



DURHAM
AT **WAR**



MY PART IN THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

July – October 1916

by

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[Durham County Record Office](#) and Durham at War volunteers have assisted with the transcription and editing so that this memoir can be shared with a wider audience online during the First World War centenary.



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Charles Moss added a few revisions to his story at the end of the original text. These have been inserted, in italics, into the appropriate place in the narrative.

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My Part in the Battle of the Somme

Historians will tell future generations the high facts of the Battle of the Somme. That it was the greatest battle the world had ever experienced. They will give particulars of the number of troops engaged, the enormous quantity of materials used, the appalling number of casualties suffered, the length of time it lasted, and the fate of Kings, Governments and Nations involved.

Historians are not concerned with the experiences of the hundreds of thousands of the rank and file soldiers who took part in it. A few Field Marshals and Generals will be mentioned in relation to their strategy and command, but historians will record nothing about “other ranks”, the men who really fought the battle.

Was it Henry Ford who called history “bunk”? I suppose he meant official and school book history! Despatches sent by War correspondents to the censored capitalist press, also never did justice, or give reasonable insight into the actions of the rankers in the Great War. It was the job of the press to glorify British feats of arms on a high plane, and not to cause despondency by reporting the ordeals of the rankers.

How we used to laugh and scoff at the War Office threadbare communique “All was quiet on the Western Front.” We knew that during the period covered by the communique, there had been terrific bombardments, bombing raids, fighting patrols, wiring parties, trench digging, mine tunnelling, and many other dangerous activities - especially at night - that meant hard work, constant courage, ceaseless vigilance, disciplined conduct, the loss of life and limb and the winning of rankers decorations - even bravery had rank distinctions except in the case of the Victoria Cross - by the non-commissioned soldier.



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It is characteristic of the private soldier and Non-Commissioned Officer [N.C.O.] to be silent about their deeds in battle, they seldom talk about them let alone

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recording them in writing. Very little indeed is written about war by the rankers themselves. If officers are the brains of battle, and money is the sinews of war, then “other ranks” are the heart and soul of active service – especially of the infantry. It is like cutting out the very heart of a battle not to record the rankers’ part in it. They have to do the killing or be killed: not the high ranking officers, they are usually safe enough.

The specially personal, direct contact, hand to hand nature of the deeds of rankers should not die with them, they should be available to their family at least. But because of the rankers’ silence and their policy of “Oh forget it,” the most vital and intimate things of a battle are lost forever.

“What did you do in the Great War daddy” was a common question soon after the finish of the First World War. But the question was treated as a joke and answered accordingly. Fathers are seldom heroes to their own children. But there is a difference with grandchildren. The length of time that will have passed, by the time they are old enough to understand, will make it more interesting to them, and make it possible to compare my personal experiences with what they are taught at school about the Battle of the Somme.

The British attack started at 7.30 on Saturday morning, July 1st, 1916, after many weeks of working preparation - done mainly by the infantry - and many days and nights of artillery and trench mortar bombardment.

I was a Lance Corporal in charge of No. 2 Lewis Gun of “C” Company. 18th (Pals) Battalion The Durham Light Infantry. (There were only two Lewis Guns to a Company then).



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Our Battalion was reserve - with the exception of 'D' Coy - to the 93rd Infantry Brigade, 31st Division in the 8th Army Corps commanded by General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston. The other Battalions in the brigade were the 15th (Leeds Pals) West Yorkshire Regiment and the 16th and 18th (Bradford Pals) West Yorkshire Regiment.

The Leeds Pals with our 'D' Coy were to be the first wave over the top followed at half hour? intervals by each Battalion of the Bradfords. Our Battalion was to follow the Bradfords with the object of holding

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the part of the line captured by the three Battalions of West Yorks. It was our job to consolidate the position against German counter attacks. Our 'D' Coy had a special job in the first wave to link the Leeds Pals with the Seaforth Highlanders on our right. 'D' Coy had a special objective, to capture the strongly fortified position called Pendant Copse.

The sector of our attack was in front of the village of Colincamps and nearly opposite to Beaumont Hamel held by the Germans. Our Division had done the trench duties and worked on this part of the front digging telephone and assembly trenches since we arrived from Egypt in April 1916.

We did not know that we were preparing for an attack until we had a sort of rehearsal of the plan and method of attack a few weeks before the time to "go over." A miniature copy of the German trenches had been prepared for this purpose on the open country a few kilometres behind our billets. A few Brass Hats explained the plan of attack, the timing of the attacking waves, the control of the artillery barrage, and the formation of each Battalion's "wave." Then each Battalion practised their part in it.



The Leeds Pals to be first over the top to capture the German front line, each man a few paces apart, with loaded rifle carried at the "port" and with bayonet fixed. The Bradford Pals to follow in the same manner and pass over the top of the Leeds Pals to capture the second and third lines of trenches. Our Battalion was then to follow and make strong points to hold the front at all costs against enemy counter attacks.

I was shown exactly where my Lewis Gun post was to be but when I asked the officer what my field of fire would be like he couldn't tell me. I pointed out that the sort of country in front was the most

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vital thing to me to deal with the counter attacks. He resented me calling his attention to this, and all he could say was that I would find that out when we got there. I thought that was a poor look out when so much depends upon this very necessary information and I told him so.

There was to be two sets of distinguishing marks to be included in our equipment. All ranks of the West Yorks would have a triangle shaped piece of tin - cut from empty biscuit tins - fastened to their backs, so that the airmen who were going to watch the progress of the attack from the air, would be able to recognise our men and report to H.Q. how the attack was going. Also, each man had a few pieces of coloured tape fastened to his shoulder straps and hanging down his back so that the Battalions would be able to recognise each other, as no regimental badges or numerals were to be worn. Each colour represented the colour that had been given as a name to the trench they were to capture. The troops had to leave their valises behind and go over in battle- order, the haversack worn on the back in which was our "Iron Rations", which were not to be eaten except in case of dire necessity.

We were relieved of our front line duties about a fortnight before the attack was to begin. About a week later the General came and made a speech to us. I liked his blunt and forthright manner and the way he exhorted us to uphold the reputation of the British Army. He told us of some of the deeds of the "contemptibles" in France



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and the 29th Division which he had commanded in Gallipoli, as a means to inspire us to similar feats of arms.

The start of the attack had been fixed for June the 28th but it rained so heavily for about a week before that date, that despite the terrific bombardment by our artillery, most of the German barbed wire entanglements were still as strong as ever on the 28th.

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Those barbed wire defences were a great wonder to me: all the daring hard work there had been put into them. They were a great massive rusty wire wall built along the whole of the Western Front. They were about 5 or 6 feet high, and 3 to 4 yards deep in most places, built up on strong wooden and iron stakes, the German wire always looked a far better job than ours, the Gerries were out working on their wire every night. Every break our artillery made in their wire during the day, they repaired it during the night, and on June 25th their wire was still so strong, despite our terrific and long bombardment that the attack was put off until July 1st.

In the meantime the Germans had been bombarding our reserve trenches and advanced billets. The billet I was in received a direct hit while I was out with a fatigue party with the result that we had to dig some trenches further in the rear in which to live. It was impossible to get any sleep during the night because of a heavy long-distance battery and a great howitzer belching away all night long.

We were on fatigues during the day carrying ammunition and "Plum-pudding" mortar shells to dumps near the front line, the shells were brutes to carry, they were about the size of a football with a steel shank attached. Many of these never reached the dumps, because some of the carriers, to save themselves from struggling down the trench with them, just tipped them into the deep gullys that crossed the communication trenches. Everybody remained in good spirits despite all the rain and



mud and bad feeding arrangements and the filthy and verminous condition we were all in.

I had stood it all wonderfully well, but there was an incident on the night of the 29th June that might have stopped me from being in the attack.

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Lieutenant Simpson, one of our officers, who knew of two of my previous exploits, came and asked me if I would go with him across No-Mans-Land that night to examine the German wire. He asked me what duties I had been on, and when I told him "the bomb carrying working parties" he said I would be too tired for such a dangerous job. It seemed to me that whoever did the examination of the wire it would be a miracle if they got back alive. I took it as a compliment that he had asked me to go. I hear afterwards that it had been impossible for him to do the job.

During Friday the 30th we moved to the south side of Colincamps where we found some shelter in the ruins of a badly strafed chateau. During the evening our Commanding Officer (C.O.) Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Bowes gave us instructions for our conduct during the attack. There was to be no turning back, every man must advance at a steady pace. All officers had the authority to shoot anyone who stopped or tried to turn back. The wounded had to be left to be attended to by the stretcher bearers and Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.). The grimest order to me was that no fighting soldier was to stop to help the wounded. The C.O. was very emphatic about this. It seemed such a heartless order to come from our C.O. who was a Brigadier General of Church Lads Brigades and looked upon as a religious man. I thought bringing in the wounded was the way Victoria Crosses were won. But I realised that this would be an order to the C.O. as well as to us from the General and that the whole of the attack could be held up if there were many wounded and we stopped to help them.

We spent the rest of the evening being issued with Field Dressings, extra ammunition, picks and shovels, camouflaging our tin hats with pieces of sandbag



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and getting our bayonets sharpened. *We did not get a personal issue of rum that night, our C.O. did not encourage the use of it. The rum was carried into action by one man in each section, to be dished out when urgently required. I did not get any of it, but it was the cause of "B" Company Sergeant Major being reduced to the ranks through getting dead drunk on his Company's ration while we were in the line.* There was a good deal of light hearted talk amongst groups of us

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concerning what we would do when we got into the German dug outs. We had heard that they were well supplied with cigars and sausages. I was very fond of some Medalcion cigars which I had bought while on holiday in Hamburg, so I arranged that I would swop any cigarettes or sausages I found for any cigars that they got.

We moved off from Colincamps at about 10pm and marched in sections to the entrance of a light railway trench which led for about half a mile across open ground to the entrance of the communication trench called Eczema all the time we had used it for front line duties, but it had been renamed Southern Avenue for purposes of the attack. As we approached the railway trench we found that the Germans were strafing it; especially at the entrance, which meant that we had to wait to time the bursts of shell-fire and hurry in between salvos. A section of West Yorks were scattered out of their formation while we were waiting to get into the trench.

The Germans had intensified their bombardment of Colincamps and the village was soon enveloped in flames, as the fire reached the ammunition that was stored in the village. The explosions of the Stokes shells which had a specially shattering effect, and the peculiar rattling effect of the small arms ammunition, added to the shrieking, whining and crashing of both British and German artillery fire made deafening pandemonium complete.

We had been through our first baptism of fire at Hartlepool on Dec 16th 1914, and had suffered many bombardments since then while in the front line, but this baptism for this battle was intensified and dramatized by the leaping flames and aimless



cannonade behind us at Colincamps. The fitful glare of the fire broke the cover of darkness for some distance across the open plain on our left towards Hebuterne. We could see a lurid glow, sections of troops moving slowly forward towards

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the trenches. The whole awesome scene was lifted so much above reality to me, that although some of us were setting out to be killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or to win military glory, none of those thoughts entered my head. I was too fascinated by the mightiness of the spectacle of the whole affair. I had no thoughts for anything else.

It was slow and hard work to get along that Railway Trench. We so often had to fling ourselves down in the trench, as the shriek of shells sounded as though they could not miss. When we got to the entrance to Southern Avenue, the area was so crowded with troops that it was some time before we got into it. It was marvellous how each section kept together in such a mix-up.

We were all carrying so much it was like a free-fight to move at all. Over and above our ordinary equipment, rifle and bayonet, and ammunition in our pouches, I had a khaki bandolier full of .303, six loaded Lewis Gun magazines - carried in a horses nose bag - because we hadn't enough proper containers available, two Mills-Bombs, and a pick with the shaft stuck down my back behind my haversack, and we were called Light Infantry! But most ironical of all was the dirty tricks our clumsy bad fitting "tin hats" played us. If the chin-strap wasn't trying to strangle us, the "soup-basin" was falling over our eyes to blind us. Steel helmets always got more curses than blessings from us.

After many stops and much struggling, falling down and getting caught in signallers' telephone wires we reached our assembly trench at about 4.00 am on Sat Jul 1st. The trench was just a temporary assembly one, about 4 ft deep without any fire-step or proper parapet. It was made just to afford a bit of protection from machine gun



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and rifle fire, while we waited to move to our jumping-off trench in readiness to go “over the top.”

Most of us got into the assembly trench in fair condition. Our artillery were blazing away a terrific bombardment of the German lines, the Germans were comparatively quiet until about 6 a.m. They must have waited until we were all in position, then they opened

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out on us with all they had of every calibre. There was no need for them to do any range finding, they were dead on our front at once. Along on my left there was soon word being passed along for stretcher bearers.

We heard that several of our Company had been hit with their first salvo, the trench was so shallow. I was having to crouch low into the front of it, but regardless of the danger Lieutenant Simpson kept moving up and down the trench with head and shoulders in full view of the Germans. I told him he was “asking for it” but he took no notice and kept on having a word here and there with the fellows while we waited. At about 7.30 - Zero hour - the time for the first wave to go over, we heard a great heavy rumbling thud, which was the exploding of our great mine. This mine is recorded in the official account as being the greatest mine that had ever been blown.

Coinciding with the putting up of this mine the speed of the bombardments increased tremendously. Conan Doyle in his history of the battle says we had the worst part of the line to attack, and received the brunt of the intense bombardment from massed German artillery which had taken up position the night before behind Gommecourt Wood about 3 miles on our left front.

I wanted to see how our attack was going so I moved some of the chalk on the front of the trench in such a way that I would be protected from German sniper fire, and took a good look at the German line in front of me. But all that I could see was fountains of chalk and smoke sent up by our artillery barrage. It was like watching



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heavy seas rolling and roaring on to Hendon beach as I had seen them at home during winter storms.

While I was watching I saw the barrage lift and storm further back over the third German line. As it got clear of one of the German trenches, out on to the top came scrambling a German Machine Gun team.

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They fixed their gun in front of their parapet and opened out a slow and deadly fire on our front. The gunners were without their tunics and worked their gun in their shirt sleeves in quite a different manner to their usual short and sharp bursts. *No playful tapping out the beat of a tune like they used to do in answer to our machine gunners on a quiet night.* Their fire was so slow that every shot seemed to have a definite aim. Except for that gun-team and the "Mad Major," there wasn't another soldier either in British Khaki or German Grey to be seen. The "Mad Major" was the name we gave to a British airman who flew low over the German trenches every morning, and there he was as mad as ever this morning.

Just as I spotted the German Machine Gunners come into action we got the word to move to our "jumping off" trench to be ready to go over the top.

This trench was called "Maitland" and I like to think that it was named after the famous full rigged Tea Clipper that was built at Sunderland and was a great rival of the "Cutty Sark." The assembly trench was about 4ft deep. It had been hurriedly prepared and just gave a bit of protection for machine gun and rifle fire, it had no traverses and was no defence against artillery or enfilade fire. We waited in this trench till the Leeds and Bradford Pals were due to start the attack; then we were to move along to the right to our "jumping off" trench to go "over the top".

We had to cross a communication trench to get there and as I got into this trench I nearly bumped into a soldier who seemed to be carrying a big piece of raw meat resting on his left arm, he was doing a sort of crying whimper and saying "why have



they done this to me? I never did them any harm.” Then I realised that it was the remains of his right forearm he was carrying in such a way. Many more soldiers were making their way up the trench, they were walking wounded going to the advanced dressing stations of which there were several dug into the sides of the communication trenches.

When we got into our jumping off trench I found it was in one of those deep hollows that were peculiar to this part of the front, and was called “dead ground” because of the protection it afforded. Part of it was occupied by our Battalion H.Q. The C.O. and Adjutant were there. As soon as I got there I found that something had gone wrong with our procedure, because Lance Corporal (L/Cpl) Fletcher had been called away with No. 1 gun. The arrangement had been that No. 1 gun was to stay with H.Q. but

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seeing that it had gone I had to stay with H.Q. with my gun. A little further along the trench there was some scaling ladders up which some of our fellows were climbing. “Big Lizzie” - a nick-name we had given this officer - was brandishing a revolver, shouting and urging them up the ladders. I watched this for a minute or two when down into the hollow came Corporal Forshaw - one of the Battalion runners - he was very excited and was shouting as he came, something to the effect that “the whole show was a b---‘s up.” The C.O. spoke to him but I couldn’t hear what he said for the infernal row of the shell fire, but the C.O. came near and shouted to “Big Lizzie” “wait a minute Mr -- a minute or two will neither win or lose this battle.”

The officer at once stopped waving his revolver and stopped the fellows who were climbing the ladders, then they all crouched down in the bottom of the trench. In that minute or two along came an Army Corps runner and handed the C.O. an envelope. The C.O. opened it, read the message it contained and striking a dramatic attitude he turned to the Adjutant and said, “Ah, ah, Mr Lowes this is where we come in” and he read the message: “Your attack has failed, 18th Durham Light Infantry take over the front line from Point-to-Point.”



So here was one of those marvellous circumstances that happened to me while I was in the Army. Another one of those astonishing escapes of which I had had several since I joined the Army. There is no doubt that if it hadn't been for the mistake about the place of the two gun teams and the startling outburst from Corporal Forshaw I most certainly would have been over the top, and once over it meant death or mutilation.

The C.O. and Adj. had a brief consultation, then the C.O. gave "Big Lizzie" an order to muster as many men as he could and occupy the

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part of the front line that had been allotted to us. The artillery fire was much quieter by the time we reached what had once been the front line trench. But it was nearly impossible to tell it from No-Mans-Land. Most of the revetting and fire-steps had been blown in. The whole of the front was an awful chaos of duck boards, sand-bags, stakes, wire netting, barbed wire, and dud shells strewn and tumbled about. It was impossible to recognise a revetment from a fire-bay.

Amongst this awful wreck was the dead bodies of what appeared to be a Leeds Pals Lewis gun team, with their gun and drums of ammunition lying near them. One of my team picked up the Lewis gun and we took it with us, making two guns to our team for the rest of the time we were in the front line.

One of the dead soldiers was a horrible sight, a shell must have burst so near to him that it had ripped all the uniform and flesh from the front of his body.

I was surprised to see a black retriever dog roaming about, but it disappeared down the remains of a dug out when we got near it. This dog was the only living thing we saw as we struggled along the front line.

Most of the West Yorks and our 'D' Coy had been killed or wounded in their assembly trenches on our sector during the intense bombardment before 7.30 am,



Zero hour, coupled with the tactical mistake of our high command in having a fixed time for the lifting of our artillery barrage from one German trench to the next after zero; which meant that when the barrage was lifted off the German second line it allowed the Germans to bring their machine guns out of their deep dug-outs and fire them on “the top” in comparative safety, while our barrage during that tragic half hour was concentrated for that fixed period on the German third line. It looked as though the Germans knew beforehand exactly what our

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plan of attack was going to be. In short from what I saw, I think the reason why the attack on our sector failed was because of the murderous unexpected German bombardment, coupled with the lack of a plan by our artillery to deal with the German batteries and machine gunners, owing to all our artillery being mobilised for the fixed time barrage.

It was generally understood by the survivors of our Battalion that practically the whole of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd waves of the attack by our Brigade were “wiped out” before and soon after Zero hour. After seeing the dog disappear into the dug-out my gun team and I kept on struggling along the trench past several bodies of West Yorks until we reached a position well to the left of the Lewis Gun Post that I knew so well.

I had been in charge of this post when we did our ordinary front line duties. It was at the corner of the road that led from Maily to Serre. This road was part of No-Mans-Land for some distance. It was about 40 yds wide at this point, and was commanded by the famous German Quadral Lateral [Quadrilateral] Redoubt.

The position we had reached hadn't suffered near so much as the part we had come from. There was also a great difference in the width of No-Mans-Land - up to 100 yds in places. The whole front had gone very quiet along there and during the afternoon I set up our Lewis a bit north of Rob Roy communication trench not far from Foncquevillers.



A good deal of webbing equipment was lying about in this sector. It had been thrown off by the wounded when they got hit, so we stripped off our leather equipment and put the webbing on in its place. We had been issued with leather equipment when the Battalion was first formed, but we found that the leather shoulder-straps cut into our

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shoulders when we were marching in full marching order. Webbing was much easier to wear and had a more fighting-soldier-like appearance so we weren't long in dumping the leather and changing to webbing and feeling more like seasoned troops.

There were so few of us to hold this part of the line that I thought what a walk-over the Gerries would have if they were to attack us. It was the only chance we had had to get anything to eat and I was specially thankful for a packet of Sunmaid raisins I had received in a parcel I had from my sister in Winnipeg. Most of the food and water we got had a filthy taste because of all the chlorination there was in it. But those raisins went down well with some of the hard wheaten biscuits that I liked to crunch so much.

We had a reasonable rest until it was dark then we moved into No-Mans-Land and set up the Lewis guns in a shell-hole. To get into No-Mans-Land we had to pass one of those big hollows with a few bushes growing in them. This one may have been St John's or St. Paul's copse. As we passed the place we could hear many awful moans and agonised cries for stretcher-bearers coming from the depth of the hollow. Many of the badly wounded had managed to struggle

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into this place for protection from shell and machine-gun fire, but we were forced to leave them to be attended to by the R.A.M.C and stretcher-bearers.



The darkness of the night was often broken by the brilliant light from the arching Verey Lights being fired across No-Mans-Land. As each light died out we were blinded by the darkness being blacker than ever, and the sudden changes from the blackness to such weird and ghostly light thrown on to the tragic shapes of the charred stumps of trees whose tops had been blasted off during previous bombardment made the place such a terribly eerie sight, that I felt as though I was no longer on the civilised world.

People have heard a lot about Hell, but no one has come back from there to tell us what it really is like, I know that I was very near to it as the red light from the star shell and explosions fell on the hollow, while the cries of despair from the wounded mingled with the Devil's tattoo of the rifle and machine-gun fire. I had withstood the ordeal of all that had gone before in the attack very well indeed but this unearthly experience made me blanch a bit.

We thought the Germans might send a bombing raid over so we had to struggle on into No-Mans-Land where we got into a big-shell-hole and set-to with picks and shovels to make it into a Lewis gun post.

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While we were doing this I heard somebody cursing and blinding and shouting "Where's that B----- Durhams Officer?" I looked out over the top of the shell-hole as one of our fellows fired a Verey Light and I saw that he was a British Sergeant. He turned out to be in charge of a King Edward's Horse machine gun. The Durhams Officer had promised to send a working party to make a gun emplacement for him. I had no idea where the officer was but we heard later that the officer had been shell-shocked and had left the front.

It was one of those cases where rank stood for nothing in No-Mans-Land. It was the piece of ground where the supreme test of sudden death levelled all, and the strongest personality always took charge no matter what his rank. We however heard no more of the Sergeant as he disappeared into the night. I think the noise he



had been kicking up must have given away our position to the Germans because they were soon strafing us with shrapnel.

One of my gun-team got “the wind up” very badly. He would dash himself from one side of the hole to the other at each shell-burst. I was urging him to keep still in the bottom of the hole when he gave a great gasp and groaned “Death! Oh Death! they’ve knocked a bloody hole right through us.” He scrambled out of the shell hole before anyone could help him and I saw him no more till I reached the 3rd Battalion at South Shields in 1917 where I found that the shrapnel had wounded him in the shoulder and given him a Blighty that got him to England.

We came out of the shell-hole as it was breaking daylight and joined the rest of the Company who were “standing to” for the dangerous hour following dawn, the time that enemy attacks were generally expected. But the Germans did nothing more than drop a few shells round about

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the communication trench while we “stood-to.”

At “stand-down” the gun-team was relieved and we moved out of the front line up the communication trench where we found a shelter. This was one of the shelters that had been used as an advanced dressing-station; the duck-boards inside were covered with a horrible mixture of blood and chalk puddle, used field-dressings and the remains of hurried operations. It looked so repulsive that we were hesitating about going inside when there was the crash of a 5.9 shell a bit farther down the trench, the blast from it nearly blew us inside, and as the “strafe” continued close round us we went inside and thought it best to stay there.

We shovelled out as best we could the shocking evidence of the suffering of the wounded and the harrowing work of the “worst paid”(First Aid) wallahs. Then we set about cleaning our rifles, Lewis guns and drums of ammunition.



The rest of the gun team had finished their issue of cigarettes, and seeing that we hadn't got any of those German cigars that we had joked about, I still had my issue of "Ruby Queens" so I shared them out. I seldom smoked my issue and often came to their rescue at a time like this. What strange brands we had dished out to us! What a rare luxury a "Woodbine" was to many of the fellows.

The army cooks had found where we were and sent a container of bully beef stew down to us. This was the first meal we had since we left Colincamps on the Friday night.

While we were in the shelter the talk amongst the team became very morbid and downhearted. They would persist in talking about the cruel and gruesome sights they had seen, and how easily such things could happen to them. One of the youngest, a lad of about 17, was becoming very distressed as the despondent talk continued. I realised I would have to get their minds on to other and more cheerful things, so when one of them passed the remark --- that had become a favourite army saying when things were looking black ---- "It's a bloody good job we've got a navy," I took this as my cue to turn the talk on to ships and the sea, so I got them interested in some of my trips in the Merchant Navy especially my holidays on the continent with the Londonderry boats out of Seaham Harbour.

It was marvellous how they responded to the change of subject, the young gunner brightened up considerably and the rest of them stopped their depressing gossip.

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(I sent particulars of this incident in the shelter to H.G. Wells after seeing a reference in one of his articles that Abraham Lincoln used to keep up the spirits of his Generals by telling them stories during the dark periods of the American war to free the slaves. H.G. Wells was kind enough to send me a card of appreciation from Geneva, where he was at the time observing the work of the League of Nations). This card is with other letters I have had from notable writers.



On the Monday morning we were in the remains of the front trench when a Staff Officer came along. He turned out to be Captain Pearson who had been in our Battalion before he went on to Army Corps staff. He remembered some of us and stopped to speak. In the course of his talk he revealed that our Division had been used as a sacrifice to hold down the Prussian Guards who were in the trenches we had to attack, while the Divisions on our right broke through and carried on with the attack.

We were also told that the Medical Officer (M.O.) of the Bradford Pals had just come in from No-Mans-Land after attending to the seriously wounded and having them brought in by the stretcher bearers. He had worked out there continuously from the Saturday night and was awarded the Military Cross for his good work.

The position where we were was a sort of small salient. It overlooked a broad part of No-Mans-Land where there were many dead. They belonged mainly to the East Yorks (Hull Pals) and King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, 92nd Brigade. One of the dead soldiers was just about ten yards from us. At first sight you would not think that he had been killed, because he had dropped on to one knee and steadied himself by putting the butt of his rifle on the ground, and there he had stayed in an upright position balanced by the grip he had on the barrel of his rifle. A strange thing I noticed about him was that his moustache and beard had grown strong stiff bristles since he was killed.

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Monday night was reasonably quiet except for sudden bursts of machine gun fire and the sending up by the Germans of many Verey lights and red star shells, but on our right we could hear the drum fire of the artillery where the attack was still in progress.

At daylight on Tuesday morning we moved to the notorious Monk Trench. This trench was looked upon by our fellows as a suicide post, because of the bad name it had for casualties while we were on tours of duty. It was on a spur of high ground



which overlooked the narrow part of No-Mans-Land to the south. It was a favourite place for the Gerries to vent their hate in the shape of Minnies, Coal Boxes and Whiz Bangs.

The weather had been close and overcast all the time from zero hour but as we reached this trench there came on a terrific thunderstorm and deluge of rain which poured into the trench from the higher ground and was soon filling with water. We had a set back right at the entrance to the trench, the man who was leading the gun team backed away from a disembowelled body lying beside the fire step. I eventually led them into position where we found several of my platoon (No. 9). One of my pals, Corporal Charlie Cross, had just found one of our 'D' Company officers wounded in a shell hole and had him brought in, he had been there since zero hour. (A year or two after I was demobbed I met this officer in Seaham Harbour, he had had both legs amputated, but he was very bright about it and got out of his car to demonstrate how clever he could use the artificial legs with which he had been fitted).

The storm and rain had increased so much that we had to climb on to the parados to save ourselves from the danger of drowning. We had put the Lewis guns on the parapet in the ground sheets, it was the limit to see the chalk bouncing up by the force of the rain. I was having to shake the guns clear of the chalk to prevent them

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getting buried in it. To have fired them would have been impossible if it had been necessary.

We were wondering what we could do to get the flood out of our trench when we saw two or three Gerries climb on the parapet of their trench and start digging - with those long handled shovels of theirs - they must have seen us because as the water came pouring out of their trench, one of them lifted the blade of his shovel into the air and waved a "wash out." I at once gave them the same signal with the butt of my rifle. It seemed to me that this was an event that was apart from the ordeal and



enmity of battle. The forces of nature had restored the sense of common humanity after all the carnage there had been since the battle started; and not a shot was fired on either side while we stood in danger of being drowned.

The Germans had got back into their trench and we had got the water running out of ours when I noticed there was something wrong with L/Cpl Fletcher. He was shaking very strangely, his lower jaw had dropped and lost control of himself. When I asked him what was the matter he couldn't reply properly. I felt that he was having a sort of delayed shellshock so one of the team took him down to the M.O.'s dug out. I saw him no more until we were going into the trenches at Neuve Chapelle when he collapsed again and I had to take charge of his gun team. (This was another of those events that looked like what was commonly called fate taking over, because that very night the Germans carried out a very big raid on us and I had it to deal with).

While we were in Monk Trench and the thunderstorm was raging we could see the Prussian Guards in full marching order passing the gaps in the rear trenches, they were on their way to join in the counter attacks against our troops who were advancing on our right at Delville and

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Trones Wood.

Soon after this I was on my way to the Company H.Q. dug out when I met some fresh troops splashing towards me, I was surprised to see that they were in khaki shorts but the biggest surprise of all was that they were the advance party of Gloucesters who had come to relieve us. They very quickly took over and we were soon carrying all our gear toward the old Eczema communication trench up which to leave the front line.

As we struggled along the trench, I noticed a ground sheet covering a long body lying on the parapet. I wasn't surprised when I was told that it was the body of Lieut.



Simpson, and that a sniper had got him in No-Mans-Land. His death meant very much to me, because apart from him being a brave and pally officer, he was the only officer who had seen my two previous exploits that he could have used to my credit when it came to the award of the Croix de Guerre ---- which went to Sergt Allison, and I was promoted to Lance Sergeant --- for my part in the big German raid at Neuve Chapelle on the night of July 27th 1916.

It was nearly dark when we got out of the communication trench. Here we found a great dump where troops from other regiments who had been relieved were dumping fighting material which they had salvaged from the battlefield.

We had to leave on this dump the Lewis gun that we had picked up in the front line on the Saturday morning after our attack had been stopped. But when the gun which we carried back to the Battalion was checked the next day, it was found, by its number - which we had not been able to check in the dark - that we had left our gun on the dump, and brought away with us the one we had found. I got into trouble over this mistake. The incident gave further proof to me of the callousness and inflexibility of army routine and discipline. We had

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survived five days and nights of exhausting experiences, but they stood for nothing in comparison to having brought the wrong gun back to the battalion.

It was quite dark by the time we got the survivors of our Company collected together and on the march to Louvencourt. (Motor transport for the infantry hadn't been organised then). We know that people walk in their sleep, and I am certain I was asleep as I marched the last few kilometres into Louvencourt. A meal of bully beef and rissoles and tea was waiting for us when we got there, and I was soon down to it on the floor of a stinking and rat infested farm building, and had the first sound sleep I had had for weeks.



Roll Call wasn't till late in the afternoon, and as I sat waiting for it while I scraped the cement like mud off my uniform and equipment I was filled with a grand feeling of satisfaction at having weathered my part in the battle so well. But the feeling went deeper than that. I had passed into a new and fuller understanding of life. I had become more fully conscious of being alive than I had ever been before I had seen such awful killings and suffering - mental as well as physical. In such battalions as ours the suffering was often more mental than physical. Our feelings had not been brutalised by our civil life occupations, we were not time serving professional soldiers, most of us had left soft jobs.

We had in the ranks many with college and university educations, who had volunteered for the "duration" of the war only - there was no conscription in 1914 when our Battalion was formed - we had not been psychologically hardened for the hardship and mentality of the rank and file of the P.B.I. [Poor Bloody Infantry].

Yet as a contrast we had a few miners in our company, they took to soldiering as though it was a great game. Their intrepid and sporting spirit never deserted them in or out of the trenches.

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Death seemed to be nothing to them. When they spoke about any of their pals being killed, they said "He's gone west" just as though he'd gone to a football match. If anyone was absent or missing their common gag was "He's on the wire at Loos." It sounded like a great joke to them.

The Kitchener's Army Pit Lads proved themselves to be "born soldiers." What a great pity it is impossible to estimate how much the country owes to the miners for the ultimate victory, and the good hearted manner of it. All the world ought to know how many miners there were in the regiments that broke through the German Front at Contalmaison and Fricourt and repulsed the enemy counter attacks at Martinpuich, Butte de Warlencourt and Flers.



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It was their contempt of danger and death that won them through. I had been prepared for anything that might happen to me on Active Service, but I never “asked for it” like the pit lads did, and as far as my part in the attack had affected me I felt that my life had become far more vital and worth living.

I was deeply thankful to be able to answer the Roll Call that so many thousands would fail to do after the first phase of the many phases of the criminal waste of men and material on the Battle of the Somme.

Chas H Moss



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