there was a dummy tank on the brow of the rise in the ground. It was undulating country. Three of the Americans wanted to have a look at the dummy tank. We warned them that they would draw the enemy's fire but they persisted. Sure enough, the shelling started and one of them was very seriously injured in the chest. We had no places where we could shelter, it was open country, except behind a large camouflaged dump of shells for the artillery!!

And we crouched down. Fortunately the shelling was concentrated on the dummy tank. When it eased up and ceased two of our men dashed up with a stretcher and brought the injured man back and his comrades took him to the nearest advanced casualty station. It was doubtful if he would live as his chest was ripped open. His wound was bandaged as best we could. Naturally we were not only upset, especially those of us who had not been in action before, but also very annoyed as we had done our best to dissuade them from going anywhere near the dummy tank. It was a gruesome warning to avoid taking any unnecessary risks.

Our brigade was then given positions to take up behind the front line of trenches, and that meant I should have my first real experience of warfare as applied to field artillery. It so happened that our gun detachment, gunners and drivers, were short of a driver and I had to take his place in the 6 horse gun team which I had never done before. My Corporal knew of course I could ride and as a former NCO should know the drill. There were 3 pairs of horses and I had the middle pair which was the easiest, but the middle driver had to be the most careful to keep his two horses the correct distance from the front pair (lead) and the pair behind (wheel). The traces had to be kept taut. Once they became slack and a horse stepped over out of the traces there would be chaos; drivers could be thrown off, horses could be brought down and maybe the gun limber would be overturned, and the gun. The battery position was in open country away from roads, and there were numerous shell holes. We had to go up in daylight and when we were approaching the front line everything must be done as quickly as possible in case we were observed and became a target for shelling by the German artillery. The lead driver and the wheel driver were both experienced and they helped to give me confidence, which I sadly needed. I cannot really say I was frightened as I had not worked out all the possibilities I have just listed. I knew the drill, now I had to carry it out for the first time, and also the real thing!! Fortunately, the front was quiet after the battle of Cambrai and the British had lost most of the ground they had so easily gained. We cantered to our position, unlimbered the guns, unloaded the ammunition etc and cantered off and returned to the wagon lines. The following day I went with the wagons taking up supplies and found the gun team.

Our battery's position was not far from the Hindenburg line, four to five miles. It has to be remembered that the Hindenburg line was broken for a few miles but the British were driven back and by 6th December our position was about 2½ miles (14km) from the German front line of trenches. In between was the village of Gouzeaucourt in 'no man's land' and which we covered. Thus we were between the British front line and the first reserve line infantry, some hundred yards behind us in a sunken road. It was open country undulating and we were just below a slight rise on the west side, so that our site could not be seen at 'ground level' by the enemy, but could of course, be spotted from an observation balloon or a plane. We had to take every precaution to avoid attracting attention. If a torch was used carelessly there would be a salvo of artillery fire. We had to

dig dugouts close to the guns so that we could be ready for action at any time. We were supposed to sleep in our uniforms but we sometimes risked taking some off. The entrance had a blanket in front so that we were able to have a candle for 'lighting' the dugout. There were usually two or three in each dugout, a trench with a pole on supports along the length and a canvas surround on each side of the gun so the risk of the complete gun crew being knocked out by a shell was reduced. We had to make our own latrines, the officers had a separate one. There were usually four or five gunners and a sergeant in charge. My first impression was 'is there a war?' All was so quiet. The winter had commenced, snow was on the ground and it was dark and eerie. We seemed to be talking in whispers. Then suddenly there would be the rattle of machine gun fire or a 'firework display' of Very lights [flare gun] or the whine of a shell passing over. Sometimes a lone shell would explode too near us to be pleasant. There were numerous shell holes around us, full or nearly full of water or mud; most unpleasant to step into in the dark and sink up to one's knees. Most of the men in the battery were 'conscripts', although we did not like that term!! We were willing. Our battery commander Major McDonald was a regular, and some of the NCOs too. The rest of the officers were 'civilians' although few were Territorials. Our Major was a wonderful man, small and wiry, most capable and as I shall show later, held our battery together and inspired us with confidence.

The gun crew I was in had been in action before. My Sergeant was a Canadian farmer who came over and enlisted in the British army. He was a most likeable man, always efficient and most helpful. We all worked together and there was no question of rigid discipline. The cook had to do the best he could. Not far away in a gulley were some trees and he would manage to make a fire in a trench - making sure it could not be seen at night - so that he could boil water in dixies or make stews etc. Whenever we could we had tins of café au lait from NAAFI. We sometimes had boiled rice and if we were lucky there would be some raisins thrown in. There was the 'ever present' bully [corned beef] and hard biscuits; we sometimes experimented with them to make something like bread pudding by softening them. We had parcels of food etc sent out by our families which were very welcome, and we always shared our parcels of food. Sometimes the parcels contained clothing, socks etc and I had a lovely sleeping bag, waterproof, sent to me. Our rations were brought up on GS wagons, including water in cans. We had no field kitchens like the infantry. As we were nowhere near any NAAFI canteens, we arranged with our drivers and gunners at the wagon lines to buy us slab cake etc and we reimbursed them. Although the army personnel are normally thought of as 'scroungers' I must say that so far as we could judge, none of our parcels went astray or were tampered with; food rations and food parcels for men in the line were sacrosanct, and mustn't be scrounged under any circumstances. Our gun site was not far from the main road from Poperinghe to Cambrai and it passed through to Perrone. It was used a good deal by transport and was subject to intermittent shelling during the comparatively quiet period of the winter of 1917 – 1918.

Our first job was to check our position with regard to a firing point so that we could adjust our range direction. The only means of communication were with runners who kept in touch with our brigade HQ which was in a gully some 100 – 200 yards behind us, and signallers who had to lay cables from the battery to our observation post in the front line. There was always an officer in the DP and two signallers. The signallers were responsible for maintaining connection and if, during shellfire, a cable was broken, they had to repair it as quickly as possible. We had two signallers in a pit or dugout at the battery and an officer who was responsible for passing on messages etc to the battery commander, who was the Major. The two signallers at the gun site were a strange pair. One was a solicitor and the other a solicitor's clerk. In those days a solicitor's clerk tended to be looked down on by a full blown solicitor. They were not known to each other and it was pure chance, or the war, which brought them together. They were not robust and it was rather pathetic to see the solicitor, who was always in charge, and the bespectacled clerk standing in the muddy bottom of the signal pit carrying on taking messages from the OP and sending messages back. (The solicitor often had business letters sent out to him by post.)

As soon as the OP in the front line was connected with the battery, we had to do some firing and ranging so that we could cover an area which included the village of Gouzeaucourt, which could give cover to German infantry. The officer in the OP would tell the signaller over the 'phone the range and direction in which we had to fire. The order to fire would then be given by word of mouth and the officer in the OP would watch for the burst of the shell. He would change the range and direction as required. This could be repeated until the officer was satisfied that the batter could open fire on targets as quickly as possible. Only one gun was necessary for ranging and then the battery would send over a salvo more. This operation may seem rather primitive but was surprisingly accurate if the officer at OP was efficient and the gunmen were speedy with their drill. This was my first experience of action at the front and it deafened me.

18 pounders had a vicious piercing crack. We were called out to man the guns when some movement was observed in the enemy lines. On those occasions there was sometimes a return of shelling by German batteries, but sometimes one gun was ordered to stand to stand to at dawn and fire a few rounds, the target being the outskirts of Gouzeaucourt. It was reported that apparently the officers on duty at the OP were having 'pot shots' at odd Germans moving about and were keeping a tally of their 'individual scores'. This was obviously ridiculous and was quickly stopped by some offer in authority. We, that is the gunners manning the guns, were told about it by the signallers and we were very annoyed. It was a waste of arms and also we were aggrieved at being called out from our dugouts into the bitter cold; there was quite a depth of snow and all the metal we had to touch, guns, ammo, spades etc were pretty cold. We had plenty to do during this quiet period with fatigues of various kinds. On Christmas day 1917 the gunners thought we should have

some time off!! When we had completed fatigues etc by midday and there appeared to be more in the afternoon, we appealed to our Sergeants that we might have a 'rest' and it was granted. Of course, we couldn't go anywhere or do anything but have a 'kip' in our dugouts.

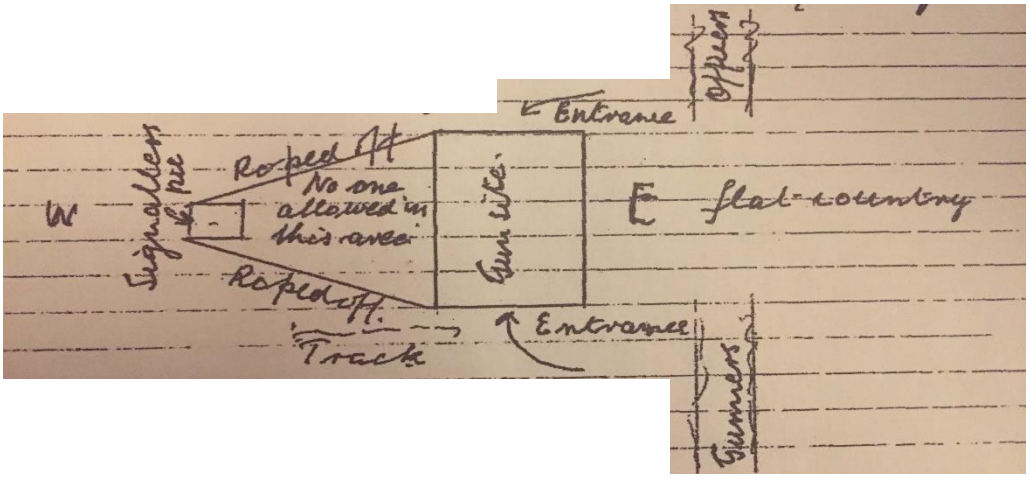
I had an unfortunate experience which shook me. A runner was required to report to our Brigade HQ. The Senior Sgt detailed me to report to HQ as quickly as possible. It was early evening, thick fog and deep snow. I was given the direction to go and was told it was only a few hundred yards and it was in a gully sheltered by trees. I packed my kit, including blankets, expressed my disgust and annoyance to my pals, including my Sgt, and set off. There was nothing to guide me as the fog was dense. I could not walk very fast as the snow was thick and I had all my kit. It was deadly quiet and I could hardly see where I was walking and stumbled a good deal over the rough ground. After a time, I realised I was lost and had no idea where I was. I had to keep on walking in the hope of finding something. I came to a gully and walked along it and suddenly saw a twinkling of light to one side. I found a dugout in which were some signallers and asked if they knew of our Bde HQ. They didn't but they said if I continued walking in the direction I was walking, I would soon be in the front line!! They advised me to retrace my steps and keep in the gully and I should find the first reserve line of infantry. I did this and duly heard voices and was greatly relieved. No-one knew where our HQ was and as it was now between 9 and 10pm, they advised me to wait til morning. The infantry was in corrugated war shelters and they made room for me to lie down in my blankets and go to sleep!! Which I did. At 6am the following morning the infantry were roused. An NCO came round and I was still 'between the blankets'; he asked an infantryman who I was and was told an artilleryman who had lost his way!! The NCO told them to fetch me some breakfast; lovely hot porridge, bacon, fried bread and tea!! The best breakfast I'd had for months. I packed my kit and found Bde HQ a little further along the gully. I reported there and learned that another gunner had been detailed and I had to return to my battery. I was delighted but hope I didn't show it. I reported back to the Senior Sgt, who was a regular, and he refused to accept my explanation and said I had 'got lost' deliberately to avoid taking over as a runner. I think he must have guessed I didn't want to leave the battery. He didn't bring a charge against me and couldn't punish me, only an officer could do that. My own Sgt was glad to have me back!! I was relieved that no action was taken but I fancy my own Officer would have accepted my explanation in view of the awful conditions, very dense fog etc.

Our Battery Commander (Major – a regular) went on leave Dec/Jan and the second in command (Captain – not a regular) took over. The second in command was in charge at the wagon lines and only took over at the gun site if the Major was on leave or became a casualty. Our battery was ordered to move further west. To our amazement the Captain chose, or was ordered, to take up a position on a slight slope facing the front line. Our previous site was a slight slope towards the west,

so that we had a certain amount of cover which helped to hide our gun flashes. We were horrified, and when the Major returned from leave he was furious. He immediately set us to work to make our position 'invisible' to the German observers.

Our living conditions were much more comfortable, which was a boon. Quite close to our site was a ravine, not very deep, but sufficient to give us cover, especially as there were small trees in which were bunks with spring mattresses. They had evidently been used by infantry in reserve. It was a luxury compared with dugouts in 'mother earth'!!

We had already completely covered the gun site with camouflage netting but when the stores, ammo etc were brought in, wagons and gun limbers (for ammo) from the wagon lines, a track was made which stopped by the gun site. From the air this looked as though there was something by the track, maybe a gun site, or a dump. The wagons and limbers with ammo came up during the night and usually were on the way back to the wagon lines before dawn.




The Major had us on 'parade' every morning just before dawn, four abreast, marching backwards and forwards so as to continue the track so that it gradually faded away. The ground was hard and we had to continue the treatment until the Major was assured by the RFC that observers from the air could not identify the site even though they knew the exact position on their maps. Whether this was completely effective was not possible to ascertain but the fact is, we were not shelled before the 21st March, although we did a good deal of firing. During this period the Germans were preparing for their offensive and were obtaining information regarding locations of infantry, artillery (both field and heavy), reserve lines etc etc. Our targets were of ammunition dumps, movements of troops behind the front line, reserve lines etc. Our shelling was at night.

We had issues of rum, 'fire water', at night and it was very strictly controlled. I happened to be a teetotaller, having been brought up in the Primitive Methodist tradition, and I always declined it. My Sgt never tried to persuade me and my ration was shared among our gun team. He did, however, tell me that I should take it and the time would come when I would be glad of it and that did happen!! I did have a 'taste' of it during our night firing in bitterly cold weather. We were able to have a small fire, well concealed from the enemy in our gun pit and we made hot café au lait. Our Sgt put some rum in it and asked me to have a drink which I did and I continued, needless to say. I didn't feel I had broken my pledge. Our Senior Sgt with the guns, a regular, had charge of the rum and on occasion helped himself and had too much. The rum was very potent but he was always able to stand up 'stiff as a ram rod' when addressing an Officer. It always amazed me on the few times when it occurred.

I had two unfortunate experiences during the comparatively quiet period in the spring of 1918. To reduce the risk of our position being spotted, there was always a man on duty in the daytime with binoculars looking out for enemy planes. They were usually very high but you could sometimes hear their drone. If one was spotted, the man on duty blew his whistle and all movement must cease until the 'all clear' was given when the duty man blew the whistle again. The Major was clearly very strict about this. I was on duty one day when our gun team were due to take over. It was a glorious day. By midday when 'lunch' was served and everyone, except myself, was under cover, the sunshine was delightful and I sat down against a hump on the ground. I directed my binoculars to the sky. It was easier in that position, but unfortunately I dozed off!! An Officer wakened me, no-one else was about and I was close to the signallers' pit. I was petrified – asleep at my post!! The Officer lectured me and emphasised the seriousness of the 'crime'; court-martial, punishment in the ultimate, a firing squad. I did not offer any excuse, no excuse could be advanced when my duty was to protect our battery. The Officer did not report me but told me I must take off my great-coat, which was nice and warm, and must not put it on again before my turn on duty had been completed. Although it was a beautiful day, it was quite cold in the air. Later, the sun was obscured by heavy clouds and we had a snow storm. Retribution!! The Officer was one of our best Junior Officers. A Liverpool Irishman, a policeman in civil life, who always 'mucked in' with the gunners, digging trenches, helping with tasks, and if our limbers were stuck in the mud he would 'put his shoulder to the wheel'; he was very well built. I thanked my lucky stars that he had found me and not another of our Officers.

The other unfortunate experience was when I had to take a message to the signallers' pit during our midday break. No-one was about except the man on 'spotter' duty and I foolishly nipped across the roped off area and delivered the message. An Officer happened to notice me. He didn't send for me but later in the day my Sgt told me that the Officer had seen me and I was to hump ammo from the

dump to the gun site for 1 hour each evening for a week. My Sgt was furious with the Officer although he couldn't say so, because the Officer didn't tell me himself, and strictly speaking, he could not give me a punishment unless the correct procedure was followed. The Sgt told me to leave it to him and he would tell me when to do it. He conveniently forgot!! The Officer was not liked. He was in a Territorial Battery before the war, I think a Yeomanry unit. He had his own horse, a lovely black one, very well trained. He could get it to lie down and he could fire a rifle or revolver leaning over the back of the horse.

Preparation for the 'possible retirement'

Although the history books and so-called records state that there was no sure information that an attack was imminent and that neither the Third nor the Fifth Army sent out the specific warning order, for some weeks before the 21st March our Major was making elaborate and detailed plans for a 'possible retirement'. Martin Middlebrook in his book 'The Kaiser's Battle' points out that "the artillery was the most important of the various arms supporting the British infantry, and many gunners had been in action. The most forward artillerymen were the gunners manning the 18-pounder guns posted for anti-tank purposes in the Forward Zone. Officers and signallers were in observation posts near the British front line".

Our Major decided to have a sap dug, not too close to our gun site. Many of our drivers, short men, were Welsh miners and he brought them up from the wagons to dig the sap. A Corporal, an experienced miner, was put in charge and he directed operations. The gunners and all the officers with the guns helped in filling sandbags etc and carrying the bags and dumping the soil out of sight of the Germans. The Major managed to get all the timber necessary for supporting the sides. Two saps were dug and they were connected below ground and a chamber was dug and all the battery documents were put there. It was a wonderful job and was meant of course for a 'funk' hole in case of very heavy bombardment. It was completed a few days before 21st March and was never used!! Wasted effort? I don't think so. With hindsight I have often thought that it was a wise decision to dig the saps so that we were kept busy doing something which could be quite useful.

As 21st March approached, we became more and more aware that there was every possibility of a massive attack and possible retirement. Our signallers passed on information to us and we also knew some of our targets when we did our night firing. Our Major gave us a warning that we may have to retire and also instructions, or should I say orders. Officers at the gun site had to send their kit back to the wagon lines and whatever they required in the line they must carry themselves and NOT load it on to their servants!! Also, the officers would not be allowed to have their horses, all of us would walk as we should, mostly likely, require the stamina of the horses to pull us through. He, the Major, would be walking at the rear of the battery. It should be remembered of course that

when it was necessary to trot or canter, the order would be given for the gunners and the officers to mount and ride on the gun limbers and ammunition limbers. Some wags suggested we might be issued with swimming costumes!! There was no fuss or sign of alarm or panic. We just accepted it as part of our job and we had a good deal of confidence in the CO. I had formed a friendship with the CO's servant who told me that the Major had a very good knowledge of the terrain, having been through the battles of the Somme.

Our 65th Bde was on the left flank of the Fifth Army and we did not have as heavy a bombardment as those on our right. But it was a terrifying experience to see the flashes from the several thousand guns and mortars that opened fire in the early morning, 4.40am 21st March. The noise was deafening. It was later on after the initial bombardment and when the fog was much thinner that we were called into action. Our Observation Officer observed a column of infantry advancing along the main road from Gouzeaucourt. It was almost as if they were going on a route march. We had to train our guns round to the right as far as possible and open fire. He quickly got us on target and signalled us back but we had broken up the column and caused many casualties. It was our first real action and needless to say we were delighted. After a winter of comparative inaction, desultory firing, stand-to, fatigues etc we had at last done something, we hoped, towards ending the war. There had been some gas shells in our area but no real sign of an attack. We realised that there must be some heavy fighting on our right and we naturally wondered when we should be ordered to retire.

This came the following morning and we moved off at walking pace after dawn, almost as if the war had finished. It was not long before we came across disorderly groups of infantry, some of them not knowing what was happening. We, that is the gunners, did not know exactly what was taking place but realised that the troops on the right were being driven back. Then some men on horses galloped past us yelling and shouting that Jerry was not far away. A little further on we came across a battery of heavy artillery and a Junior Officer, a first or second Lieutenant, came across to our Major and asked for his help. One of the drivers of a caterpillar refused to tow out one of the heavy guns. Without any hesitation the Major took out his revolver, went over to the driver and ordered him back on to his caterpillar at the point of his revolver. The man obeyed and drove off towing the gun!! Our battery continued at walking pace and at some open country we halted and prepared for action. I presume some order had been received by the CO.

On our left was a small wood and we cut down brushwood to use as camouflage on the guns. We unloaded our ammo from the limbers and waited for our range. Suddenly, observation balloons went up and enemy shelling commenced. We were ordered to retire, which we did, the horses with limbers were standing by and we galloped off, leaving all the ammo, kit etc. Fortunately, our CO must have realised that the shelling was a directed barrage and would lift. He directed us to a quarry

where we sheltered until the barrage lifted and we saw the shelling of a bridge over the Canal du Nord. The area was crowded with troops waiting to cross over the bridge. It was a ghastly sight and there was chaos. We were thankful our CO had saved us. He went to the top of the quarry, surveyed the area and then ordered us to mount the limbers and gallop back and 'rescue' the ammo. He led the way on the first limber. This we did but we had no time to rescue our kit, it had to be left. I left behind my sleeping bag which was a great loss – however, we were safe. By the time we had reached the quarry, the barrage had lifted again and we crossed the canal safely. Fortunately the bridge was not damaged but it was heart-breaking to see the carnage, guns, wagons, soldiers.

During the next few days we took up various positions and were given target and opened fire. We usually stayed in a position at night and slept as best we could under the guns, and it was very cold. Our CO was always anxious for the welfare and safety of his men. Whenever we were likely to stay in a position for a little time, we had to dig 'funk' holes, two for each gun, a little to the rear and the side. They had to be deep enough for us to crouch in if we were shelled. The Senior Sgt had to inspect them to make sure they were deep enough. When he was satisfied, we were allowed to have food!! The Quarter Master Sgt must have had an awful time. He had to supply us with ammo and food, which meant finding the depots behind the lines and then returning to the battery. Our CO was conversant with the terrain which must have been a tremendous help. At nights when we tried to get some rest, the CO of our brigade used to come over to our battery to discuss the situation with our Major. They would walk up and down in front of our guns and we could often hear snatches of conversation from which we could surmise what might happen. One of the first things we learned was that our Major agreed with, or told the Col. that our battery would always bring up the rear when the brigade had to retire. We had to continue firing until the other batteries had retired – not altogether a healthy prospect. I don't think we looked upon it as an honour to cover their retreat!!

Incidentally we never saw the other batteries (by a strange coincidence, when we were in Cambrai in November 1977 for the commemoration of the Battle of Cambrai in November 1917, I came across a gunner who was in the 465 Battery. He was wounded in the battle and so did not take part in the retirement of 1918). Some of the roads were jammed with traffic and soldiers and our progress was slow. On occasions we were strafed from low-flying planes and we had to take cover, if possible by the roadside. Our Major, knowing the area, managed to avoid roads as much as possible. Once, when we were firing, the breech block of our guns jammed and the CO sent us off to find an ordinance depot to put it right and told us to be back next morning!! Off we went; spent a night in the open, no troops anywhere near us and only desultory firing. It was freezing cold and we managed to be back in the line having got a new breech block (in some instances men, both infantry

and artillery personnel, 'disappeared' under in similar circumstances). The Major was pleased to see us!! We lost count of the days as the retirement continued and we naturally became tired. My legs gave me some trouble due to sores developing and I tended to drop behind and was walking along with CO. He finally told me to ride on one of the limbers, he didn't want me to be left behind, and I was thankful.

Our QM Sgt kept us supplied with ammo and we were in action every day. On one occasion it was rather misty and there appeared to be the sound of gas shells exploding. Someone shouted "gas!" and we stopped firing to put on our gas masks, but it was a false alarm and our CO dashed up and across the line of guns, firing his revolver into the air and yelling at us to get on with the firing, Usually our ranges were 1000 to 2000 yards, sometimes dropping a little lower. We never knew exactly what was happening but we assumed our ranges were such that we were not shelling our own troops. The time came when the ranges dropped lower and lower and we were given the order "open sights rapid fire" and we knew the Germans were in sight and we also realised that as usual we would be the last battery to retire. I do not think we thought of anything but keeping up our rapid fire until the order shouted along the line came to cease fire and limber up, and we galloped off on order. And we had no casualties for which we were most thankful.

We seemed to be in action almost every day. Then when we had prepared for action and were waiting for orders, sheltered in a copse, the infantry began to filter through and we were forced to retire. Our last action was when we were in sight of Albert and saw on our left the Golden Virgin of Albert on the tower of the basilica. The statue was hanging at right angles to the tower; the church had been badly damaged. During this last action we suffered our first and only casualty. There was a direct hit on one of our guns and it was put out of action. Fortunately the gun crew were only wounded as the shell hit the foot of the shield at the front of the gun. I think we were the only battery in the brigade which had come through with so little loss, largely due to our CO. And at this last sight during our retirement we heard the church bells ringing; it was Easter weekend!!

For some days towards the end of the retirement we had come across civilians who were working on their farms. At one farm the French workers came towards us with forks calling us 'cochons' (pigs). They may have been frightened that we would do some looting, as happened frequently. When the retiring troops came across villages which had been deserted before the retirement or during the retirement, buildings could be searched for food or drink and also for arms and ammo etc. Inevitably some soldiers, especially those separated from their units, would find a wine cellar in the big houses and would help themselves. We were told of one case when the officers had to order soldiers out of houses and then make sure that all the drink was emptied into the gutters. Some of our battery found some Moet & Chandon and we had a drink, my first taste of champagne, but there was no question of overdoing it. We had to keep on the move. On one occasion a lone sheep was

found and captured. We had a butcher among the gunners and he got permission to slaughter it, skin it and cut it up. I am sure most people would agree that it was the best thing to do in the circumstances. We enjoyed the extra meat!!

Although we, as gunners in a battery, did not know that the retirement had finished, we were glad when we learnt that we were to have a rest behind the lines. We had no break from being always on the alert for action since the whole of the Battle of Cambrai on December 19th – four months. No chance of a bath, only a rub down, not supposed to take all of our clothes off; sometimes no chance to wash or shave. Our Major led us into a village badly damaged by shell fire and no civilians in it. We paraded in front of him and he inspected us. We must have looked a ragged lot – unshaven beards, uniforms ragged, boots worn out etc etc. The CO sent for the QM Sgt and we heard him say that he was not going to take his battery through inhabited French villages looking as we did. The QM Sgt was told all of us must have a complete new set of kit at once. He, the AM Sgt, was staggered, shouted something like "how?" but he set out and had us kitted out the following day. Needless to say, we were troubled by lice which was almost impossible to control under such conditions. I imagine that all the clothing we discarded was consigned to the incinerator.

During the retirement we were often disheartened by the number of fires we saw destroying stores, equipment, canteens and ammo dumps to avoid them falling into enemy hands; all very necessary. We were thankful to have a roof over our heads even though it may have a few holes in it; the first time since leaving the Ypres front. Our 'rest' in the village turned out to be very brief. Within a few days we were ordered to move off to the north, as we found afterwards. We had a day's notice which mean 'be ready to go by tomorrow morning'. A rumour went round during the night and next morning that the order had been cancelled. Many of the drivers and gunners did not trouble to be fully prepared to have everything ready, e.g. drivers must have food in the nosebags for the horses and the nosebags must be securely fixed to the saddles; gunners had to have their blankets ready to fix on the limbers, and so on. In the meantime, there was no official announcement that the move had been cancelled and we paraded as ordered. The CO then began a detailed inspection of all our 'billets', empty houses, accompanied by the Sgt and AM Sgt. He found blankets, parts of harness, food etc left there. He then returned to the field where we paraded and gave the order to 'walk march'; the gunners were ordered to standfast and not mount the limbers. The battery moved round in a big circle with the officers in the middle and the Sgts watching if anything dropped off!! A number of things did drop off and the CO ordered "trot, canter" and finally "gallop"!! One can imagine what happened. We, as gunners, laughed inwardly although we felt sorry for the drivers. The CO then inspected the guns, harness etc etc. In some nosebags were men's rations but nothing for the horses. All those who had failed to obey the order to be ready to move off, whether the billets or the parade ground, were given fatigues of one kind or another. The CO harangued us all

and told us that although we had had a rough time, we must obey orders and be ready to be on the alert under all circumstances. I mention this, shall we say 'episode', to emphasise what a first-class soldier and lead our CO was. Many would suggest it was rather hard and a bit unfair, but looking back it was of vital importance. Discipline must be maintained. I was promoted to bombardier, one stripe.

After a few days we moved off to Arras and Vimy Ridge. It was a welcome change to pass through pleasant countryside and inhabited villages with little sign of a war except the rumble of guns, artillery away to the east. We also had an opportunity of having a drink and some food in eateries on our route. We were always well received and I managed quite well with the French I learnt at school. I had taken it in the matriculation exam and our senior French master had always insisted on the 'importance of oral French'. The Canadians held the ridge and resisted the German attack in March 1918. We were attached to the Canadian corps and they gave us marvellous rations!! We did not know why we had been ordered to the Arras sector although we guessed we were to strengthen the artillery. We learned later that the Germans were making a final effort to reach Amiens. We were soon in action. A number of gas shells were coming over but as the Germans were hoping to break through out front, they could not risk making a gas attack. The sound of a gas shell was quite distinctive, really a 'plop' without any loud explosion. It was during this period (11th April) that we received Earl Haig's desperate 'backs to the wall' appeal but it wasn't until the 30th April according to official records that the German offensive was halted.

We were then sent further north to Vimy Ridge. Our battery was ordered to send a gun with gun team to a forward position on the plain stretching eastwards of the Ridge, and my gun team was chosen. We presumed that the rest of the battery was, as it were, in reserve, having a rest. It was comparatively quiet. We got our guns into a German gun implacement constructed of concrete with a deep sap by the side for cover. It was all very comfortable but when we fired it was deafening. The reverberation was awful and we could hardly hear ourselves. We had to shell various targets at night. We dared not move about much during the day and all our ammo and stores were brought up at night. The drivers who drove the wagons were always in a desperate hurry to get back on to the Ridge for safety before dawn!! We didn't blame them but we were rather amused; we had to stay with the gun. The whole area was pitted with shell holes and was quite desolate, having been fought over a number of times. It was gruesome and smelt of death. When dawn was breaking we sometimes watched our planes flying low over the enemy trenches and the airmen hurtling bombs into the trenches. It tended to be somewhat boring having little to do during the day and not being able to move about and we sometimes entertained ourselves by having rides on a small gauge railway line quite close to the gun site. We found a truck and pushed it to the top of an incline, jumped in and rode down until it stopped. We had to be very careful not to make too much noise

and we could do this only in the twilight or when it was misty. It may have been silly and childish, but it relieved the monotony to some extent.

Our next move was south, during which we had some periods of rest which usually included some fatigues. For a little time we were attached to the Guards Division, all spit and polish!! Although it didn't affect us directly, steel helmets had to be burnished!! Goodness knows why as they reflected light and sunshine. Unfortunately the order was very quickly cancelled. A large sign was erected on many roads stating 'all steel helmets must be worn beyond this point'. That was probably a necessary warning, although we had never seen it before in other parts of the line.

As a junior NCO, I often had to take charge of some duties which would come under the heading of 'fatigues', usually not in the danger zone. One was dangerous – I had to take a squad towards the front line to dig a long trench some 4ft deep in which a cable had to be laid for communication purposes, possibly. The bottom of the trench need not be very wide but the difficulty was to judge the width at the top. Each man had an allotted length and the sooner the job was finished, the quicker we should be able to get back to the battery. The majority of the squad finished in a reasonable time and fortunately helped the less expert, but it was rather a race against time and there was a certain amount of tension; to our relief there was very little shelling. On another occasion, I took a party with GS wagons to a forward area where there were some fields of clover. We were supplied with scythes and had to cut as much as possible. It was jolly good fodder for the horses. We were interrupted a few times by shelling from long range guns and one shell getting a direct hit on the base of a very large, tall tree. The whole of the tree was totally lifted up by the explosion and fell some distance away in the middle of a field.

Although we had been subject to heavy shelling, to see that happening really shook us. One Major used to give the gunners talks about fuses and the development of new fuses. One of these was a new fuse which was very sensitive. It would cause a shell to explode and scatter shrapnel merely by touching a wire. The fuse was covered with a black metal cap which had to be removed before the shell was loaded into the breech. They were used to cut barbed wire entanglements. To begin with we were in dread of one being accidentally exploded in the gun pit. Many of these shells with the special fuses were fired without removing the black cap and they did not explode and the shell simply penetrated into the earth. The other fuse we had to set according to order; some would be set to explode in the air, others to explode on reaching the target. Our CO used to keep us in practice with fuse setting as often as he could when we were not in the line. The correct setting of a fuse was most important and had to be done quickly, and the CO kept us busy by calling out the range etc and we had to work out the setting.

When we were out of the line there was always a good deal of gambling, and I assume the drivers at the wagon lines would indulge in it. Pontoon was one of the favourites, also Crown & Anchor. There was very little of it at the gun site as we had our own gun pits and dugouts near the guns. It worried the CO as many of the men had wives and families and he feared that too many of them were losing too much money. We always had a 'pay day' but we need not take all of it if we wished. It could be 'kept' for us. The CO decided that he would 'cut' our pay so that there was less money in circulation, but I don't think it made much difference as the gamblers had a system if IOUs. They would gamble into the early hours. The gunners rarely took part – we were 'lookers on' and when we were in the line we had to be ready for anything. Whether the CO exceeded his powers I do not know, but in any case, he would always arrange for anyone to have money if he wished, for any particular reason.

The brigade finally arrived in the Cambrai sector to join the artillery needed for the offensive on the Hindenburg line. We occupied various positions and then we went forward behind our front line in readiness to open fire along with other artillery. It was some days before the barrage began and we were all tensed up. We were not in the open but managed to get some cover as there was a very small quarry on the hillside and we were able to rig up a tarpaulin under which we slept.

Our Major decided that he would be in the observation post with the signallers and another officer when the attack was due to start. He also insisted that he would go over the top with the infantry and some signallers who had to keep the line to the battery working while the hoped-for advance was taking place. Although the officers tried to dissuade him as strictly speaking it was the job of a junior officer, the Major should be with the guns. However, he did go over the top and came through. We were very relieved.

When the first barrage opened there was a terrific noise and we were literally in the midst of flashes from guns on our right and left, and also from behind. It was quite different from the German shelling on the 21st of March. Shells were whizzing over us and we could almost feel them rushing through the air, and the noise was shattering. It was not very long before we had our first casualty, most saddening, from our own artillery!! A shell from a battery behind us exploded in our rear and killed one gunman and wounded another. The wounded man was seriously hurt, having been torn open in the abdomen. The best we could do was to keep him doubled up and padded with cotton wool and bandages. We had been apprehensive when we saw how closely the artillery were placed and we wondered whether that might happen. The Senior Sgt suggested we should bury the dead man near the battery but we protested and were allowed to put the body on a stretcher and also the wounded man on a stretcher and take them to the nearest CCS. We should then know that the relatives would be informed. As an NCO, I was detailed to take charge and we had to get back to the battery as quickly as possible. We estimated that we should have time before the battery moved forward as the incident occurred before the first barrage had lifted.

A little distance away from us we found an American first aid post. We had no idea there was one so close to us and we were pleased as we wanted the wounded gunman to have some attention, but to our utter disgust and dismay, the Americans were still on their camp beds and had no hot water and were not prepared and ready to treat wounded men. The air was 'blue' and can one wonder!! So we pressed on and arrived at the CCS to find the whole area covered with wounded soldiers brought in from the front line – the first infantry casualties. It was a distressing sight as there it was impossible to have sufficient doctors and orderlies to deal with each casualty as he was brought in. Some who were seriously wounded were screaming for help and they were attended to first, usually with injections to ease the pain. Although I had seen many dead bodies and wounded men, it was my first experience of a CCS not far from the line. It made me realise the horrors of war and one felt quite helpless seeing so many needing urgent medical attention, but we had to get back to our battery and I was responsible. It was not unknown for soldiers in similar positions to disappear!!

The attack was successful and as one writer has put it, 'most astonishing'!! The advance during that first day was measured in miles. Our battery went forward and we were able to see the effects of our sequence of barrages. We had to make our way as best we could through rows of German soldiers killed or badly wounded, shell holes, trenches etc. It was a sickening sight but we had to keep going and overcome our feelings. Prisoners were being lined up and marched away to the rear, escorted by our NCO and a few men. When they were halted we saw some of our soldiers searching them quickly and pocketing iron brasses and gold watches. We didn't think they were in the escort but soldiers who had managed to get separated from their units, possibly purposely!! The prisoners were mainly downcast and dejected and many seemed dazed and bewildered. A few officers put on a show of resignation at their fate and did their best to bear themselves with a certain amount of dignity. They were far from arrogant. We advanced steadily and as we were usually not far behind the front line of infantry, we saw something of the casualties of the enemy and the devastating effect of our artillery fire; more and more prisoners being escorted to the rear, saps and dugouts where Germans were seeking cover, blown up with Mills bombs [hand grenades] by the infantry. In places the stench was nauseating.

We stayed in one position in flat, open country and managed to fix up a tarpaulin over an old dugout to get some shelter. I was walking from our guns to the dugout when I found a big burly Australian solder pulling at our tarpaulin. I pointed out to him that it was our dugout and we were with our guns, a short distance away. He took no notice but fortunately our Sgt came along and very forcibly told the man he would fell him if he didn't drop the tarpaulin and clear off. Our Sgt was very hefty and I was slim. The Aussie let go, muttered something about coming back with more Aussies, and the Sgt told him he could bring a battalion but he wouldn't get it. I mention this because the troops had a kind of code of conduct. Scrounging often took place but not in the sense that it was literally

robbing some of your fellow soldiers. You would never scrounge, say, rations from a wagon supplying the infantry. It was from this position that we watched a convoy of lorries taking ammo to the front being shelled. I found out later that my brother was one of the drivers!!

Some of us were wondering when it would be our luck to get leave. We never had a warning!! One of the gunners with whom two of us shared a dugout was most difficult to waken. He could sleep through any amount of noise and when he was relieving the guard or look-out in the night, he had to be almost dragged out to waken him. One night the blanket at the entrance to the dugout was pulled aside and his name was called. His leave had come through – he woke immediately and dashed straight out into the night. There was no question whether he would go during daylight the following day!! It was not long before mine came, much to my relief; this was in October. Travelling was not easy but I managed to get a lift in an army lorry to the nearest station, reported to the Transport Officer, showed my pass and waited for the next train, crossed the channel safely and had to stay the night in our Army hostel in London, then I caught the first train for Leeds the next day.

I well remember how efficiently everything was done to help solders going on leave. I had never been out of England and had never been in London. (When at school one of the staff used to take a group of boys over to France each summer, but I was unlucky and hadn't the chance. I suppose those were some of the earliest 'school journeys'.) Transport officers and their staff, VADs [Voluntary Aid Detachment] and other voluntary organisations, guides and canteen workers who made sure hot drinks and food were available gave a 24 hour service and the general public all contributed to make our journeys as easy as possible. I had never been on London's Underground and would have been quite lost without the guidance I was given, despite the numerous 'signposts'. From my appearance it must have been obvious that I was going on leave from the firing line in France. I seem to have attracted a good deal of attention. Crossing on the Underground to King's Cross, two elderly ladies were looking at me and expressing some concern that I was so young – I always looked boyish!! It was heartening to feel so many civilians were 'doing their bit' in the war effort. When I got home the first thing I did was to remove all my underclothing and shirt and dump them in a bucket of water with disinfectant, and then a glorious hot bath; the first for months!! My leave was extended for a week on compassionate grounds; my grandfather had died.

I returned to France wondering where my battery would be and on 11th November at 11.00 our train was standing in Amiens!! The news was flashed through, Armistice signed. Our feelings? Very mixed!! Glad the fighting with all its horrors was over. Deep down, regrets we weren't at the other side of the Channel when we would most probably have stayed in England. For me, it might mean a quick demobilisation so that I could take my place at the university. I do not remember any wild enthusiasm; I suppose we could hardly believe having had any news and being slightly depressed coming back from leave, we didn't fancy a return to the winter's mud. I found our battery. They had

advanced well beyond the Hindenburg line and were in a deserted village, almost ruined by shells but with sufficient houses standing to give us shelter; the village was not far from the main road to St. Quentin. French peasants were walking on the road enquiring the way to St Quentin. In a village near us we found a group of French people hiding in a cellar, rather bewildered. They did not seem to know what had happened and were overcome when we told them. There was a piano in the cellar and one of our gunners was a pianist so there was a sing-song and we nearly raised the roof, much to the enjoyment of the French. During my leave our Battery Commander had been promoted to Lt. Col. and had left us.

The weather had been terrible and although we had some cover and there were some rough roads, there was still mud!! Also, we, 'the rank and file', were beginning to complain among ourselves about the food, which we thought was inadequate. It was so bad one midday, stew with very little potato in a dixey for 10-15 men, that the men thought we should complain. The senior NCO, a Cpl, refused to lead the complaint. I was the next Senior Bdr, and I was asked and I agreed to go to the Sgts' Mess to ask for the Orderly Sgt. I was following Army Regs (and the war had finished!!). When I arrived at the mess, I noticed a plate being taken in with more potatoes on it for one Sgt than we had in one dixey. The Orderly Sgt appeared and I made my complaint. He was rather taken aback and when I requested to see the Orderly Officer he was quite surprised. However, he went and brought the OO and he saw the dixey and stew (I had warned the men they must not touch anything until the OO had seen it). The OO agreed the complaint was justified and sent for the QMS and the OO asked him what he could do. His reply was that he could take something from the rations for the following day, which would make them short. I immediately said "in that case, Sir, we shall have to complain again tomorrow". The QMS produced some more food for us and I told the QMS personally, <u>not</u> in front of the OO, that one Sgt had more potatoes on his plate than were in our dixey. There was an enquiry and the following day our CO saw the rations allocated to the Officers, the Sgts and the Other Ranks. We had good and ample food afterwards and no further complaints were made. I often wonder how I had the 'cheek' to carry it through and I wondered then what the consequences for me would be. I am glad to state that the QMS and his assistant didn't 'take it out of me', although they were annoyed. This may appear to be a very trivial episode but I have mentioned it because during the war, although we often had short rations, partly because we were a 'flying column' [small independent military land unit] and often had to wait for rations to reach us, we never complained officially. We 'mucked in' together, officers, NCOs and men.

Towards the end of November we went to Cambrai and occupied the cavalry barracks – it was heaven!! Sports were arranged and I was playing soccer when someone on the touch line was beckoning me off; my brother was there with his lorry!! He wanted me to go with him to his unit for a weekend. My officer saw the CO who gladly gave me permission. My brother was a pianist and

singer and they had a concert party. I had a wonderful weekend. He couldn't take me back in his lorry but put me on a train and showed me the carriage to travel in. There were a lot of civilians (French) who were suffering from various infections and diseases (VD and the like) and were being transported from behind the German lines to hospital well away from the British troops. It was a sad sight.

In December, to my astonishment, I was told that I was to be demobilised. This was because I was a student and due to go to university. Needless to say, I was delighted and I became the envy of my friends, who were only too anxious to be demobbed and return to civilian life. Just before Christmas a pantomime was produced in a hall in Cambrai; one of the concert parties who entertained the troops. They had arranged for a number of chorus girls etc from Paris to appear, and we had a marvellous show. We had never had the opportunity of enjoying any of the concert parties as we were rarely out of the line and when we had so-called rests, we were always not far from the front. When we returned to the barracks in the evening, the battery officer sent for me and informed me that all demobilisation was stopped. I must remain with my unit. It was a bitter disappointment. There had been some trouble at the ports, almost a mutiny, it was said, when soldiers returning from leave had refused to cross over to France. For my part, what hit me most was that I had to report to the centre in Cambrai and as it was quite close to our barracks there was no need to leave my unit until, as it were, the last minute. If we had been outside Cambrai, I should have left the battery before demob was halted and I would have reported to the centre and waited until demob was resumed. However, I hoped I should soon be told to report to the centre. But it was not to be. Although I made appeals and enquiries, there was no information regarding my demobilisation. I gave up hoping!!

I learnt later that army schools were being started with courses for matriculation. Although I had gained matriculation in 1915, I applied for a course as I thought it would be a good way of having some revision. I was accepted and joined the course in a village near Cambrai. We were housed in a disused factory. All the machinery had been removed (rumour had it that it had been sent to Germany) and some lecture rooms had been equipped. We had comfortable army beds etc and the food was wonderful!! There was a group of some twenty odd, officers and NCOs. I was promoted to Corporal soon after I joined the course. All very pleasant – no duties or fatigues – everyone was very keen to make the most use possible of the course. We had one instructor, a PhD, Emeritus Prof. of Munich University, who was an amazing man. (I enclose some certificates etc but please do not cough too loudly when you seem them.) There was no practical work, only lectures and discussions. I became friendly with another Cpl (Engineers) from Wellingborough, and in the evenings we used to go to a nearby estaminet [French café]. We became friendly with the owner and his wife and daughter, in her twenties. She was very keen to improve her English and we, our French. To our

surprise, they had a Larousse. We had some very enjoyable evenings 'at the bar' until some drunken English soldiers had an argument with some French men about the value of a gold watch one of the soldiers was trying to sell. A 'free for all' ensued with glasses flying about. Fortunately we got out quickly before the English Military Police arrived. The estaminet was put out of bounds, much to our annoyance.

At the close of the course I was informed that our battery had been sent to the Rhine to join the Army of Occupation. They were going by road so that meant some weeks. I was ordered to go by train to Cologne and report to HQ and await the arrival of the battery. By great good luck, almost the first person I saw on the platform was the Education Officer, Capt. Cooper. I asked him what I had to do and he told me to go to the HQ of the Army at Hotel de Ville and ask them to arrange for a billet. They sent me to a most comfortable hotel in the Heumarkt!! Needless to say, I couldn't believe it. Nothing to pay for accommodation and food etc (except drinks) and I was free to do what I liked. And I made the most of it. I travelled round Cologne free on public transport and saw all the sights, most important was that I could practice my German, and I managed very well. Fraternising was not encouraged and I had my first 'warning' when I was having some tea in one of the best restaurants in the Hohe Strasse. I got into conversation with a German family and when they left, a Sgt who I had not noticed came over to my table and got into a conversation with me. He remarked that I seemed to be getting on very well with the German family and finally asked me what I was doing in Cologne. He also told me he was in the Intelligence Corps!! However, I satisfied him when I produced all my papers including my pay book!!

In due course my battery arrived in Buschhoven near Bonn and I joined it. I enquired immediately whether there was any news of my 'demob'. To my dismay, there was no information at all and I began to despair. However, we had comfortable billets and I had more opportunities of improving my German. Also, I became the Major's right-hand man on the battery staff and was allotted a horse. The Major's servant spoke German like a native, he was of Jewish extraction from the continent and the Major used to send me along with the servant to buy things in villages in the neighbourhood. We were mounted of course and it was very enjoyable, especially as summer approached. Although we had the usual drills etc, there were plenty of sports – football, cricket and boxing. One of the gunners turned out to be a sparring partner of Georges Carpentier and he was given the job of getting together a first-class group of boxers who took part in competitions with other units in the area, and they were quite successful. I was given the job of instructing gunners. As I was not one of the Senior Cpls, I foolishly protested to the Sgt Major that it was not my job!! I wanted to get out of the army as soon as possible. He took it in good part and tried to persuade me to sign on for 7 years as I should soon get promotion. He thought there would be much unemployment in England and things would be very difficult for some time. The QM Sgt also tried to

persuade me, without avail. It was also suggested I might help with the Army Education Service and give lessons in English, maths etc in the brigade which would include our battery. I declined because I wondered whether it may delay my demob. I regularly called in the battery office for news of my demob and when I heard that the Brigadier was to visit the battery, I asked my officer if I could have an interview with him. But I had no luck and didn't see the Brig – we didn't have a parade, he walked round.

On the whole, life was quite pleasant and bearable. The Germans were very friendly (we were in Alsace Lorraine!!) and it was most interesting to learn something of their way of life in the villages. All the streets had to be swept clean by midnight on Saturdays and we often saw the women folk clearing up at 11pm. Although fraternising was frowned upon, four or five of us (NCOs) arranged to have parties in turn in our billets, and the German women supplied and prepared the food for which we paid. Our daily meals were in our canteens. The roads were lined with fruit trees and when we asked the Germans if any was stolen the reply was "no", and explained that the fruit was sold and helped to pay the 'rates' due from the village. No-one dare steal any of the crop. We were amused to see the travelling troupes of conjurers, jugglers and acrobats who performed in the middle of the road outside the village. They chose a fairly long straight stretch so that they could stop their acts and allow any traffic to pass. There was very little traffic. The children of the village, and the adults, were delighted whenever the troupes came along. The villagers were very hard-working and the whole countryside was very well cultivated. As far as we could tell, the war seemed to have had little effect on them, except for the loss of their menfolk, who were in the German army.

When I was making enquiries one day in the battery office regarding 'demob', I was told that there were some education courses starting at Bonn University organised by the Army Education Service. I asked if I could be allowed to join a course (for matriculation again!!). The Major sent for me and said he was very sorry he couldn't spare me. Some manoeuvres were being planned and he was most anxious for the battery to do well. If I would postpone my request until after the manoeuvres, he would arrange for me to go on the next course. I agreed, although I was disappointed. He knew I was very keen to be 'demobbed' so as to take up my place at the university and he was quite sympathetic. However, soon after we had been preparing for the manoeuvres, they were postponed and when I approached the Major he readily agreed to let me go on the next course, and I was accepted. (The Major did not know when the manoeuvres would take place and I think they were abandoned altogether as the whole battery was sent back to England soon after.)

I joyfully packed my kit and got into the service wagon which was to take me to Bonn. As we were about to leave one of the senior officers, who had been with us right through the retirement and on the advance and was most disliked by all of us, put his head under the cover of the wagon and said "you know you have been reduced, don't you?" I replied "yes, sir". I could have 'killed' him!! I had

already seen it in battery orders. Owing to being over-established with NCOs, I had to be reduced to Bdr!! I wasn't bothered as I had got my course. I was billeted, along with a South African (white), in a very pleasant household not far from the university. We had lectures from English officers, mainly on science subjects. (One of them was a demonstrator in one of the chemistry labs in Leeds when I went there in Oct 1919.)

We had cricket matches on a delightful ground not far from the Rhine and also had trips up the Rhine to Coblenz and the vineyards in the pleasure steamers. There was a bathing pool on the Rhine – very difficult to swim against the current. Weekends were free and we used to have walks on the surrounding mountains. The German youths used to go into the woods, always with guitars etc, and it was very entertaining to hear their music, instrumental and vocal, when they were returning on Sunday evenings. I also managed to spend half a day with one of my cousins who was our Officer's servant, billeted in one of the numerous chateaux on the Rhine. On Sundays there was opera at the Cologne Opera House, mainly for the army, and we managed to get tickets. We travelled on the electric trains and usually caught a 'Schnelzug' [express train]. One of the sights was the beating of retreat in the main square of Bonn, with bands, buglers etc. The town mayor was there, or his deputy, on a lovely charge. No Germans were allowed to cross the square during the ceremony. On one occasion a German (man) was seen by the mayor to be crossing. He galloped across and reared his horse close to the man, who was terrified. I don't know what the mayor said. I spent a very pleasant and useful month in Bonn.

On returning to the battery, I learned we were to be 'demobbed' and would soon be on our way to England, which was very welcome news. Although I was most annoyed that I was not released earlier, I felt that the time had not been wasted. The army had certainly helped with educational courses and it had been useful experience on the Rhine. Also, I should be able to commence my course at Leeds at the beginning of term. But the delay in releasing us from the army did have an effect on my teacher's pension and might have had on my salary. After my university course, I was very lucky as I obtained a post at Tottenham Polytechnic. During the late 20s and early 30s many graduates could [?? - text missing?). Although I had not done 3 years' service in the Forces (2 years 337 days), the Middlesex Education Committee allowed me 3 increments. When I obtained a more responsible post at the LCC Hammersmith School of Building & Arts & Crafts, the LCC refused to accept the 3 years' service for increments as the Middlesex Committee had done, and this was approved by the Board of Education. The LCC had a rule that increments could only be allowed up to Feb 1919 for Army Service. Although I appealed, they would not accept it.

Fortunately I managed to get a statement from the War Office stating that I was 'compulsorily retained to serve with the colours'. (Copy with other records enclosed.) The LCC accepted that.

Strangely enough when I retired, my 3 years' war service was not allowed for pension purposes although it counted for increments!!

Comments

Church parades, Chaplains, religious views

I always took part in church parades which we had in Ripon and am sure most of the troops appreciated them. There were a few when we were in Suffolk but they were not as impressive as in Ripon.

We never had a parade in France, nor were we visited by a Chaplain. Being a 'flying column' and not attached to any Division or Corps, no provision would be made for us to have a visit by a Chaplain.

My war experience had no effect on my religious views, except to strengthen them. I am not a 'war monger' or likely to be, nor am I a pacifist, which is even less likely. I learnt a great deal about the horrors of war and would hope that wars would be unknown sometime in the future. But this is a very imperfect world and although we might say wars should never happen, there are circumstances when they are unavoidable and also unjustified. (In 1939 I was granted a commission in the Royal Engineers but the LCC refused to release me. I was in charge of a group of students, Building & Arts & Crafts, evacuated to the Wilts and Somerset area. I returned to London in 1942 to East Ham Technical College and joined the Rocket Batteries on Wanstead Flats.) I am a regular churchgoer and have held office, including churchwarden.

I do not subscribe to the views of Vera Brittain in 'Testament of Youth' when she refers to the young men of her generation, and mine of course, as 'unintelligent dupes' whose only dignity was to be killed in battle!! (This may not be verbatim.) Nor to 'The Three Musketeers', who like so many others, were not only willing but anxious to risk their lives in order to save the face of a Foreign Secretary who had committed his country to an armed policy without consulting it beforehand. This is verbatim!!

I realise this was written 1929-1933 and with hindsight, but many of my generation who survived and many who never came back would feel maligned. And now the BBC have produced 'Gone for a Soldier'!!

Army discipline, officers' morale

So far as I was concerned, and I think most of those with whom I served, the discipline was good. As a boy scout and a schoolboy in a well-disciplined grammar school, and also a member of a big family, I had always been subject to discipline in one form or another. In France there was no 'let up', we pulled together and, as it were, we were held together by our battery Commander, a marvellous man, as I have previously indicated. This was as it should be, we were fighting for our lives and we were ready to help each other. That does not mean we had no grumbles.

As for the other officers, on the whole, they were quite good, again partly because of our CO. The second in command was not of the calibre of the CO, although we did not have much experience of him as he was at the wagon lines. One of the junior officers, an Irishman, Liverpool policeman, was exceptionally good and would 'muck in' with anything we were doing – digging trenches and funk holes etc. He happened to be on leave during the retirement and he told us how sorry he was that he wasn't with us – he meant it. One of our 1st Lieuts was rather unpleasant – I have mentioned him once or twice. During the retirement when he was Observation Officer, with two signallers, he was striding along ahead and the signallers were humping the equipment; one of the signallers was so fed up he was on the point of stopping and firing at the officer with his rifle. Fortunately the other signaller dissuaded him. There were incidents of this kind in the retirement, I understand.

At the training camp in Diss and also in the battery on coast defence, there were a number of soldiers who had served in France and had wounds which put them in the category of 'no further service overseas'. Some of them had wounds which they managed to 'keep open' rather than run the risk of going out to France again. They did their best to warn us of what we might expect. Those of us who were eligible for Active Service, the young 'uns, took little notice of their remarks.

Feelings towards the Germans and French

I don't remember having had any bloodthirsty feelings against the Germans beyond the fact they represented an attack on Belgium, France and our country. I pitied the prisoners as they came in. We had very mixed feelings about the French poilu [infantry solder in the French army], although we met very few of them on our sector. They had the reputation of being untidy, and not over clean. We ourselves were not able to do much better but we always did our best to keep clean and tidy whenever possible; the French didn't seem to bother. We found the French civilians quite friendly and we were always welcomed in estaminets, although we were rarely near places well back from the front line. The infantry were more fortunate. On one or two occasions we had our hair cut by female assistants in the barbers. There was always a queue!! There were some Portuguese troops in one of the sectors but they were of little use. We were not very keen about the Americans; they had come over to win the war for us!!