



CSC 11

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VIOTOR

Sept 1914

It was on September 7th 1914 that, together with Les, Lewis and others, I went to Sun Street in the City, to join the 7th City of London Regiment. High spirits were general and the whole affair appeared to be a great game. The morning was very sunny and a small crowd of intending recruits had very soon gathered round the door. On the doors being opened there was quite a rush to get in and although the sergeant at the door tried to keep Lewis out as being under age (which he was), we got him through, and once he got past the door he passed all the necessary tests. I think the medical examination took place the same afternoon, and this proved to be only one of the many more or less similar examinations which were to take place in the war years that followed. At this time, however, all this sort of thing was a novelty to us, and I think we all expected to have finished with the army in a few months.

The medical examination was successfully passed by all of our party, and the days that followed in London were spent in learning the elements of squad drill, and marching in such places as Finsbury Square, Regents Park and similar places. We very often tubed to Regents Park. Songs were sung on the marches, and for some time we were all in civilian clothes; then khaki caps were issued and we were these with the rest of our clothing ordinary civilian, and we could not have presented a very martial appearance at this time.

On the whole we had a very easy time during this stage of our training (especially getting home as we did each evening), but I was looking forward to getting away from London, and ~~at this time I was~~ eager to get to France. Finally one morning we entrained for Burgess Hill in Sussex and by this time we had been completely fitted out in khaki.

Our first billet was in a large draughty recreation hall, but this was given up after a few days as being unhealthy, and our company removed to Tower House. We were served out with palliases and paraded to draw straw for these. Here we slept in the empty rooms and the first stage of the breaking in to army life commenced.

Our training here went forward another stage; we did longer route marches, and although at this time we had no equipment, we carried our overcoats rolled across our chests, which I think was far more uncomfortable than carrying full marching order. Putties were still a troublesome matter to me to roll properly, and although we had long ~~reg~~ rifles issued ~~to~~ us, we had done no actual firing of any kind.

Things that stand out in this place among others are the illness of Dad, who was more ill at this time than we then realised; a long route march to Chailey Common and the long wait there in the cold (the plaintive tune played by the band on this day is still fresh in my mind together with whole battalions swaying to the time of it); and our first church parades and experience of living with the rest of our section night and day.

After a few weeks here, a batch of us were taken for transfer to the 1st Battalion, and Les and myself

with others entrained for Watford to join the 1st, leaving Lewis behind with the 2nd battalion, ^{with} ~~which~~ which he remained until the 2nd Battalion went to France as a unit some time later.

Les. Clifford and myself were put in a private ^{which was unsuitable.} billet in Diamond Road after shifting from two others. λ We drew our raw rations each evening and brought them back for our landlady to cook. Tom Card was the gallant landlord and he worked in the cocoa factory nearby and was fond of playing nap. The three of us, Les, Clifford and myself, slept in one room and the billet was moderately comfortable.

The training was harder here and included many inspections, notably a big one in Cassiobury Park. We also fired a course after marching to London Colney and being billeted there in uncomfortable empty rooms. The weather was very cold and wet (about January 1915 I think) and the time we were in this place was most ~~an~~ uncomfortable especially on the miserable range itself where there was no protection from the bitter cold, except a little cottage where hot coffee could be obtained. I found afterwards, however, that this was typical of all ranges, and the weather was also generally bad whenever I went to a range. It nearly always meant standing about for nine-tenths of the day doing nothing but shiver, the remaining tenth being spent in a little firing and a lot of cleaning. We also did some firing on a range on the road to St Albans. However, we completed our course at London Colney and journeyed back to Watford to be inoculated. This was the opportunity to get

to London for a couple of days as two days' sick leave were given at this time, and the 'bus would take one right into London under the Watford arches.

We were now nearing the time of departure and had been issued with most of our kit. Les's eyesight had proved troublesome and it was ~~finally~~ decided that he should be transferred back to the 2nd battalion, so that I was finally left by myself in the 1st battalion. I was in London when a telegram arrived from Clifford telling me to return at once as the battalion had received orders to prepare to depart immediately. This was the last occasion I saw Dad (in hospital), and he was looking desperately ill at this time. He had been buried when I next returned to England.

I arrived back at Watford to find everything in a bustle of movement, and in a day or so, towards the middle of March 1915, we were paraded in the dark streets with all our belongings on our back (and mine seemed terribly heavy). Followed a train journey which I do not recollect very clearly (probably slept most of the time), and then the arrival at Southampton docks; piled arms and waiting about for orders to embark. We received our first issue of bully beef and biscuits here.

It was an awful job to shave on board in the morning (although at this time I hadn't very much to shave off fortunately), as the trouble was to get water and everybody wanted what little there was at the same time; then the re-packing of my valise at which I was not very expert at this time, was an awful job. I had made no particular friends up to this and so had to follow my

own trail. I had far from settled down to army life and found it a rather hard sort of game, until I shook down to it myself later on and learnt to follow the old army motto.

We landed at Le Havre on St. Patrick's Day, 17th March 1915, and began for the first time the weary climb up the hill to the Rest Camp at the top, which at this time consisted of tents and marquees. After a night here I found that I was to be left behind with a few others as "reinforcements", and the battalion left us the same day. I was not at all pleased at this and felt rather miserable at being dropped again in a strange place among more strangers. After the battalion had gone, we reinforcements were herded together like lost sheep ^{and marched} to a camp farther off, and inserted in tents at the rate of about twenty to a tent.

Our time for the ~~two~~ three or four weeks I was here consisted of various fatigues - coaling at the docks, unloading of heavy cases of tinned foods from the boats and wheeling them on trucks to huge stacks of tinned food, carcasses of beef, great sacks of loaves, etc. This was very heavy work. And then, of course, we had the usual squad drill, route marches and guards. The camp was composed of reinforcements of the different regiments for the whole of the 47th Division, while one section was put apart for the Canadians who had their reinforcement camp here.

, It seems strange now to think of the way we all queued up outside the mess hut with our messtins and knife and fork, with the daily rush to get served, and

the grabbing of bread and jam at tea time. The food on the whole was fairly good.

I received the cablegram here telling me of Dad's death, and immediately applied for leave (Flower) which was not granted. I was very upset at the time and crept away to have a good howl. Shortly after this was I was given 14 days C.B. for breaking bounds ^{with Prebble} to go to a small village, Montevilliers. I don't remember why I wanted to go there, possibly just to get away from the camp for a ~~bit~~ time and leave the mass of khaki behind for a while. However, we (there were two of us), were discovered and punished accordingly.

I managed to visit Le Havre a few times as I was attending the dentist there, and I found these visits a great change from the camp, and enjoyable, but for the dentist's chair in the background. I was anxious to get away from this camp, in fact I believe everybody was, as it was a rotten place and only had a good Y.M.C.A. hut to relieve its monotony. But soon the order came through for us to re-join the battalion, who were at this time at Givency near Festubert, so that one warm spring morning we marched to the railhead at Le Havre, boarded our cattle truck and were trundled towards the mysterious "line" about which we had heard so much from 'old' soldiers at the base.

We found that the battalion were out resting in a small village near Bethune; my company ^{were} were in a barn next to a cemetery - a French civilian one - with the usual sprays of artificial flowers on the graves which gives them rather a lighthearted but tawdry appearance. I was unfortunate enough here to

miss a parade, and by the time I arrived, the battalion had moved off on a long route march. I believe I did have some idea of missing this march - I had gone sick with two badly poisoned fingers - but as a reward for being successful I was given three days' field punishment, consisting of one hour in the morning and another in the evening of being handcuffed to a limber wheel, and confinement for the rest of the time. During this confinement I learnt to play the mouth organ greatly to my own satisfaction. I finished my last day in confinement at Gorre, and that same evening, which was drizzling with rain, we paraded, in full marching order with newly issued waterproof capes round us, to go up to the line. It was very wet and dismal looking in the big square and the country we moved through was likewise, with the ground mushy underneath, but I was excited at being about to go to the line at last. We eventually reached a spot where rifle firing could be heard distinctly and then very soon arrived near a different sound - that of bullets whining overhead - very mournful noises some of them made while some were just sharp vicious sputts. There were no actual trenches here and communication with the front line was made by means of a shallow ditch shielded on each side by wooden hurdles. Up this we went and we had reached the front line at last, consisting in this part of the line of a sandbag breastwork only, as the ground was too marshy for digging. My shirt and vest were wet through with perspiration when I arrived (at this time we carried full marching order

into the line), and my first act in the line was to get out a clean shirt from my pack and proceed to change it with my wet one. Lt. Ferguson observed me doing this and gave me a suitable lecture on the serious ness of being in the front line.

Very little shelling had taken place during our journey to the line, if any, but rifle fire was much in evidence, much more so at this time than in the later years of the war when shelling took its place.

In the line itself we received orders to fire our rifles intermittently all night while we were on s entry; rifle firing was more or less continuous therefore throughout the night with occasional heavy bursts at different parts of the line, although there was really nothing to fire at but the flashes of the rifles in the German lines. I suppose the front lines were about 300 yards apart here. We worked in pairs - one sleeping for an hour while the other was on sentry just by him, and so on throughout the night. At this time of course, there were no steel helmets, aerial torpedoes (or very few), rifle grenades, etc.

Our first shelling came the afternoon of my first day in the trenches, when a few whizz bangs were sent over and exploded some 100 yards or so behind us, but at this time shells did not greatly impress me; it was only later on when I saw the fearful damage they could do to a man that I began to get a wholesome fear of them. Our first casualty was a fellow shot in the head and killed while drinking from his water bottle. It was in the early morning and his head probably appeared

above the parapet while he was drinking.

These first few days in the line were more or less uneventful, although they were eventful enough for me at the time. There was water fetching, which was carried in stone rum jars, and the carrying of rations at night; these were carried in to the line in bulk, i.e., a box of bully would be carried up whole, or a tin of biscuits would be carried up as it was - an awful job. These were split into sandbags later in the war and were much easier to carry. Then there was the cooking of grub individually in the trenches, which meant making a very small fire with thin sticks; all this I found damned awkward and uncomfortable but became an expert later on.

After being relieved from the front line we spent a few days in a fortified farm in reserve - a trench running round a small system of farm buildings with some barbed wire in front. Later we had a little training and some bayonet practice in preparation for the attack which was shortly to take place.

For the first attack at Festubert on the 39th May 1915, we remained in positions in the fortified farm, but this attack was not a success although the bombardment sounded enormous to me at the time.

The following Saturday, 15th May, we moved to reserve positions, and early on the following Sunday morning our bombardment commenced preparatory to the attack at Festubert. Very little shelling came near us, but in the early afternoon we received orders to move up, and wended our way in artillery formation across open

ground to the communication trench. We soon arrived among the shelling while still in the open and had several casualties. The communication trench was half full of brown liquid mud and the afternoon was very warm, and working our way up this narrow winding trench, which in places had been blown in, was very hard work. Wounded were coming down, and one case on a stretcher was nearly covered from head to foot in bandages. It was not at all a cheerful prospect and I am afraid I failed to see much pleasure in our undertaking at this moment. We reached our old front line breastwork after our tussle with the mud, and here things were still merrier. The shelling was pretty heavy and whizz bangs were skimming the top of the breastwork, and many wounded were lying around. Scaling ladders were in position against the breastwork and on Captain Casson giving a blast on his whistle, we climbed these and did our best to move quickly towards the German trench (this had already been taken - we were moving up to reinforce). The shelling between the lines was heavy and some big shells were falling sending up great black clouds of smoke: we could not move very quickly as were carrying our full pack, and in addition a shovel, or bag of rations, or a packet of sandbags. I had not gone more than ten yards from our breastwork when a cloud of dirty gray smoke suddenly burst up all round me and I felt myself spinning round. I knew I had been hit, and thought, strangely enough with a very happy feeling, that one side of my face had been blown away; it felt just like that, and when, on

getting back to our breastwork I took my hand away from my face and discovered ^{no} ~~on~~ ~~the~~ blood on it, I thought I had made a mistake and would have to get on back again, but on feeling myself over I found a hole in the right ~~sh~~ shoulder of my tunic and the stretcher bearers were soon bandaging the wound for me. The shell that had hit me had burst right amongst our little party and had killed one (Cawkell) and wounded seven others.

I felt a little groggy and must have looked rather dissipated, as my hat had been blown off, one of my putties was undone, and of course I had dumped all my equipment. I returned back along the same communication trench that we had worked our way along earlier in the afternoon. I passed New and Pennell in 'C' company who were coming along, and eventually reached the field dressing station at the end of the trench and was dressed again. I was then given a seat in a horse ambulance and taken to Bethune. I felt very contented^t with things; the wound was not troubling me much and I knew I was well away from the line for some time to come. We arrived at Bethune at dusk and were greeted there with plenty of tea and bread and butter. After this I had the hole in the shoulder examined and a squirterfull of iodine pressed into it; this caused it to bleed profusely and the pain started from about then and lasted all night, which I spent very restlessly. I know I got practically no sleep; wounded were coming in fairly thickly and during the night the town was shelled.

, The next morning I did my best to have a clean up as I was in a filthy state with mud all over my clothes,

but I was not very successful with only one arm available, and later in the day I was put into a so-called hospital train at Bethune. The carriages were just hard wooden passenger carriages and most uncomfortable for wounded to travel in, and the greater part of the journey I was in a half stupefied state as the aching pain in my shoulder was getting very bad. At one of the halts, however, I found the fellows in my carriages were helping me out, as the R.A.M.C. were coming along the platform asking bad cases to alight and I was placed on a trolley and wheeled into the hospital. We had reached Boulogne. It was now quite dark, and without any medical examination, I was shown a rough bed and did my best to get some rest. For another night my clothes remained on and it was not until the following morning that the nurse took off my dressing and the wound was examined by the doctor. He immediately had me put to bed and my temperature taken; the hole had turned a nice shade of greenish yellow and did not look very handsome. A nurse helped me to undress and I was soon in bed, where I had my first bed bath; a hot fomentation was ~~es~~ clapped on my shoulder and I settled down to another far from restful night. I found it hard to get water and had to shout hard before an orderley came to me but I got it eventually. The following morning (or about four days after I was hit), the doctor probed the wound and marked me for England after hesitating whether to operate on the spot or not, while I anxiously awaited his decision. I wanted to get to England and did not want to spend any more ^{time} ~~than~~ in France

than I could help, so that I was very glad when he decided to put me on the boat forthwith; I was thrust into a suit of pyjamas, placed on a stretcher and lowered into the boat the same afternoon.

The journey across to ~~Folkestone~~ Dover made me seasick but I was quite happy when we arrived near land and ~~were~~^{was} finally put in the train. We arrived at Oxford at about 2 a.m. but even at that time there was quite a small crowd of people outside the hospital. I was taken to the Examination Schools and carried up the wide curving staircase; put to bed, given another bed bath, a glass of hot milk and an aspirin and fell asleep until morning. It felt fine to wake up and know that I was back in England again and in a clean bed and with nothing to do but wait until the operation was over. I did not mind this in the least as being in the shoulder it was not in a very vital spot.

Mum called on me when I had been there a day or so but I think she thought she must be careful not to stay too long as she only stayed a few minutes although I think she would have liked to stay longer; a day or so later Winnie turned up. I was operated on after I had been in Oxford about a week. I went quite confidently to the operating theatre and laid down on the slab, and the ether gave me no trouble, but the after effects of this stuff were bloody. I was violently sick and came to swearing like a trooper. I somehow connected the taste of chocolate ^{with} ~~that~~ that of ether for some time afterwards, which was sufficient to put me off chocolate for a very long time.

The piece of shell extracted from my shoulder was given me by the nurse and I still have it.

After the operation I progressed rapidly and spent a very enjoyable fortnight in the hospital and was taken out for motor drives on several occasions, and once or twice on the river and out to tea. I went over most of the colleges in Oxford.

At this time people were doing all they could for you, and many presents were brought in by visitors and left by the bedside, such as eggs and cigarettes. There were several bad cases in the ward, and one, a Canadian, who had both ~~of~~ his feet taken off, died while I was there. He fell out of bed one night and this, I expect, hastened his end.

After having been in Oxford for about three weeks I was considered well enough to be sent away to a convalescent home, and with a few others left Oxford for Goring on Thames. This proved to be a lovely place and I saw it at the finest time of the year - mid June. I was nearing my twentieth birthday and the summer promised to be a fine one so that I was as nearly happy as it is ever possible to be. I had nothing to worry about for the present as my leave was to come at the end of convalescence.

Strawberries and cherries grew plentifully in the grounds around the house - it could not be called a hospital - and the River Thames was close by. There was a small recreation room in the house with a gramophone and billiard table and my bedroom (about six of us in it) was next to this.

After our wounds were dressed in the morning we had the rest of the time to ourselves and quite often took our lunch out with us and stayed out nearly all day. The nurse from the hospital at Oxford paid us a visit here and brought me some tobacco as she had promised. The village of Goring (and Streatley) was a very pleasant place and the Thames here is simply great.

After three grand weeks here with splendid weather, I was pronounced well enough to go on leave in London and when my leave had expired I reported to Sun St. for duty again.

My luck was still very much in because the duty was of the lightest description and we slept at home each night. Recruiting was the great thing at this time and we took the game up with enthusiasm although I must admit that I did ~~not~~ not get one recruit myself and my efforts in this direction were not very strenuous. It must be remembered that this was midsummer 1915, long before the shadow of possible conscription had begun to spread over the country, in fact at this time it was not even thought of by the ordinary person. Our little party looked upon recruiting as a huge joke and simply enjoyed ourselves to the best of our ability. We would be given a certain part of the City of London to patrol and were intended to ask likely looking fellows if they wished to join the army.

In the intervals of recruiting we did a little drill and an occasional guard at Hammersmith. But towards the end of August 1915 our little party of returned wounded, which had been gradually swelling, as

more and more reported back from hospital, were entrained for Ongar and were followed by a company of the 3rd Battalion. We had, of course, all this time been kept entirely separate from the 3rd battalion (and the 3rd battalion were not at all a promising looking lot). The place by which we were intended to camp proved an ideal place with numbers of apple trees in the background, and nearby some trenches which had been dug as part of the defences of London. Otten and myself volunteered as painters and were given the job of camouflaging all the tents with great blotches of paint. And so we passed a few more entirely carefree days, but our easy time was drawing to a close. Rumours of the Loos attack, in which the 1st Battalion had taken part, were trickling through and it was clear that the casualties had been heavy; reinforcements were called for immediately, and as it was considered that we returned wounded were the only ones with sufficient training, we were called together, sent off on a few days leave, and from this reported back to Orpington in readiness to cross to France again. The whole thing happened very quickly - kit inspections were rushed through, and the medical examinations, and finally towards the end of September 1915 we were ready to cross again to France.

I was greatly disappointed at this time by Otten's commission papers coming through, so that we separated from each other here and I did not seem him again - I believe he was killed on the Somme in 1916. We had been constant companions during recruiting and got on very well together, so that on the eve of our departure to find that he was not coming with us was rather a blow and I missed

him very much. However, we departed to the station to the tune of the British Grenadiers, and detrained at London. On the station I managed to get hold of a lot of whisky and carried some with me in the carriage in a bottle. I was not fond of the stuff at this time and drank it, I think, simply because it seemed the thing to do, added to which there was always the excitement of leaving England again (excitement or depression). On the train journey to Southampton I was violently sick and arrived at Southampton feeling very shaky and groggy. A few days were spent here in wooden huts and we had very little freedom.

The journey over to Le Havre was rather rough but I was not sick although very near it. We again marched up the hill to tents, and this time found a number of the 7th in the camp who had been lightly wounded and were now gathered together ready for the next draft back to the line. Several other units, including the Guards, had detachments here. We did not worry about the place much as ^{we} were only passing through and knew we would not be there long, and very soon we marched to the station and boarded the cattle trucks for the line. After the usual long drawn out journey we detrained near Bethune one evening and were taken in the dark by our guide across country to Mazingarbe - a small straggling village behind the line at Loos and consisting of two main streets only, a few odd estaminets and one or two broken down shops selling chocolate wrapped in silver paper and nothing much else. (I revisited this place again in January 1919 nearly four years afterwards).

As we arrived near the village the star shells could be seen rising and falling ⁱⁿ the far distance - the night itself was a very black one.

There were no billets for us at Mazingarbe as the battalion were in the line and our arrival was unexpected, and so we slept as best we could on our waterproof sheets in the open. During the night there was a little long distance shelling just to remind us that we were back near the line once more.

The following evening we fell in for the line, and I was feeling pretty windy with recollections of my last experiences in mind. We found we were to carry in the battalion's rations, so that besides our full marching order, each of us had a sack of provisions to carry, and this journey was, I think, one of the hardest I ever made. It was a long cry from Mazingarbe to the line, the trenches were awful affairs to get through and none of us was very fit after our easy time in England. However, late that night or early the next morning we tracked the battalion down in some very shallow trenches well in front of Loos, and for the rest of the night our little party was side tracked in a chalky sap until morning. Some of the trenches here were dug through almost pure chalk and this was especially noticeable during wet weather when great chalky smears were given off from the wet trench walls in passing them. Many casualties were taken past us in the night as trench mortars in front, which we could hear smashing away, had been doing some damage.

I myself had hardly got my wind yet, it seemed only yesterday that I was in England on recruiting work,